

## The art project inspired by the Cold War's last frontier

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A view of a monument inside the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Picture: PA/Mark Staniforth

Tourists in Seoul flock to the Changdeokgung Palace, the ancient home of kings, others brave the bedlam of Gwangjang Market, but one of the most popular destinations is surrounded by barbed wire and overlooked by watchtowers and armed soldiers. And bad news for happy snappers; it is lined with signs banning photography. Not so much as a selfie.

This is Panmunjom, 30 miles north of the South Korean capital and which straddles the DMZ, the Demilitarised Zone which has separated North and South Korea since the Korean War ended in an armistice in 1953 and now cuts an eerie swathe, 2.5 miles wide, 155 miles across the entire peninsular.

It was in this so-called 'truce village' - where the armistice itself was signed - that Donald Trump met North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in June for their third summit. Trump crossed over the military demarcation line in the village into the North before he turned back to the southern side with Kim.

While the border is freighted with military menace and historical unease and the land beyond strictly forbidden territory, the tourist zone in the south of Panmunjom is in brash contrast, with its shops selling DMZ T-shirts and baseball caps. Visitors are invited to admire the pristine railway station which has signs indicating departures to the North's capital Pyongyang (which have never run) and take the tour of an underground tunnel dug by the North in one of its many attempts to sneak in and invade its enemies. There's even a fun fair.

All this is in striking juxtaposition with the rigid police state across the frontier and it is tempting - almost - to think it represents some kind of acceptance of the status quo. That could not be further from the reality as far as the artists are concerned whose works are on display at a new exhibition at the Korean Cultural Centre, just off Trafalgar Square. The centre, which comes under the jurisdiction of the South Korean embassy, is the venue for *Negotiating Borders*, a diverse range of archive images, installations, sculpture and photography inspired by the DMZ, this weird hangover from an unsettled conflict.

The works reveal the unnatural state of two nations divided by irreconcilable philosophies and interests and for whose citizens the threat of being at the centre of a third world war is ever present.

*Negotiating Borders* is the latest iteration of the Real DMZ Project, which was founded in 2012 by exhibition curator Sunjung Kim, and has seen an increasing number of artists explore the division of Korea from different perspectives. The result is works that eschew violent, gung-ho images of nationalistic pride and hostility, but offer subtle commentary and telling observation.

There is a wistful symbolism about *The Embrace* by Min Joung-ki, with its lovers meeting at a barbed wire fence in front of a stylised landscape which might well represent an undivided country. Seung H-Sang's *Model, Birds' Monastery after collapsion* depicts a building in the no-go area falling apart and degrading into dust; it is an ironic nod to the fact that after years without people the Zone has become an eco-friendly bird sanctuary where the cranes fly untroubled by man.

Documentary photographer Heinkuhn Oh has captured a series of young South Korean soldiers posing in their uniforms - but rather than expressions of warlike belligerence they seem awkward, irresolute and reluctant. Military service is compulsory in South Korea and most young people are dismayed by having to join up.

They know that five million people died in the civil war. They will know that the two countries have been on a knife-edge ever since, with North Korea positioning thousands of artillery pieces near the DMZ, according to *The Economist* in 2018, with the capacity to fire more than 10,000 rounds every minute on Seoul.

To add further to the unreality of the place, nothing of this threat is evident to today's visitors, as they peer through 'official' binoculars across the pleasant rolling countryside of the North.

Minouk Lim is only too aware of the concealed dangers. In the video *Monument 300 - Chasing Waterworks* she has dramatised the massacre of 300 civilians in a water tank which had been used as a jail during the war.

"No sign of bodies has ever been found so I decided to find out about the disappearance," she explains. "I invented a radio show and invited relatives of the missing people on a bus where I performed as a kind of DJ to tell the story as we drove from Seoul to the jail.

"It was winter and I gave them torches to help them find more than 300 plastic feathers stuck in the snow. They had to tread carefully as if there were mines still hidden there. Find the objects, I said, and in return I will find the names of the disappeared. But I cannot, they have disappeared. The work is abstract but also a monument to help make the history official."

