

Square Wonder

Jee Young Maeng (Independent curator)

Focusing on the artist's works from 2020 to 2023, out of a career that spans over two decades, *Square Wonder* presents over forty pieces by the Düsseldorf-based artist Sen Chung to take a closer look at how the world of his paintings is undergoing subtle yet substantial changes. Chung is an artist who traces the essence of an invisible world through restrained colors and forms, moving between figuration and abstraction. For the last few years, he has held solo exhibitions each year, mapping out the trajectory of his thoughts and contemplations. The titles of his previous exhibitions—*Very Art, touching stardust, temporality, Solitude, and After Beauty*—all exemplify Chung's approach towards art and mirror his romantic hopes and expectations towards an unfathomable world in which one must weather great loneliness.

The images in Chung's paintings continue to infuse and deplete the canvas with gray colors along with lines and figures drawn with restrained brushstrokes, creating the impression that they are all part of a single series. This seems to be inevitable considering how all of his works are titled "Untitled." Chung's quiet, routine life in his studio in Germany grants him the space to meditate on the dynamic movements of his mind. In his paintings, the inner and outer landscapes that surround Chung are transformed into the ashen skies of Germany or Korean traditional ink wash paintings. Like ever-shifting light, the lights and shadows in Chung's paintings change over time as they appear and fade away on the canvas, creating an atmosphere and visual narrative that is unique to the artist.

Chung has continuously positioned himself as a painter, asking questions as a painter and searching for answers on the canvas, however vague they may be. It may seem impractical to look back at four years of his work in chronological order. The recurring lines and colors, as well as the overwhelming grayness that permeates his paintings, may seem so consistent that any changes that have occurred over the course of a day, a year, or even four years may seem too subtle to be noticed. Yet in the past few years, Chung's paintings, which once felt abstract, are starting to reveal clues to a world that the artist yearns to see with increased frequency. Lines of various shades and thicknesses converge and disperse at different speeds, sometimes creating geometric shapes, sometimes creating large and small planes of muted colors.

The colored sections on the frame create tension with the overwhelming gray that occupies most of the canvas, marking their presence as if they will disappear if they do not demarcate themselves. The rhythm that arises from the complex movements on the frame is simple but driven by the colors. Since 2021, the prominent clusters of colors and patterns have been starting to narrow their distance from the background. The figures and colors that shape the formative center of the paintings are still buoyant and dominate the frame, but they are no longer separated from the backdrop. The colors no longer outrun or lag behind but are

in sync with the gray. No single color floats up to the surface, each color keeps pace with each other to gently add weight to the entire painting.

The lines, planes, shapes, and muted colors in the frame appear to form familiar compositions, but the paintings are dominated by an unidentifiable heaviness that evokes a strange sense of *déjà vu*. This ‘heaviness’ in Chung’s recent oil paintings resembles the heaviness of paper weighed down with moisture, and yet maintains a light and airy rhythm. These changes in Chung’s works suggest that the elements within his frame, regardless of their variation, now move together like a single organism. Yet as the world that the artist wishes to see becomes clearer in his mind, this may materialize through increasingly simple gestures and language on the canvas, which may deprive the viewers of visual clues to understanding the art.

On the other hand, the small-scale drawings on paper created with pencil, oil pastel, or watercolor offer a compressed glimpse into the world that Chung longs to see. When an artist knows his destination but not the way and has to contemplate the road for a long period of time, his drifting thoughts will land on paper to form a map. For an artist who spends more time looking at a painting than actually painting, the fast pace of drawings can offer a source of tension and stimulation that guides his work. The most fundamental forms and gestures an artist encounters in his search for answers are a collection of the choices he makes as an artist, as a human who is always subject to change. A work of art is a trace of such roaming thoughts, an intuitive snapshot of the present that is not fully understood. They say it takes a split second to make a decision, but that second is an accumulation of hours upon hours of implicit time.

Chung faces an empty canvas for long hours during his routine days, meditating on the vast, invisible world through the act of painting. The image he paints within a square frame is an amalgamation and symbolic representation of his condensed thoughts, transforming the canvas into a universe. Variations in shades and brushstrokes, splits between colors and planes are bound to appear and disappear, as they are brief reflections of the artist’s fierce deliberations. Traces of these deliberations within a seemingly stagnant painting may seem trivial, but they are important moments that should never be taken lightly. To this day, Chung continues to search for a world of wonder—a world that is not adrift but already present in his paintings, a world that is not yet revealed, a world that fades but never disappears.