Lee Ufan receives the Wolfgang Hahn Prize 2026

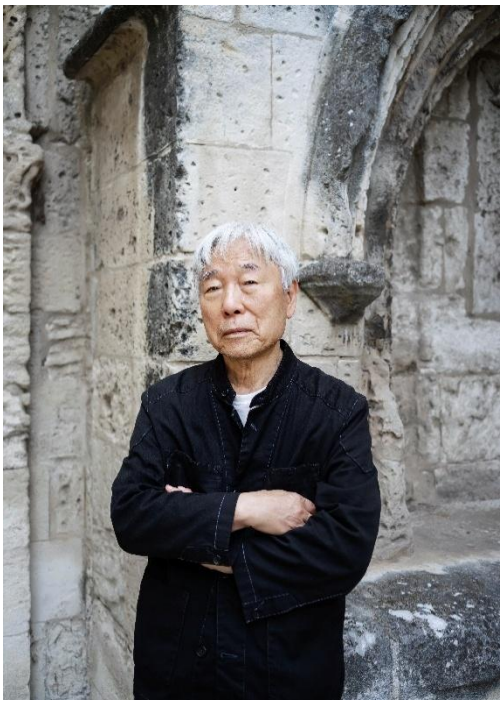
South Korean artist Lee Ufan (born 1936, lives in Kamakura, Japan) has been awarded the 32nd Wolfgang Hahn Prize by the Society for Modern Art at the Museum Ludwig. His art brings together contrasting forces such as emptiness and tension, silence and energy. As co-founder of the Japanese minimalist Mono-ha movement ('School of Things'), a collective of artists in Tokyo between 1968 and 1975, he continues to seek a harmonious reordering of things. Since the 1970s, his minimalist painting in particular has had a major impact on the international art scene. Lee works with a broad brush, placing dots, lines and diffuse rectangles on large-format canvases. These elements appear as isolated formal signs, rhythmically structured patterns or in loose, non-narrative figurations. Lee regards the act of painting as 'a pure and absolute event' involving an immediate encounter between artist, material and image carrier, detached from rational calculation – a transcendent experience of oneness with the world.

This year's guest juror, Mami Kataoka, director of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, explains the jury's decision: 'Lee Ufan has spoken about how his experiences with several exhibitions in Germany in the 1970s brought his work to the world stage. Over the course of his sixty-year career, he has explored the essential meaning of existence in all relationships that transcend East and West – without following Western modernism or retreating into Eastern spiritual traditions. Our current interest in Lee Ufan's work, which gives us an awareness of holistic perspectives, may stem from our longing for interpersonal relationships that form the basis of our humanity. Lee Ufan's work will be a great addition to the Museum Ludwig's collection and contribute to its global orientation.'

'Lee Ufan's works have been on my personal wish list for the Museum Ludwig collection for a very long time. I am therefore all the more delighted that Lee Ufan has accepted the award,' says Dr Yilmaz Dziewior, explaining the jury's decision in favour of Lee. 'The artist, now 90 years old, has close ties to the art scene in Germany, especially in the Rhineland: When the Museum Ludwig opened 50 years ago, his works were on display at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, the Glaskasten in Marl, the Galerie m in Bochum and already at the Museum Ludwig itself. Until now, however, the collection lacked a work by the artist. This gap will now be filled with the acquisition of the Wolfgang Hahn Prize.'

Mayen Beckmann, Chair of the Board of the Society for Modern Art: 'The nomination of Lee Ufan continues a long line of conceptually working Wolfgang Hahn Prize winners since 1994 and, after Haegue Yang, is once again an artistic position from South Korea to expand the collection. Lee's work for the Museum Ludwig collection ties in perfectly with the passion for collecting of Peter and Irene Ludwig, who were interested in Asian art from the very beginning. The acquisition was only possible thanks to the generous cooperation of the prize winner. The Wolfgang Hahn Prize is financed by contributions from our dedicated members.'

Lee Ufan, born in South Korea in 1936, moved to Tokyo at the age of 20, where he graduated in philosophy from Nihon University in 1961. From 1969, he led the Mono-Ha movement and was a professor at Tama Art University in Tokyo from 1973 to 2007. In 2001, he was awarded the 13th Praemium Imperiale for Painting in Tokyo.


Lee Ufan, photo: Claire Dorn, courtesy Studio Lee Ufan

About the Wolfgang Hahn Prize

The Wolfgang Hahn Prize is awarded annually by the Society for Modern Art at the Museum Ludwig, and will be presented for the 32nd time in 2026. The award is primarily intended to honor contemporary artists who have already made a name for themselves in the art world with an internationally recognized oeuvre, but who are not yet as well known in Germany as they deserve to be. The prize money, which amounts to a maximum of 100,000 euros, is made up of contributions from members and is used to purchase a work or group of works for the Museum Ludwig collection. The prize is accompanied by exhibitions of the acquired work(s) organized by the Museum Ludwig and a publication.

The name of the prize honours the memory of the passionate Cologne collector and painting restorer Wolfgang Hahn (1924–1987), who was committed to European and American avant-garde art in Cologne in many ways. Society for Modern Art at the Museum Ludwig feels indebted to his exemplary work as a collector, as its founding member and as head of the restoration workshops at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum and the Museum Ludwig.

Former Wolfgang Hahn Prize winners are:
2025 Evelyn Taocheng Wang
2024 Anna Boghiguian
2023 Francis Alÿs
2022 Frank Bowling
2021 Marcel Odenbach
2020 Betye Saar
2019 Jac Leirner
2018 Haegue Yang
2017 Trisha Donnelly
2016 Huang Yong Ping
2015 Michael Krebber / R.H. Quaytman
2014 Kerry James Marshall
2013 Andrea Fraser

2012	Henrik Olesen
2011	John Miller
2010	Peter Fischli, David Weiss
2009	Christopher Wool
2008	Peter Doig
2006	Mike Kelley
2005	Richard Artschwager
2004	Rosemarie Trockel
2003	Niele Toroni
2002	Isa Genzken
2001	Raymond Pettibon
2000	Hubert Kiecol
1999	Pipilotti Rist
1998	Franz West
1997	Cindy Sherman
1996	Günther Förg
1995	Lawrence Weiner
1994	James Lee Byars

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