

Stitching different cultures into art

Artist Kim Soo-ja films indigenous textile crafts in various cultures

By Lee Woo-young

A soothing rhythmic sound is carried along a gentle wind in a wild flower field. It resembles the pleasingly relaxing sound from wooden wind chimes blowing in a breeze.

The sound, in fact, comes from the skillful hands of Belgian bobbin lace makers moving wood bobbins from right to left and left to right repeatedly to create lace patterns.

The opening scene of the second chapter of artist Kim Soo-ja's "Thread Routes" series takes audience to the centuries-old tradition of handicraft lace making in Bruges, Belgium. The film continues to capture lace making traditions in Croatia and Italy and industrial lace production in France.

"This film has an anthropological approach, made in a documentary style, but it also features a very poetic collage of images. This shows how I view the world," said Kim, in an interview with The Korea Herald last week in Basel, Switzerland.

Kim, based in New York, is one of the most well-known Korean artists in the international art scene. Her works, which come in multiple disciplines, such as performance, video, photography, drawing, sculpture and site-specific installations, have been exhibited in renowned museums and galleries around the world. The first three chapters of "Thread Routes" are being showcased in Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain until July 12. Such global recognition this year earned her the prestigious Hoam Prize recognizing leading figures in Korea.

Her non-narrative film was screened during the Art Basel fair, the world's biggest and most prestigious art fair, held in the industrial Swiss city of Basel last Wednesday.

The 20-minute long second chapter, released in 2011, follows the artist's silent



Artist Kim Soo-ja

gaze to the traditional lace making, showing their conjunction with architecture and natural landscapes.

In the film, the artist juxtaposes various lace designs with decorative patterns in historical architectural works, such as Alhambra in Spain, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, a cathedral in Milan and Sedlec Ossuary in Czech Republic.

Kim explores textile arts as a medium to view indigenous cultures around the world. She featured Peruvian weavers, descendants of the Incas, and Indian textile artisans in the first and third chapters. The remaining three chapters will feature textile arts of minorities in China and natives of North America and of North Africa.

"I've always been interested in comparative cultural studies that look into features that distinguish a certain culture and people from others," she said.

Textiles and the act of making them have been central concepts to her works.



A scene from "Thread Routes" Chapter II, by Kim Soo-ja Kimsooja Studio

She focused on two important acts in textile making — sewing and wrapping — as major concepts in her previous works.

In her "Needle Woman," (1999-2001), she acts as a needle, standing motionless among crowds in major cities around the world, including Tokyo, New York, London and Mexico City, as if weaving herself into the different social fabrics. In her "Bottari" series, her bottari — a pile of cloth in Korean — travels 2,727 kilometers visiting various villages from her childhood.

Kim calls "Thread Routes" a "recap" of her exploration of sewing and wrapping.

She stitches cultural traditions happening in different places together under a single aesthetic concept and seeks to associate them with other cultural elements, such as lace patterns with architectural structures. She calls this process "sewing" and "wrapping to transform into non-material property."

Having started as a painter, Kim replaced canvas and a brush with fabric and a needle after watching her mother stitching a bed cover. Since she found her fate in working with cloth and needle, she has applied the concepts to investigate

the questions she had related to exile and migration, interpersonal relationships within a global network and the role of women in society.

Her films explore her aesthetic and cultural point of view of the world, but the artist also wants the audience to use their imaginations to guess what she is trying to say.

"I want my work to stimulate the imaginations of audiences and create their own links without my direct explanation," she said.