



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

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2018 Gwangju Biennale

Why North Korean Art Matters at this Politically Charged Moment in Time

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I believe this exhibition, “North Korean Art: Paradoxical Realism,” at the 2018 Gwangju Biennale will be most probably the first opportunity for the people of South Korea and around the world to see North Korean art in its full spectrum within the context of Socialist Realism art.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, North Korea is the only country that is still creating Socialist Realism art in the world. It is worth noting that North Korean art has developed a unique expression and characteristics.

I also believe that this exhibition will carry significant historic value for the Korean peninsula since the two nations have been separated for more than six decades with little exchange of culture, art, or politics.

I was born in South Korea and educated there until I finished my degree in journalism, and like many others, my educational experience was saturated with anticommunist sentiment. This included a genuine fear regarding North Korea. My fascination actually began in the United States when I had a chance to see North Korean artwork. It was a Chosonhwa, which is an ink wash painting on rice paper. In other words it was a traditional Oriental painting. But, I never expected anything of its nature to surface from North Korea. This Chosonhwa that I saw was not a usual landscape painting, but figurative painting and it captured a poetic quality and yet was rendered with delicate nuance of human emotion on its facial expression. That artwork, that Chosonhwa that I saw in the States shattered my fear, and from that experience my curiosity grew. As an artist, I wanted to know more about North Korean art, and my journey of research into this relatively unknown field began.

Come to think of my research, it has consisted of primary research which was first-hand and on-site experiences rather than a dependence on text. I visited Pyongyang nine times since 2011, and during those trips, I met and interviewed numerous artists, museum staff, and prestigious Pyongyang Art University faculty members as well as students. I also visited many art exhibitions, including the National Art Exhibition.

During this period of extensive research, I regularly presented my findings and held talks on North Korean art at academic venues and research centers such as Georgetown, Harvard, Columbia universities and The Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC. Additionally, after five years of dedicated effort, I was able to bring to fruition the exhibit featuring North Korean art entitled, “Contemporary North Korean Art: The Evolution of Socialist Realism,” at the American University Museum in Washington, DC, for two months in the summer of 2016.

I am currently completing a book on North Korean Art: Chosonhwa, which is the culminating project of my many years of research. My book will be published in Korean in March of 2018 in Seoul, with an English version to follow.

Although most people in the world have heard quite often about the human rights violations and almost everyday there is news about nuclear weapon development in North Korea, it is actually very difficult to know how the society operates or functions in North Korea. For example, in art people can imagine there exists only state-ordered, simple and uniform expressions of propaganda art. It is true that North Korean art is largely propaganda art, but that is not all it is. There is complexity within the simplicity of the art. I would like to introduce this complexity of North Korean art through this exhibition at the Gwangju Biennale.

One aspect that distinguishes North Korean art from that of other communist countries that were directly influenced by the Soviet Union's Socialist Realism, is the traditional ink wash painting on rice paper which, I already mentioned earlier, is called Chosonhwa. Chosonhwa has been the main vehicle for the expression of North Korean Socialist Realism. This exhibition at the Gwangju Biennale is entirely composed of Chosonhwa, and the majority of the artworks in the exhibition consists of ideological paintings of propaganda art.

Due to the closed nature of the society, the artists tend to choose similar subject matters and stay mostly within those limits. However, as I scrutinized North Korean art, within the circumscribed themes, I found evidence of a high degree of creativity. This is particularly prominent in Chosonhwa. As I examined the artworks at Mansudae Art Studio and the Choson National Museum of Art, I gradually discovered the mastery of brushstrokes and the innovative solutions to artistic problems. I came to see the elements of artistic brilliance within the common, set subject matters of the paintings.

In addition to individual artworks, North Korean artists work collaboratively on epic scale paintings. These massive Chosonhwa pieces are created when an event of historical importance occurs, such as the death of a leader or the building a dam. Many artists up to sixty work together for unified production of painting. This very unique type of work, collaborative paintings will be prominently featured at the special exhibition.

My hope is that this historic project centered on North Korean art to be viewed holistically, and I hope this exhibition will bring about active discussion as well as further understanding between the divided countries at this politically charged moment in time.



BG Muhn

Contemporary North Korean Art: The Evolution of Socialist Realism

Curated by BG Muhn

June 18-August 14, 2016

American University Museum, The Katzen Arts Center, Washington, DC

(Link of Media Reviews)

(1) DCist

http://dcist.com/2016/06/first-ever_exhibit_of_contemporary.php

(2) The Feature Story News

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8enBrZDiUA>

(3) The National Geographic

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/07/north-korea-propaganda-art-socialist-realism-display/>

(Don't forget to check all nine images on the site!)

(4) The Washington Diplomat

http://www.washdiplomat.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13854:rare-exhibit-uncovers-surprises-inside-propaganda-laden-hermit-kingdom&catid=1547&Itemid=428

(5) National Geographic live Face Book interview

<https://www.facebook.com/natgeo/>

(6) The Creators Project

<http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/rare-north-korean-paintings-exhibit-us>

(7) The US News & World Report

<http://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2016-08-08/decoding-north-koreas-propaganda-paintings>

(8) The City Paper

<http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/arts/museums-galleries/blog/20830091/the-evolution-of-socialist-realism-reviewed>

(9) Fast co design – Fast Company

<http://www.fastcodesign.com/3062651/the-north-korean-art-movement-thats-been-unknown-for-70-years>

(9) China's Xinhua World TV interview

<http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=YouTube+new+china+north+korean+art&&view=detail&mid=871B546FF31178A4B521871B546FF31178A4B521&rvsmid=871B546FF31178A4B521871B546FF31178A4B521&fsscr=0&FORM=VDFSRV>

(10) Artsy

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-north-korea-s-artists-are-breaking-out-of-70-years-of-isolation>

(11)(NK News)

<https://www.nknews.org/2016/07/not-just-propaganda-explaining-n-korean-art-to-americans/>

(12) <http://mart19.dreamingofgalleries.me/01cedb4a974b49>