

# Minjung Kim

## Trace

May 26 — Jun 11, 2023 | Gallery Weekend Beijing

Almine Rech is pleased to present a solo exhibition by Minjung Kim during Gallery Weekend Beijing 2023. This is the artist's second solo exhibition with Almine Rech, on view from May 26 until June 11, 2023.

'Trace' presents a curated selection of works highlighting the paper manipulation and mark-making techniques which have made Minjung Kim's oeuvre so compelling. Classically trained in calligraphy, Kim still retains the tools essential to the art — carbon-based inks and *hanji* paper made of mulberry fibers. Yet having lived in Italy for more than a decade, she arrived at the creative act of burning, ultimately to develop a unique craft that retains the calligrapher's spirit while emphasizing the artist's gesture and highlighting the transformative, simultaneously destructive nature of creation.

Minjung Kim has a deeply personal and philosophical relationship to paper, having called it her "skin" in a 2021 interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist. Rather than assuming the *hanji* paper is a passive blank page, Kim burns the paper itself, giving it shape and transforming it into a proto-ink substance that leaves traces in shades of brown and black. This technique fundamentally inverts the traditional material processes by which the paper sustains its ink, and is a microcosmic recreation of how ink has traditionally been produced: carbonization.

By evolving these techniques, Minjung Kim has forgone the brush as gestural intermediary. She uses her hands to grasp the paper directly, whisking it through open flame to create controlled patterns of burn and resulting in the delicately singed, organic edges ever-present in her work. Similar to traditional calligraphers or ab-ex painters wielding a brush, her motions require breath control and subtle variations of speed. In a variation on this technique she also uses smoldering sticks of incense to puncture her paper or texture its edges, maintaining continuity with burning by hand.

Kim uses techniques of collage, folding, and gluing to emphasize the naturally occurring characteristics of her papers, such as their transparency and weight. First determining the conceptual rules for how her paper will be manipulated, she then repeats the prescribed action countless times. Her hours of artist labor cultivate a mental state of clarity and emptiness that allows the formal aspects of each artwork to crystallize. Each canvas becomes a work born of conceptual constraints, with her aesthetic cohering through repetition, relying on the materials themselves and on her self-possession and focus in the moment.

Originally inspired by water, Kim's *Mountains* series (2007–2023) is composed of horizontally layered paper that simultaneously resembles undulating waves and distant forested mountains. The layers recede into space by virtue of their gradient jewel tones, creating a visual double entendre, a contemporary version of "mountains and water" (*shanshui*) traditional ink landscape painting. The series also recalls the freehanded energy of Ma Yuan's *Water Studies* (late 12th–early 13th century).

*Hanji* paper's transparency is highlighted in *Phasing* (2022) and *Encounter* (2023), whereas the accumulation of time and the artist's labor are made more palpable in *Order & Impulse* (2023). Works like *Pieno di vuoto* (2020), *The Street* (2023), and *The Water* (2022) bring strata of burnt paper together with vibrant colors to create compositions that are meant to be displayed in any orientation, a delightful ambiguity acknowledging the objecthood of works whose paper is both material and content.

Transcending the East vs. West art historical discourse of image, anti-image, representation and systems of thought, the accumulated traces of Kim's movements engulf viewers with the feeling of peace she channels through her work's inherent appreciation of nature and natural states. Her practice resonates with ancient literati artists for whom ink and paper were primary tools, but is ultimately one of control and self-cultivation. Kim's creative process is meditative and contemplative, culminating in an inner calm and an aesthetic that emanate that same beauty and stillness.

— Lee Ambrozy, Art Historian