

PA-GYONG – LAST SUTRA RECITATION PARK CHAN-KYONG

WEB REVIEW BY NICOLE CHING

UK KOREA, SOUTH



Installation view of **PARK CHAN-KYONG**'s "Pa-Gyong – Last Sutra Recitation" at The Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva), London, 2015. Courtesy Iniva.

Park Chan-kyong is known more widely for his writing and directing work (which he collaborates on with his brother Park Chan-wook), including "The Vengeance Trilogy" series of films. In January, Chan-kyong made his own mark with his first British solo art exhibition at The Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva) in London. The exhibition, "Pa-Gyong – Last Sutra Recitation" is named after a Korean shamanistic song. It embraces many of the themes which has captivated Park throughout his career, exploring people's utopian aspirations born from the political trauma that Korea has undergone throughout history, as well as from the country's traditional religion.

The exhibition is organized alongside Practice International, an initiative whose defining impetus concerns internationalism and social change. It is an apt fit, then, that the exhibition offers a unique insight into Park's distinctive cultural heritage, while simultaneously presenting related concepts in ways that resonate with international perspectives. Furthermore, the works in the exhibition strive toward achieving

depoliticization through art, whether through fictional and documentary film or archival research material.

PARK CHAN-KYONG, *Three Cemeteries* (detail), 2009–10, photograph of Jeokgun-myo (The Cemetery of the Enemies), Paju, South Korea, 81.3 x 136 cm. Courtesy Iniva, London.



Considering the abundance of assorted material provided in the show, it is unsurprising to find that this is an exhibition which calls for, and indeed demands for, the viewer's time—to digest, discover and discuss. This is clearly evident in the centerpiece of the exhibition, *Sindoan* (2007), Park's first documentary film. Our desire for utopia, again, prevails predominantly in this work, chronicling the various divergent religions

that have convened at the Gyeryong Mountain in western Korea, from the colonial period to the Korean war to the present time. The film narrates a story of co-existence despite oppression, with the mountain obviously holding a personal appeal to Park, who sees the site as “the co-existence of dual utopia, that of reality and social change.” His optimism triumphs, as *Sindoan* manages to serve as a beacon of hope. The film is paired alongside three other documentaries shot by Kim In-who, which all concern the Gut—the Korean shamanistic ritual in which the last sutra recitation is sung—being performed for various people.



Detail installation view of **PARK CHAN-KYONG**'s “Pa-Gyong – Last Sutra Recitation” at The Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva), London, 2015. Courtesy Iniva.

These videos are paired alongside three photographs by Park, depicting three different cemeteries. Those buried there are united by repression and displacement, including ones who lost their homeland due to war or were anonymous sex workers. Park strives for a sense of unity through art, particularly between the two Koreas—a subject that clearly enthralled the artist, who deftly explores it in his sensitive treatment of the issues.

Additionally, one entire wall within the exhibition space is plastered with 19 images, like a mood board. The various pictures, which are reproductions of renowned paintings, are accompanied by handwritten captions, penciled in by Park with a sense of immediacy. These captions describe the images, which have each been carefully handpicked to embody some moral or religious concept. The reproductions range from Ed Ruscha's *It's a Small World* (1980) to Hieronymus Bosch's *Ascent of the Blessed* (c. 1500) to paintings by Korean artists. Park relates *It's a Small World* to an encounter he had with a shaman, in which the latter asserted that "the human mind is as complex as the universe." Park believes that if this idea were correct, then life would be pointless. Bosch's phantasmagoric imagery also fits in well with Park's concern with paradise and the struggles involved in achieving it. For Park, "Paradise became either a bad dream or a big joke. There is a Stalinists' paradise in the North [Korea], and aggressive capitalists' paradise in the South." Park seems to be reconciling these two vastly different conceptions of paradise by engaging with traditional Korean history and ideations, and practicing self- and cultural awareness, rather than having the "blind futuristic will" that he believes governs modern Korea.



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These established themes are further explored in pamphlets, which are littered throughout the exhibition space and contain essays on topics ranging from Park's thoughts on Orientalism, grass, shamanism and universality. A reading space in the middle of the floor offers publications for the public to peruse, including literature on the Minjung art movement in the 1980s and rarer finds such as North Korean photography books depicting Mount Kumgang. Upon entry into the exhibition space, visitors are encouraged to access the various desktop computers on display, to print out documents or research materials about the art that is being exhibited, offering up Iniva's vast library resources.

The exhibition, just like the last sutra recitation itself, aims to reconcile those who have been repressed and, through the acknowledgement of disappeared indigenous religions and shamanistic beliefs, emancipate the traditional and spiritual culture of native peoples that have been stifled by history and war. Park's work is undeniably influenced by the structures and religions upon which the cultural sentiment of Korea is based; yet he is able to explore these themes in a way that is compelling to us all. He looks at what it would be like to be free, and to exist without boundaries, and tentatively contemplates the possibility of attaining utopia. This exhibition, then, seems to have arrived at a pertinent time, where it is more important than ever to consider achieving a universal and equal form of globalism.

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