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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

You, Me and The DMZ: Imagining North Korea

by Ellen Pearlman on January 30, 2012



Jung Lee, "Bordering North Korea # 15" (2007) (Courtesy of the artist and One & J Gallery, Seoul)

North Korea is so wacky they have their own calendar system, and it marks its centennial anniversary in 2012, the birthdate of the late Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-un's grandfather. Dovetailing neatly with the recent passing of Übermeister Kim Jong-il, A Postcard From Afar: North Korea From A Distance, curated by Mark Feary, showcases the bull's eye vision of apexart's unsolicited proposal program's winning entry.

North Korea calls itself the Junche Republic (100). The 100 marks its centennial anniversary (2012), chosen because it is the 100th birthday of the late Kim Il-sung, the current leader Kim Jong-un's grandfather. Feary's curatorship asks eight artists to image what is going on behind its secretive borders. North Korea's propaganda machine is so replete with Hollywood show-biz flash-in-the-pan razzle dazzle that it is cause for a movie within a movie, which is the real take away from this exhibit.

291 church st. nyc, ny 10013
p: 212.431.5270 f: 646.827.2487
info@apexart.org; www.apexart.org

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Peter Cave, "Kim Il-sung" (2011) (Courtesy of the artist and Arts Project Australia, Melbourne)

Eight artists were asked to envision "a state and culture that is shrouded in secrecy, being both the producer and victim of oppositional propaganda mechanisms." The first thing Feary did was boldly approach a special art center in Melbourne, Australia that supports artists with "intellectual disabilities." The residents were given standard photos of Kim Il-sung and Kim-Jong-il, display items compulsory in all houses and buildings inside North Korea. The residents were not told whom the pictures represented, a decidedly opposite approach of state supported propaganda painters in the DMZ. The conflicting tensions of the two portraits by Peter Cave highlight the backward alchemy of authority, image making and meaning stripped lean by the characters anonymity through their outrageous and hilarious decontextualization.

Magnus Bærtås' short film "Madame and Little Boy" (2009) revolves around the chillingly true story of the 1978 kidnapping of South Korean film star Choi Eun-hee and her equally prominent ex-husband, the director Shin Sang-ok by North Korean master espionage handlers in Hong Kong. The couple, who were first sent to a gulag for five years for an attitude adjustment, were offered the deal of a lifetime by Kim Jong-il to make kitschy propaganda films for the motherland replete with an unlimited budget and resources. The only hitch was to proclaim publically they "defected." The couple bit the bullet and no expense was spared to make "Pulgasari," a 1985 action adventure thriller rivaling Godzilla, including importing technical wizards Teruyoshi Nakano and his crew from Toho studios who made the original Godzilla in arch-rival Japan. The crews were not told where they were going until their plane touched the forbidden tarmac.

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Magnus Bærtås, "Madame & Little Boy" (2009) (Courtesy of the artist)

Once inside the DMZ the Japanese were so terrified of being abducted, just like the director whose orders they were following, they put their nose to the grindstone, churned out fire breathing behemoths and quickly high tailed it out of the country the minute Shin Sang-ok yelled, "It's a wrap." Bærtås even interviewed Choi-Eun-hee, who eventually escaped to Seoul, but her freedom is only the coda, not the main thrust of the tale. The stinging issue in this entire exhibit is the opposite of most curated shows — the reality of the absurdity of the story almost overwhelms the artists' ability to convey it. It's as if the 1960s cartoon characters Boris and Natasha from the Rocky and Bullwinkle the Moose show actually carried out their nefarious and dastardly deeds only to be curated and commented on some 40 years later at a special event in Tribeca.

The refreshingly simple photographic series *Bordering North Korea 2005-2008* by Jung Lee shows a mesmerizing view of longing and natural terrain that cannot be touched because it stretches across a guarded and treacherous border. Apparently North Korea encourages border tourism, a vacuous and depleted theater of experience where one pays mightily and is escorted by guards to bleak, empty dining rooms and hotels for a glimpse of this forbidden terrain without the risk of being blown apart by a sniper or landmine.

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Tony Garifalakis, "The Hills Have Eyes" (2011) (Courtesy of the artist)

This sense of the hidden covert also fits in with Tony Garifalakis's special fabric, "The Hills Have Eyes" (2011) that embeds a pair of eyeballs into a rather ordinary camouflage pattern. Kim Jong-il also loved motorcycles and was probably the first North Korean biker, which led to Garifalakis "Leader of the Pack" (2011), a stitched and ornamented biker jacket.

This exhibit requires a copious amount of explanation as it uses facts that are publically available but little known to most Western audiences and creates a constructed realm of inquiry and annihilation. One of the last and most secretive places on earth, North Korea intrigues as it repels. To his credit the curator has remained virginal about setting foot inside his intended and only now after the ceremony and nuptials at Apex Art will he take the plunge and actually visit, in the flesh, the homeland of his intended.

A Postcard From Afar: North Korea From A Distance continues until March 10 at Apex Art (291 Church Street, Financial District, Manhattan).