

THROUGH A FILMMAKER'S LENS, A VIEW OF KOREA

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This spring, the art establishment in South Korea made headlines worldwide by selecting the Chinese artist, activist and now political prisoner Ai Weiwei to co-direct the coming 2011 Gwangju Design Biennial.

The country's homegrown contemporary art scene may be less likely to make international news. But artists like Chan-kyong Park — known for his haunting films and photography — are making an impact both at home and abroad. His short and feature-length films as well as his photography address the storied relationship of North and South Korea without losing the levity required to captivate an audience — a careful balance in a country ready to break away from rule-book behavior.

"Korean contemporary art has the most vital scene in Asia," said Mr. Park, who says his belief is based on the growing prominence of Korean artists and, increasingly, women filmmakers like Jae-en Jung, Chan-ok Park and Sun-rae Im. But overturning the rigid infrastructure of South Korean museums and galleries is an uphill battle, he said. "Institutions are too conservative, too vulnerable to government change, and there is no good journalism and critique."

Mr. Park's own work reflects the various structures born of Korea's politically fraught history. The resulting religious mix of Buddhism, Christianity and shamanism offer Mr. Park a rich palette of imagery.

His film "Sindoan" (2008), for example, portrays individuals practicing the many anomalous religions generated in the country during the mid-20th century. His photo series "Three Cemeteries" (2009) consists of images of the final resting places for displaced peoples in South Korea.

Late last year, Mr. Park completed the film "Anyang, Paradise City" for a local festival in the city of the same name. The film, which was shown earlier this year at the International Film Festival Rotterdam and at the Jeonju International Festival in South Korea, is a blend of documentary and fiction that centers on the search for survivors of a 1988 sweatshop fire that killed 20 women. "From my college years, I remember Anyang as a city full of female factory workers," Mr. Park said. "Koreans all know that the Korean 'economic miracle' is based on their toil, but they never want to remember."

In the opening scene a group of women dance on a verdant plateau and appear to sing a traditional song about their troubles with men. The dance was declared a cultural asset by Unesco, and by using it Mr. Park is commenting on how he feels institutions exploit tradition to increase tourism. "It was a traditional folk dance," he said. But now it has "gained a certain marketability."

His criticism of bureaucracy, as well as of South Korea's neglect of heritage sites, is evident in other documentary aspects of the film. "Anyang" includes footage of an archeological dig for an ancient temple from the Silla dynasty that was covered with another temple during the Goryeo dynasty. "Tradition is dead in Korea, but no one knows how many antiques are buried under the soil," Mr. Park said. "There are too many big apartments on top of them."

Recently, the artist collaborated with his brother, the filmmaker Chan-wook Park, who is best known for his psychological thrillers that make up "The Vengeance Trilogy." The brothers wrote, produced and directed the short film "Night Fishing," which was shot exclusively with video from four iPhones in a partnership with Korean Telecom.

Chan-kyong Park said he enjoyed the odd angles he could capture with the phones. The first shots demonstrate the benefits of this technique: an initial pan across a dirt road where a band performs is punctuated with powerful close-ups. Their song is carried over to an elderly man in a nearby wood, who, after a fishing accident, is able to speak with his family one last time through a female shaman.

Paradise, and the struggle to get there, pervades both "Anyang" and "Night Fishing." Mr. Park's ambivalent search is an apt filter through which to consider present-day Korea. "Paradise became either a bad dream or a big joke," Mr. Park said. "There is a Stalinists' paradise in the North, and aggressive capitalists' paradise in the South. While Koreans are bound to the ideological utopian images, Koreans lost great richness of their traditional imagination of the good world, because Korean modern history is really built upon blind futuristic will."

Mr. Park's sensitivity to the vices and virtues of a divided Korea is what separates him from his peers, said Yun Cheagab, the commissioner for the Korea Pavilion at the Venice Biennale this year. "His work is very conceptual," said Mr. Cheagab, who has known the artist for many years. "He's willing to figure out what is between North and South Korea. Not South Korea, not North Korea, middle Korea."

For Mr. Park, the "blind will" that colors Korea's political history is inextricable from the current state of contemporary art. "1987 and 1988 was the high time of the labor movement," he said. "Like the artist group introduced in 'Anyang,' there were strong small groups who created propaganda works and were involved in grass-roots community arts. They have left a heritage. It's called 'Min-jung art' meaning 'people art.'" Mr. Park says a generation of "post Min-jung art" has arisen that is influenced by Western conceptualism and sensitive to media politics and art institutions. He positions himself between the present and past iterations.

Operating in this temporal limbo is clearly fruitful for the artist, who has several shows this autumn, including "Second Worlds" in Austria at the integrated contemporary art gathering Steirischer Herbst Festival 2011 (Sept. 23 to Oct. 16) and "Image Clash: Contemporary Korean Video Art" at the CU Art Museum in Colorado (Sept. 9 to Oct. 22).

He's also enthusiastically pursuing a new project, despite the fact that he does not yet have funding. It's "a horror film scenario, a narrative with a lot of female ghosts," he said. "Other than that, I practice every day in art, drawings, paintings and installation. The artworks focus on what I call 'Asian Gothic.'"

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 17, 2011

An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Korea was once a colony of China, and implied incorrectly that Chinese Taoism and Catholicism were the principal religions practiced in the country. In addition, the article misspelled Goryeo dynasty.

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