LOT 1019
QUAC INSIK
1919 - 1988
WORK 63
signed in English; signed and titled in English and dated 63 on the reverse, framed
ink and cuts on canvas
91.5 by 117 cm; 36 by 46 in.

ESTIMATE 800,000-1,200,000 HKD
Lot Sold: 1,062,500 HKD

PROVENANCE
Acquired directly from the artist by the present owner

LITERATURE
World of Quac Insik, Yobisha, Tokyo, Japan, 1984, p. 24
QUAC, National Museum of Modern Art, Seoul, Korea, 1985, p. 28

CATALOGUE NOTE
Breaking the Surface
Quac Insik

by Cho Soon Chun

One of the most innovative and influential artists in postwar Japan was, remarkably, a Korean. Quac Insik (1919-1988), a Korean artist who was educated in Tokyo, is best known as an artistic mentor to fellow Korean expatriate artist Lee Ufan, leading theorist of the Japanese Mono-ha (School of Things) movement. As yet under acknowledged in his own right, Quac’s highly conceptual and pioneering career deserves a reexamination in light of its longstanding impact and legacy.

Quac was educated in Japan due in part to the deep political turmoil in Korea. The son of a powerful family, Quac was sent to Japan to study at Tama Art University during Korea’s Japanese Occupation (1910-45). After graduating in 1941, Quac stayed in Japan, immersing himself in Tokyo’s burgeoning contemporary art scene. The eruption of war in Korea in 1950 saw Quac becoming caught in the ideological chaos gripping the two countries: his older brother was beaten to death by North Korean Communist partisans, while his uncle, wrongly accused of being a Communist, was arrested and executed. These tragedies led Quac to participate in a movement in Japan for Korea’s reunification, prompting the Korean embassy in Tokyo to revoke his Korean passport. Quac was thus effectively barred from returning to his country: he was not allowed to set foot on Korean soil until three decades later, in 1982.

Whilst living in exile, Quac was comforted by memories of his childhood: the stones in the riverbank near his home, the brass chopsticks and spoons his family used at mealtimes, and hanji, traditional Korean mulberry-bark paper. These reminiscences led him to examine the relationship between natural as well as manmade objects and the spaces they inhabited. Fascinated by the concept of the “cosmos” and the endless array of substances within it, he strove to relate to and articulate the essence of matter in new ways. Working with a variety of media, including glass, iron, stone, steel, brass, clay, ceramic and, most famously, paper, Quac concerned himself throughout his career with questioning the dichotomies between surface and plane, substance and space. Thus, while contemporary artists in Tokyo and all over the world turned their attention to the picture plane, Quac concentrated on the surface of materials as the meeting point between substance and plane.

As Italian artist Lucio Fontana began cutting holes and slashing into canvases in the early 1950s, Quac’s explorations went further. He began breaking glass and gluing the pieces back together on a canvas; cutting holes and slicing through sheets of brass, steel and copper and sewing them back together with metal wire; and drilling or scratching little holes into the surfaces of stones and canvases. The current lot, Work 63 (Lot 1019), is a powerful example of the artist’s experimentation with surface. Measuring 91.5 by 117 cm, it features dozens of small holes of varying, irregular shapes perforated into its surface. The archipelago of puncture marks is concentrated mainly in the upper central portion of the frame: at first glance, they almost appear to be holes burned through the canvas material. The holes seem to have been made with a blunt tool, and are surrounded by faint black and gray halos made with ink. The finished work is a paradox: by destroying the canvas, the traditional starting place of Western painting, Quac has freed it from its two-dimensional restraints, giving it a new creative purpose.

Quac’s later works in ink or aquatint on Japanese hwaji paper are his most celebrated. Further developing the methods he used to create Work 63, these later works comprised dense concentrations of small overlapping round forms that he called “circles”, shaped like tiny eggs or teardrops, made with a single stroke or calligraphic touch of the brush on the paper. Positioned in intense clusters, the circles give the illusion of being infinitely deep: in observing them we can imagine we are peering into the infiniteness of galaxies or the microcosmic workings of the natural world. Later, Quac would observe that his circles represented pure substance: “I can’t even say they are circles or not circles. . . . They are not tableau or sculpture, they are just substance.”
Such a groundbreaking reinterpretation of form, material and substance had a profound impact on Lee Ufan, who was also living and working in Japan at the time. Bearing a similar focus on the encounter between man and material, both natural and manmade, Lee’s later works find their roots in Quac’s pioneering emphasis on conceptual and spatial juxtaposition as well as the repetitive gesture. In his 2011 retrospective “Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, Lee famously lowered a large stone onto a plate of glass, which splintered under the stone’s weight. The work, recreated from his 1969 Relatum (Kankeiko) (formerly Phenomena and Perception B [Gensho to chikaku B]), was a direct reference to Quac’s 1963 Work 63A, in which Quac shattered a piece of opaque glass in into two principal pieces. In demonstrating that to pierce the surface of a material was to breathe new life into it, Quac not only influenced one of the most important contemporary artists in the world today, but also forged a pivotal conceptual aesthetic in postwar Asian art. The current lot thus constitutes an influential early example of postwar Korean art that broke radically from tradition, singularly powered by Japanese culture, a conceptual fascination with material and critical preoccupation with the humble act of encounter.

2 Ibid., p. 25
3 Ibid., p. 26
4 Ibid., p. 8