

# ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

February 17, 2012

## “A Postcard from Afar: North Korea from a Distance”

APEXART

291 Church Street

January 11–March 10

For all its coordinated means and forcible ends, North Korea's official footage relaying the nation's demonstrative mourning of Kim Jong Il may have let other woes escape into view.

Coat-swaddled, sob-buckled—bare fists beating pavement—this suddenly visible public seemed possessed by still older grievances, vaster grief, deepened in Kim's lifetime, irredeemable by his death. Or so observers outside “the hermit kingdom” might be tempted to glean, forced to parse through the country's tethered tourism and constricted traffic of abductions and defections. The eight artists in this show roam just that moral-epistemological murk, evading expedient genres like exposé, lampoon, or Manichaeian sci-fi for subtler sightlines of desire and identification.

Soni Kum's lyrical documentary memoir *Foreign Sky*, 2005, ponders her melancholic attachment to the North by sifting the century-old history of Japan-born North Koreans like herself—a refugee underclass ineligible for Japanese citizenship—alongside US vets' and reparations activists' rueful retrospections on America's “forgotten war.” Karl Tuikkanen's video installation *Untilted*, 2011, revisits the artist's preteen participation in an anti-American march in 1980s Pyongyang, when accompanying his Swedish socialist parents on a solidarity delegation. These works address eclipsed affiliations that summon further contexts, from the Non-Aligned Movement to East Asian postcoloniality and racialism, including the ethnic nationalism fueling some Korean reunification campaigns.

Kim Jong Il's own storied avidities—for Hollywood and Harleys—inspire works here by Tony Garifalakis, Magnus Bårtås, and Jim Finn, whose loving, absurdist collage-film parable *The Juche Idea*, 2008, rummages stillborn socialism for what the political imagination might learn there. Yet the desire to feel along with and on behalf of those afar turns uneasy in Jung Lee's C-print series “Bordering North Korea,” 2005, where pithy text like “Let us live our own way” floats voicelike amid the DPRK's misty borderlands—the obscuring beauty of it all inviting belief.



Jung Lee, *Bordering North Korea # 15*, 2007, color photograph.

— Chinnie Ding