

KOREAN CONTEMPORARY ART

In Korean art, North completes South

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Ham Kyung-ah sends off her sketches. They come back embroidered by unknown hands

One day in 2008, a North Korean propaganda leaflet drifted down from the sky and landed on the doorstep of South Korean artist Ham Kyung-ah. It was completely unexpected - the North hadn't done that sort of thing much since the 1970s - but it instantly reminded the 49-year-old of her school days,

when kids were rewarded for bringing in such leaflets as part of their anti-communist education.

"I couldn't believe they still communicated with airborne leaflets in 2008!" Ham says. In lieu of a reward from school, she got started on an art project involving anonymous North Korean labourers.

She drew sketches on cotton sheets and sent them - with thread and instructions - to a middleman in China, who passed them on to North Koreans working there. Their job was to embroider the fabric according to her instructions.

It's not uncommon for people to turn to North Koreans to do embroidery for them. The craft is waning in the South, so hand-stitching is often assigned to Northerners and Chinese.

But what Ham was attempting could be dangerous for the labourers, she was warned. If the North Korean authorities find out about her project, the artisans could be in trouble, and so could she. And the project is completely beyond her control.

"I can't guarantee I'll ever retrieve my work," she says. "It could take more than a year. Some of my works are never returned." Nor does she know how many North Koreans are doing the embroidery.

The pieces that have come back, embroidered by different hands, vary in quality and colour tones.

"Sometimes the pieces are entirely different shades, as if they were done under different kinds of lights. And sometimes I'm really surprised at the amazing artistic quality the Northerners have brought to my work."

Ham is cautious about revealing details about the project lest she inadvertently compromise the artisans' safety.

Her embroidered works consist of colourful blurred images that have been digitally edited from photos and the random lyrics of South Korean pop songs or text gleaned from the Internet. She's presenting her latest pieces at the Kukje Gallery in Seoul through July 5, six years after her last exhibition in the capital. Ham's work has been seen overseas more than in her homeland, appearing in exhibitions and biennales in London, Paris, Vienna, Bonn and China.

She invites viewers to "see the unseen" in her embroidered work, summarising it specifically in the caption "North Korean hand embroidery on silk, middleman, anxiety, censorship, wooden frame, 1,200 hours/2 people".

"This project is uncomfortable and sensitive," Ham says, "but I'm not being political. I think this is what I can do as an artist to leave an artistic footprint on this page of history."

The project is a love story, she says, in which a man and a woman never find the perfect timing to realise their true love. "It feels to me that all the circumstances and situations the North and the South face are the factors that hinder two lovers from meeting."

In fact, one of her new pieces features a line from "If You are Like Me", an old song by South Korean singer Kim Jang-hoon. It's about a man who misses his lover after they break up and begs her, if she shares the same feelings, to come back.

"If you are like me, feel what I feel" is the phrase she sent with her sketches to the North Koreans in China. Their reply is awaited.

Memory and history

The Kukje Gallery is hosting Ham Kyung-ah's first solo exhibition, "Phantom Footsteps", through July 5. Well known in South Korea and internationally as an artist who investigates political issues, Ham bravely confronts memory and history.

URL: <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/life/In-Korean-art-North-completes-South-30262191.html>