

Park Chan-kyong's Multimedia Works Resurrect Korean History

21 June, 2016 | Ryan Lee Wong

page 1 of 2

Most of Park Chan-kyong's multimedia installations are slow, understated, almost abstract works, a collage of found footage, photography, and vintage cinema. But a closer look reveals a shrewd take on Cold War politics and the formation of modern Korea. Rather than use the dramatic power of film to restage the past, Park finds meaning in voids and absences. The official images, it turns out, erase other stories just at the margins, under the surface. With a sly use of text and montage, Park resuscitates those stories, reminding us how present they still are: An expanse of outer space becomes a metaphor for the Demilitarized Zone that splits the Korean peninsula, while the view out the window of a historic commercial flight evokes the wartime bombings that destroyed that landscape.

Park's exhibition at Tina Kim Gallery (his first solo show in the U.S.) opens with an epic two-channel video installation, *Power Passage* (2004–07). One video remixes Hollywood science fiction from the Cold War; the second shows images of two events that reveal the political context of the period from different angles — the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project of 1975 that saw the historic rendezvous of U.S. and Soviet spaceships in orbit, and the discovery of tunnels supposedly dug by North Korea to send spies south. Captions, meanwhile, explain that the manufacturing conglomerate Rockwell International, which worked on that epochal space docking, also created bombers and surveillance satellites to be used by the U.S. against North Korea. It's a bitter and powerful montage: the sci-fi-esque unification of two countries in space taking place just as the proxy war they fought over the Korean peninsula keeps it divided.



Power Passage

Courtesy the artist/Tina Kim Gallery; Photos: Jeremy Haik

The North-South divide is also the subject of *Flying* (2005), an experimental documentary that uses footage taken from aboard the first commercial flight from Seoul to Pyongyang, fifty years after the Korean War. As the camera gazes at North Korea's fields and mountains from the plane window, an eerie, almost elegiac soundtrack from composer Yun Isang (who died in Germany — ironically, a reunified country) seems to remind us that some divisions remain in perpetuity.



Details from *Three Cemeteries*
Courtesy the artist/Tina Kim Gallery; Photos: Jeremy Haik

It's a theory Park also forwards in *Three Cemeteries* (2009), a photo series that depicts a burial site in South Korea near the DMZ that houses the graves of the neglected: North Korean and Chinese soldiers who died in the war, sex workers based near U.S. military camps, and exiles from the north unable to return home because of the partition. The graves are laden with symbolism, inscribed with nationalist values. As Park's captions below the images tell us, those in the "cemetery of the enemies" all face north, while those of the exiles are divided to reflect the districts of North Korea; meanwhile, the graves of the sex workers are unmarked, the derelict mounds overgrown with weeds. Through the simple act of photographing and describing images with textbook-like directness, Park points our attention to histories that are both literally buried and uncomfortably present.

Park was born in Seoul in 1965, under the reign of Park Chung-hee, whose authoritarian rule transformed South Korea from an impoverished, war-torn country into a militaristic, repressive, modern state. The shadows of Japanese occupation and the Korean War loomed large over the period, driving the call for nationalism and productivity. Park Chan-kyong's works quietly resist that drive — they recall the lives that modernization too often ignores.

His narrative short film *Night Fishing* (2011) might be seen as a metaphor for this work. The film, a collaboration with his brother, director Park Chan-wook (*Oldboy*), follows the sudden death of a fisherman and his relatives' attempts to speak with him through a shaman. It's a ghost story (the family's search for answers melodramatic, the shamanistic rituals vivid) that taps into the universal desire to commune with the deceased. Park's archive of cemeteries and spaceships, his return to sites of unspoken pain, invites us to do the same — to ask how the dead might write their histories.