



"Until dawn the chessboard keeps them in its strict confinement with its two colors set at daggers drawn" by Ham Kyung-ah is currently on display at Kukje Gallery in downtown Seoul through July 5.

Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery

Stitching two Koreas together

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The North Korean mass games, known for their impeccable sense of order, are a symbol of totalitarianism. Thousands of people flip colored cards to create various propagandistic images such as Kim Il-sung's portrait among others.

Artist Ham Kyung-ah's embroidery series which makes connections between South and North Korean took inspiration from an anonymous boy in the group performance.

While watching a German documentary featuring the North Korean mass game, Ham's eyes fell on a

boy who stuck his head out during a card section outlining a pistol — a nod to North Korea's militaristic state — to see the conductor.

"It was a brief moment, but I recognized it as a powerful symbol against the faceless bureaucracy," Ham said.

Inspired from the boy behind the card, who was substituted as a pixel of the pistol, Ham made embroidery works in collaboration with a group of North Koreans.

"What you see is the unseen. Chandeliers for Five Cities 04" is a 2.5 meter by 3.5 meter embroidery work. It portrays a fancy chandelier hanging askew. The grandeur of the chandelier, which is a recurring theme in Ham's works, is a

reference to the prestige and ambitions of the upper class in imperialism. The piece was embroidered by four North Korean laborers for approximately 2,400 hours.

Other series are look like post-modern paintings holding psychedelic imagery. Ham hid metaphorical phrases behind the images such as "Money Never Sleeps" and "Are you lonely, too?"

However, since there is no private contact available between citizens of the two Koreas, the 48-year-old artist has a unique method of work. She sends digital images of embroidery design to North Korea via China and North Korean embroiderers stitched them based on her sketch-

es.

Ham does not give detailed instructions but leaves room for interpretation. "The embroiderers interpret them and do the needlework. Much of the process is done by accident," Ham explained. "For instance, some embroiderers use black threads to stitch black, while others combine red, blue and yellow threads for black stitch. Some of them are well-made, while others are sloppy. However, I can't intervene in the details at all."

Ham includes middle men, anxiety and censorship as a part of her artworks' material, in addition to traditional silk threads and cotton. It took about a year and a half on

average for an order to North Korea to return via China, if they are completed.

"About six out of 10 sketches went missing. Drafts containing jewelry was not accepted since it was considered a symbol of capitalism," Ham said. "North Korean workers have to read the text before beginning to stitch and it is a kind of propagandistic message. The attempt to communicate beyond the borders of ideology and physical distance and all the process is a part of my work."

"Phantom Footsteps" runs through July 5. Admission is free. For more information, visit www.kukjegallery.com or call (02) 735-8449.