



JONGSUK YOON
May, 2024
oil on canvas
160 x 120 cm
Courtesy the artist and
Marian Goodman Gallery

JONGSUK YOON

VAULT looks at the work of Korean-born, German-based artist Jongsuk Yoon whose work hovers between landscape and abstraction.

FEATURE by STEVE DOW

When Jongsuk Yoon paints clouds, mountains and streams in a palette of pale blue, bright yellow and soft pink, the 59-year-old artist accesses her intense memories of a South Korean countryside childhood mixed with the European influences of the second half of her life to date.

For Yoon, born in 1965 in Onyang, the mixing of cultures is filtered into something new: a Korean philosophy of seeing herself as a small part within her canvases and the wider universe, combined with a love of European Expressionism, which places the individual outside of the painting.

“Some people, particularly in the United States, see colour field painting as an inspiration,” says Philipp Kaiser, president of Marian Goodman Gallery, which recently staged Yoon’s first solo show in the United States – *Yellow May* (2004), in Los Angeles.

“On a literal and metaphorical level, the influence has more to do with clouds of memories that appear and disappear. It has a very phenomenological quality. Also, where do you stand in these pictures? This is especially true in the very monumental ones that look like a stage set.”

In Korea, Yoon’s late father owned a calligraphy gallery. “She had to have a cultural cleanse, in a way, to define herself in a new context,” explains Kaiser.

Yoon first came to Europe at age 28, studying art at the Kunstakademie Münster in 1996 before heading to the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf from 1997 to 2001, lured by the large Japanese community in the city and the fact that Korean video art pioneer Nam June Paik had taught there.

Yoon was influenced by the tutelage of the late German conceptual artist Fritz Schwegler in the fertile artists’ ground of the Rhineland.

She has remained there since, buying an apartment where she lives alone, devoting her life to her work. In 2004–05, she earned a master’s degree at the Chelsea College of Arts in London.

Her distinctive colour palette might refer to azalea blossom-covered mountains in the Korean springtime or to clouds of memories but, at the same time, it can be strikingly unusual in its rich choices. In this way, it is also suggestive, says Kaiser, of the palette of feminist artist Judy Chicago or modernist painter Georgia O’Keefe.

“I visited her a few times in Düsseldorf over many months and picked and edited the work [for the Los Angeles exhibition],” says Kaiser. “There are some works that are done quickly, and then she takes them off the stretcher and doesn’t want to keep them, so she eliminates them.”

For the exhibition at Marian Goodman, Yoon created two expansive, mural-sized paintings, *April Mai* (2023) and *August* (2024). The paintings feature silhouettes of mountain scapes referencing the border between North and South Korea, as well as her childhood memories.

Geopolitical division is an inevitable preoccupation for an artist whose homeland was ideologically and literally split by a demilitarised zone and who arrived in Germany in time to witness the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the profound ramifications of the end of the Cold War in Europe.

Yoon was invited recently to conceive a new mural for the lobby of Mumok, Vienna’s modernist, contemporary art museum. The bright and brilliant result, titled *Kumgangsan*, is “the painterly convergence on a mountain region that Yoon herself has never set foot on,” says art curator and historian Heike Eipeldauer.





Above
JONGSUK YOON
Summer, 2024
oil on canvas
230 x 330 cm
Courtesy the artist and
Marian Goodman Gallery

Right
JONGSUK YOON
Installation view, Yellow-
Mcy, Marian Goodman
Gallery, Los Angeles, 2024
Photo: Elon Schoenholz
Courtesy the artist and
Marian Goodman Gallery





“WHEN I PAINT LARGER WORKS WITH LARGER BRUSHES, GIVING MYSELF TO THE BRUSHWORK COMES NATURALLY. IN THOSE MOMENTS WHERE THE BRUSH MOVES ACROSS THE SURFACE, I AM THERE, IN A DIFFERENT WORLD.”

JONGSUK YOON
Blue Mountains, 2023
oil on canvas
100 x 130 cm
Courtesy the artist and
Marian Goodman Gallery

“Since 1945, it has been the arbitrary dividing line and visible border between North and South Korea and, as such, is a symbol of an unresolved geopolitical conflict and its still traumatising aftermath.”

Kaiser, who has known Yoon for more than 20 years, says the artist has spoken in analogous terms of the country of her birth and her adopted homeland, from her standpoint as an observer of these imposed binary structures. “She goes to Korea from time to time, and maybe she has more of a sentimental relationship to childhood, but ... if you grow up in South Korea and you have a permanent fear of nukes in your backyard, I’m sure it does something to you.”

Yoon, who is more fluent in German than in English, has said: “My landscape pictures symbolise the theme of reunification, and I believe that painting is a medium that is able to demonstrate the authenticity and symbolism of art as a powerful tool of change. All engagement with Korea has a political dimension – in other words, pictures that refer to Korea are politically charged.”

In a 2022 interview with the Louisiana Channel on YouTube, Yoon spoke of eschewing preliminary sketches because she doesn’t want her paintings to simply copy these rough drafts. “When you work without a sketch, there is more risk. It’s not always successful, I’m struggling on the canvas [but] my ideas take on shape on the canvas while I’m painting.”

“When I paint larger works with larger brushes, giving myself to the brushwork

comes naturally. In those moments where the brush moves across the surface, I am there, in a different world.”

Does Yoon have a particular religious or spiritual philosophy to which she adheres? “Not a specific religion, but I think it has a kind of transcendent backdrop,” says Kaiser. “She’s re-envisioning memory ... I feel there is a very momentous energy in there. I think it has to do with the power of now, in a way, and a hyperawareness of our surroundings and where we stand in the universe. In that sense, it has a kind religious zone.”

“But,” he goes on to note, “she doesn’t talk that way. She talks very matter-of-factly about what paint brushes she uses. It is a very intuitive process, but it is not a process of Expressionism that requires a hero subject, a strong subject, it’s more like she’s a filter.”

This intuition is often applied on a grand scale. Yoon has devoted herself to large-scale painting since 2012. In 2020, she created gigantic murals for the Nordic Watercolour Museum in Skärhamn on the island of Tjörn, north of Gothenburg in Sweden, working on a cherry picker.

Posting recently on Instagram, Rosemarie Schwarzwälder’s Galerie nächst St. Stephan, which often presents Yoon’s work in the centre of Vienna, noted that the creation of each work seems like a dialogue between artist and painting.

“Like layers of sediment, her physical painting process can be retraced on the image’s surface, especially in her large works,” says the gallery. “Yoon applies

thick layers of oil paint to the canvas with vigour before making corrections and changes and even wiping away some of the applied paint.

She leaves these alterations visible, integrating them into the picture where they create layers of paint, time and a process that is defined by powerful brushwork and precise artistic solutions.”

Observers should not be deceived by Yoon’s physical appearance, says Kaiser. “When you talk to her, she looks like a fragile woman, but she’s full of self-confidence, which you can also tell when you see the paintings.”

For her part, Yoon says that while she works “spontaneously and deliberately without a plan,” her deliberation still runs deep. “I spend a lot of time looking and thinking until I get an idea of what the picture needs.” ▼

Jongsuk Yoon is represented by Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Galerie nächst St. Stephan, Vienna.
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JONGSUK YOON
Red Mountains, 2023
oil on canvas
160 x 130 cm
Courtesy the artist and
Marian Goodman Gallery



Left
JONGSUK YOON
Installation view, Yellow-
Mcy, Marian Goodman
Gallery, Los Angeles, 2024
Photo: Elon Schoenholz
Courtesy the artist and
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