

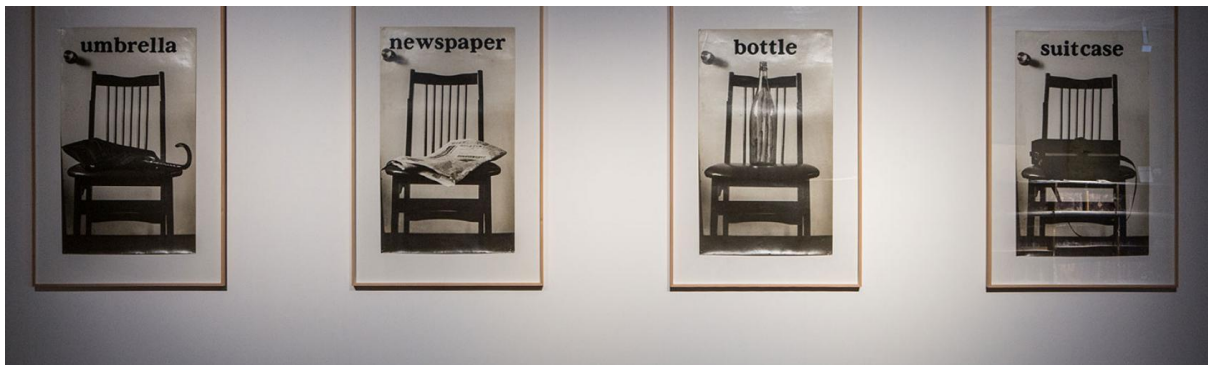
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FRIEZE

Choi Byungso's Erasures Subvert a Conservative Art World

At Arario Gallery, Seoul, the conceptual artist's effaced periodicals expose the limits of perception and reject dominant value systems

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Choi Byungso, Untitled 975000, 1975, black and white photographs, 53 × 38 cm (each). Courtesy: the artist and Arario Gallery, Seoul

Austerity serves as a guiding principle for the conceptual art practice of Choi Byungso who, since the 1970s, has transfigured ordinary newsprint into powerful expressions of nonconformity. His relentless and repeated marks in pencil and ballpoint pen deliberately obliterate the printed contents of daily newspapers, undermining their function as purveyors of information and stripping them of meaning. Initially, these 'erased' pages evinced an understated yet unequivocal response to the abuses of power by former South Korean president Park Chung-hee and articulated a silent protest against the Park regime's dissociation of representation and reality. In the context of Korean democracy today, Choi's newsprint works reflect an anti-establishment attitude that transcends politics and challenges conventions of value, function and meaning in relation to contemporary art and everyday existence.



Choi Byungso, Untitled, 1975, magazine, text, 38 × 54 cm (framed). Courtesy: the artist and Arario Gallery, Seoul

'SENS ET NON-SENS: Works from 1974–2020' at Arario Gallery frames Choi's conceptual strategy in relation to the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose 1948 collection of essays furnishes the exhibition's title. The French philosopher's theory of phenomenology disputed conventional conceptualizations of the objective world as a ready-made and fully present reality, calling into question the authenticity of empirical and rational parameters of perception. Reflecting this skepticism, Choi's avant-garde oeuvre lays bare the faulty patterns of thought that shape our awareness of everyday experience and upends habitual correlations between substance and signification.

The gallery's upstairs space traces the experimental origins of Choi's practice with a pair of photographic works juxtaposing text and imagery. In Untitled (1975), a National Geographic photo of two birds in a mid-flight rendezvous is presented next to a blank sheet of paper containing various keywords – sky, cloud, wind, birds, flying, meeting' – that accurately describe the image while connoting divergent interpretations. A related piece, Untitled 975000–3 (1975), comprises four photos of a single chair with different objects placed on top and corresponding text headings, implicating the tendency of language to impose specific realities upon visual cognition.



Choi Byungso, 0201012 Untitled (left), 0200815 (right), 2020, newspaper, ballpoint pen, pencil, 58 × 73 cm (each). Courtesy: the artist and Arario Gallery, Seoul

An inquiry into language also predominates Choi's blacked-out newsprint works, recent examples of which can be found in the gallery's basement space. After methodically covering an entire newspaper broadsheet with pencil, Choi repeats the process with ballpoint pen until the paper is completely saturated. Inevitably, the tip of the pen catches the surface, leaving tears that dramatically interrupt the black expanse and reveal the blank wall beneath. It's a strategy that originated amid the escalating political turmoil of the early 1970s, when Park Chung-hee declared martial law and implemented a new constitution. In the years to follow, Park enjoyed unprecedented jurisdiction over all aspects of Korean life, including complete control of the press, which brazenly distorted the truth to downplay the regime's totalitarian provocations. The tattered pages that Choi began pinning to walls constituted more than a political statement, however; they also encapsulated his growing indignation toward the conservative leanings of the Korean art establishment.



Choi Byungso, *Untitled 016000*, 2016, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Arario Gallery, Seoul

From the outset, Choi sought to subvert lofty notions associated with abstract art by adopting the most commonplace of materials in order to situate his works in a quotidian context with universal resonance. Choi's proclivity for the banal bespeaks his rejection of dominant value systems entrenched in contemporary art discourse, an impulse exemplified in *Untitled 016000* (2016). This room-sized installation arranges 8,000 twisted and deformed white coat hangers into a dense rectangle covering the floor, asserting a polarity of presence that inverts the void of Choi's newsprint works. Notwithstanding, what remains constant is a Merleau-Pontian inquiry into the rupture between perceived and objective reality, substantiating the experimental dialectics that have always informed Choi's unorthodox and humble practice.

Choi Byungso, 'SENS ET NON-SENS: Works from 1974–2020', at Arario Gallery, Seoul, continues until 27 February 2021.