

Ham Kyung-ah's restless pursuit of novelty

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A view of the installation "Needling Whisper, Needle Country / SMS Series in Camouflage / Big Smile C01-01-01" at the Taipei Biennial 2016 in the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Courtesy of Kaju Gallery

Ham's restless pursuit of novelty

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TAIPEI — Artist Ham Kyung-ah's colorful image grabs the eyes of visitors to the 10th Taipei Biennial held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in Taiwan. At first glance, they just look like bright-colored abstract patterns, but when examined closely, the canvas is jam-packed with woven stitches in various colors, constituting an elaborate embroidery design.

Titled "Needling Whisper, Needle Country / SMS Series in Camouflage / Big Smile C01-01-01," these are part of Ham's famed embroidery series.

But behind the flashy colors, abstract patterns and seemingly random texts, the embroidery pieces embody Ham's attempts to share artistic messages between the two Koreas. "What you see is the unseen," Ham said at an interview with The Korea Times.

The "politically abstract" works — defined by the artist — includes North Korean hand embroidery, silk threads on cotton, middle man, censorship, ideology and a wooden frame in the list of materials.

The project began in 2008 when Ham took inspiration from a flyer from North Korea stuck in her gate.

"It was a means of communication between North and South Korea. So I wanted to communicate with North Korea in my own artistic way. I was also interested in exchanging something with strange, random people," the artist explained. "Then would I initiate the communication? I could send just the flyers, but I focused on a major difference between the two Koreas — a country where everything is available in digital form just a click away and another without the internet. So I came up with needlwork, a labor-intensive, analogue industry, poles apart from digital elements."

The embroidery works are designed by Ham in South Korea and the design gets digitally pixilated before being sent to North Korean artisans through mediators in China. The abstract pattern caters Ham's intention. Phrases in the artwork, such as "Are you lonely, too?" and "Big Smile" are taken from the social network services or popular songs.

"I send digitalized images from the South and it is converted to analogue in the North. A piece takes around a year to return to me after the design was sent on average and many of them go missing as well. It takes hundreds of attempts to complete a piece in time and labor (to embroider in North Korea). It makes me think about time from a different perspective," Ham said.

As several different embroiderers work on the same design, split for convenience, the quality of embroidery varies.

"The embroidery is brighter, high-contrast compared to the original design. I heard that the North Korean artisans prefer vivid colors due to the lack of electricity and enough light. Some of the embroidery was just awful and I couldn't accept it



Artist Ham Kyung-ah stands in front of her embroidery artwork hand-stitched by North Korean artisans. Courtesy of Kaju Gallery

in terms of artistic perspective, while some embroiderers just understand what I meant in color and detail," she said.

"There is this ultimate goal of the embroidery project, which I experimented with but ended in failure. Eventually, I want to collaborate with the imaginations of North Korean people," Ham said. "Abstract art is banned in North Korea and the idea came from the artistic curiosity questioning the space and time where the basic elements of art are contradicted." She pondered the significance of the abstract in the context of art history and for herself and began the experiment questioning prejudice in history, politics and art in a primitive way, which actualized as the embroidery project.

"Such issues have been a cliché in Korea. When the South-North relations become more glacial like it has been for the past decade, political standards are applied to art as well. How an artwork is interpreted and valued changes over time and when the two Koreas become united someday, my works will be more suitable for a history museum," Ham said. "I haven't apprehended all aspects of my

experiment yet."

As Ham's work captures the paradox in the inter-Korean relations in a creative way, her pieces are well-received overseas. In addition to the four pieces on display at the Taipei Biennial currently, one of her embroidery painting series was collected by Victoria & Albert Museum in London and more of her pieces will be introduced at the Frieze London art fair later this week.

Breaking the mold

Though she is now an established artist known for the embroidery project, Ham never ceases to search for new methods to unravel her artistic desire.

Ham is one of the four candidates for the Korea Artist Prize 2016 and her latest works are currently on view at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, along with three other finalists Kim Eull, Back Seung-woo and mixrice.

She could have easily continued her signature embroidery series, but Ham instead presents a series of new works exploring the value of money yet reflecting her pursuit of communication.

"Unrealized the Real," consisting of a sound installation behind closed steel shutters, is a result of a failed documentation of a North Korean defector's journey to South Korea. "Soccer Painting by the Soccer Ball Bouncing Over Crocodile River" is a video and performance of a boy who defected from North Korea now settled in Korea. Along with the "Unrealized the Real," the two pieces of defector issues and the complicated relations between South and North Korea.

"It's not being sentimental about a North Korean defector boy. In the video, the boy says he wants to do art — he is enraptured by the joy of his kick and dribble leaving paint traces and proud of what he created," Ham said. "It is not about South and North Korea, but about struggling to do through art and soccer, by me and the boy."

Though presented in various forms, Ham's works have a coherent theme — who makes the history and why our destiny is formed by others. "In general, money and value underlie my works," the artist said. "And I bring inevitability and uncertainty into them as artistic elements."