She insists that the work is not political but the eerie half-light of torches, the icy recreation of huddled dead bodies, conjures up her scarcely contained bitterness. "What is important for me as an artist in a divided country is to reflect on how to deal with the representation of truth and history. My goal is to explain the reality - it does not mean that I give the answer, who is right and wrong, who is bad and good. I make no ideological judgement. People can discover for themselves."

There is nothing eerie or threatening about the startlingly intricate embroideries by Kyungah Ham and no clue to the unique way they are created or the fear that their production engenders in the artist.

On show are chandeliers in glorious colours. It is worth reproducing the notes alongside one. "What you see is the unseen / Chandeliers for Five Cities SK 01-05B, 2018-2019, North Korean hand embroidery, silk threads on cotton, middle man, smuggling, bribe, tension, anxiety, censorship, ideology, wooden frame, approx. 1,600 hrs/2 persons, 160×247cm."

These elliptic words only hint at a remarkable project which had its early inspiration in the 1970s when a young Kyungah Ham would find propaganda leaflets sent from North Korea tied to helium balloons. In those days children were rewarded for handing in the leaflets at school for their contribution to South Korea's ideological war with the North.

By 2008, when she found another leaflet under the gate of her parents' home, she had become a multi-media artist and distrusted much of the history she had been taught. She also knew that South Koreans were sending leaflets of their own over the border. That was her motivation. She decided to reach out to unknown artisans in the North by sending them designs which they could sew into embroidery.

Easier said than done. She had to find an intermediary in China or Russia who could get into North Korea.

"At first I sent photographs but they were too heavy and too big and too easy to be confiscated. The second time I drew the designs on A4 paper but I had to rely on the intermediary to get the drawings through. Everybody needed a bribe, and then I would have to wait for maybe 10 months, waiting, waiting, waiting. Will he show up? Will he need more bribes? I never knew where the works were or what was happening to them. It felt like a disaster. I don't know the artisans. Sometimes the design has been damaged or the product differed from my intended form.

"One of the artisans simply took my money and did no work. Pieces have often come back folded up in black plastic bags, smelling of cigarette smoke."

Of course, she can never meet her collaborators, though sometimes a name is subtly inserted into an embroidery which helps her know who does the best work, and sometimes she slips in hand cream and cosmetics with her designs.

"It's great for them because they never see things like that, but I am always aware that they are in greater danger than I am. If they are caught they can be imprisoned or executed."

As the caption notes, the embroidery of one of her series of chandeliers took 1,600 hours to complete and involved two artisans. What it does not capture is that it is a fabulous work combining the technological know-how of the South with the traditional craftsmanship of the North.

There is an added symbolism to her representation of chandeliers.

"We don't have them in Asia and Africa," she says. "It's very western. It is like something you would find in a party or a palace which is celebrating something. Our history was made by powerful countries and we are victims of the US, the Chinese, the foreign powers, which divided Korea. But now the power of those countries is passing, which is why these chandeliers are either falling or already on the ground.

"You have to look for the story behind the stitches. They are beautiful, pretty like a peacock, and they make the audience pay attention to the story behind. It is like a voice from the North."

All this comes at a price. "I'm in danger in two places because these two governments, these two ideologies, they do not make contact but I have heard that they know me and I have been really scared. I postponed my summer show 11 times because of the domestic situation. You cannot imagine how many times I went to the emergency room.

I fainted in a plane on my way to meet an intermediary because of the stress. I was really sick and I thought, I don't want to work on this, but then, I thought, this is the reality so I must learn to take it very naturally."

She struggles to find the right words in English to express her feelings: "This is really torturing to me. The conflict inside me is the reality of South and North Korea. I ask myself, 'what if North Korea disappears and there is peace for both countries, what if it changes?' My work is a witness to the conflict now which will eventually be shown in museums."

She smiles wryly: "My intermediary asked me not to be famous but I am an artist and I have to interpret the situation in art. That is my mission."

Negotiating Borders runs at the Korean Cultural Centre, London, until November 23