

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Nam June Paik Hong Kong retrospective shows an artist fascinated and frightened by new media and technology
Gagosian Gallery presents first show in Hong Kong of work by the late Korean, a member of the influential Fluxus movement

Enid Tsui



John Hanhardt, Paik's friend, and Bakelite Robot.

“Nam June Paik: The Late Style” at the Gagosian Gallery is a concise and illuminating summary of the late Korean artist’s works, featuring some of his best known pieces such as *TV Chair* (1968) as well as more self-reflective pieces from his final years that have never been shown before.

Paik had a stroke in 1996 and was wheelchair-bound for the last 10 years of his life, yet he remained prolific until the end. Eleven out of the 19 pieces on show in the gallery in Pedder Building, Central, were made in 2005, the year before he died in the US state of Florida.

“We have sold only three pieces to private collectors since he died because we have been concentrating on getting pieces placed in top museums,” says Ken Hakuta, the artist’s nephew and executor of his estate.

After he died, most of Paik’s remaining works were transferred to warehouses in California, where Hakuta lives. Some of the works that come up at auction are not among his best and the estate has decided it is time to allow more top-quality works to enter the market, Hakuta says.

TV Chair, with a close circuit camera pointing down at a television screen under the transparent seat, is probably the most important piece owned by the estate and it is the only piece in the exhibition that is not for sale.

Many of his later works are variations on favourite themes. *Bakelite Robot* (2002), for example, combines the old (Bakelite radios) with the new (LCD monitors). *Golden Buddha* (2005) features a seated Buddha statue contemplating its own image on a screen. The image comes from a video camera pointing at the Buddha from behind the television set, an evocative study of eternity.

“Paik made many versions of the Buddha and the screen. It is a wonderful dialogue between old and new, East and West,” says John Hanhardt, Paik’s old friend and the curator of a major retrospective of the artist at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2000, among other exhibitions of Paik’s works.

There is a wistful quality in some of the 2005 works. In a series of untitled pieces, old-style television sets are covered in graffiti so that the screens, showing early videos that helped make his name as an avant-garde artist in the 1970s and 1980s, are barely visible. It is an almost violent act of self-obliteration, tempered by the playfulness of the brightly coloured, child-like scrawling.

Paik became more self-reflective in his later years but the works are still about the need for constant renewal. The damaged TV sets were another way of saying, forget the old, try something new, says Hanhardt.

There was a time when Paik was putting that point across in more dramatic ways. He was nicknamed the “cultural terrorist” for the shocking nature of some of his performance art, such as his 1962 *One for Violin Solo*, in which he slowly raised a violin in his hands before smashing it into smithereens. Even in 1998, two years after he had a stroke, he caused quite a stir when his trousers dropped when he stood up to shake hands with US president Bill Clinton in a White House reception. He wasn’t wearing pants.

The South Korea-born artist had settled in the US as a young man and became part of the Fluxus art movement founded by George Maciunas, a continuation of Dadaism that aimed to topple hierarchy in art and to constantly surprise and destroy preconceptions.

Paik achieved that by harnessing new technology. He was among the first to adopt video as an art form and he was a visionary both fascinated and frightened by the power of new media. Well before the advent of the internet, he predicted an “electronic superhighway” and a paperless world in which people hang digital art at home.

“For him, technology was something you could control and remake. He was concerned that television viewers only received whatever the stations chose to broadcast. He wanted artists to all have their own television channel. He wanted the *TV Guide* to become as thick as the Manhattan telephone directory,” says Hanhardt.

Paik died before the age of the selfie and YouTube but he would have seen that his predictions were becoming reality. “If he were still around, he would be telling all the smartphone users, don’t feel you cannot do more with the tools you’re given. Actually, you can,” says Hanhardt.