



Hanoi to Hallyu

Published March 2, 2009

Embarrassingly, it took a Korean horror film, *R-Point*, to enlighten me regarding that country's significant involvement in the Vietnam War. At VAALA's page introducing Yerba Buena's exhibit *transPOP: Korea Vietnam Remix*, you can read the curator's statement where it is noted that "the Republic of Korea was the second largest foreign military and economic presence in Vietnam behind the United States, with over 300,000 combat forces and approximately 24,000 skilled workers in exchange for substantial U.S. aid." For someone who sought out just about every domestic film released about the Vietnam War as a kid, I can't help but wonder about the hows and whys of this rather glaring lacuna.

It's a bitter irony that throughout history war is often the instigator of cultural exchange. The spoils and stories brought back from campaigns abroad fuel a fascination and mystique of those sites of conflict. To meet the new demand, trade is an inevitability, and what follows is often a delicate negotiation between the promise of economic opportunity and the nascent underlying traumas. *transPOP* is infused with this blend: the gaudiest stage shows of clean-cut pop bands share space with grainy images of carpet bombings and the flare of ignition from helicopter-mounted missile racks. It's a diverse ensemble, more than slightly overwhelming in the varied approaches and subject matter on-hand. But you are never more than a few feet away from the reminder of the nexus that formed the present day relationships between Korea, Vietnam and America, whether it is a twisting pathway of camouflage-patterned placemats or the sounds of whirring rotor blades coming from projected news footage. Rather than offering a woefully inadequate attempt at a comprehensive overview, I've picked out a few of favorites from the show:



Nguyen Mahn Hung's fighter jets with their incongruous payloads of cereal goods and pig carcasses in *Go To Market*, 2004. The F-4 Phantoms are contemporaneous with the Vietnam War. The appearance of the later F-18 Hornet suggests the enduring legacy of the co-mingling of commerce and militarism (UPDATE - or not, check out Johnny O's correct identifications in the comments. Thanks again!). It's a striking image of the disparity between humble and humbling levels of technology that prompts no end of reflection. Who gets to own which? Who's in charge and why? How do we get there from here and what will become of us if we do?

Song Sanghee, *The National Theater*, 2004; video installation. This is right inside the entrance and delayed my venturing into the main space of the gallery for a good long while. A man at a podium begins a speech on the hope for reconciliation between North and South Korea. Suddenly, an assassin appears in the lower corner of the screen and fires shots from a prop gun as someone offscreen attempts to wrestle him to the ground. Although a bodyguard seated near the podium springs from his chair and draws his own gun in retaliation, he is too late: the woman next to him slumps over, the victim of a stray (imaginary) bullet. He freezes in this position for a moment or two, straightens his coat, takes his seat and smooths out his trousers. The other man emerges from behind the podium where he'd taken refuge and the woman resumes her former posture on the folding chair. The speech begins again and the scene plays out once more to its tragic conclusion. The action is not looped: during one run-through, the bodyguard drops his gun by accident, but he still strikes the same pose in tableau, arm outstretched. Specifically, the piece reenacts the attempted assassination of Korean President Park Jung-hee and the accidental slaying of his wife, Yuk Yeong, but in its recurrences of hope and horror can be read the anxiety over the troubled history of efforts of rapprochement between the two halves of a divided nation.



The slowly moving clusters of flowers against an identical background, which finally reveal themselves as the camouflage of a creeping figure in Lee Yong-baek's *Angel Soldier*, 2005. This is projected onto a gallery wall and it took me a while to even tease out the effloresced fatigues from the backdrop. Soon others emerge, magic eye-style, moving at the same measured pace, crouched in a commando duck walk.



Steaming Out (Post IMF), 2000 also by Lee Yong-baek, is another video projection of perambulating metaphors (image from the YBCA page video). A man in a business suit carrying a canvas laptop bag trudges across the bottom of a swimming pool, bubbles sputtering upward from the regulator in his mouth. As the name suggests, the work is informed by the IMF crisis and its affect on Korean white-collar workers.

The complexity of LIN + LAM's *Unidentified Vietnam (Invisible Like Peace)*, 2006. In a disorienting inter-cutting of period footage and reenactment, Lana Lin and H. Lan Thao Lam's video piece introduces a white gloved woman regarding a passage from Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*: "In a way you could say they died for democracy," he said. "I wouldn't know how to translate that into Vietnamese." The implication that the quote is more telling for what it says about the speaker than for any profundity in his observation is underlined by the frantic interweaving of staged and acquired images.



Lying on Facism, 2006 by Min Hwa Choi Chul-Hwa. The delirium induced by the rosy red that suffuses the protesters and the landscape as if their solidarity had been captured by a Tesla aura photograph seems to foreshadow the haze of inevitable clouds of tear gas.



Finally, Sandrine Llouquet's *Troi Oi!* series of drawings in marker pen and enamel on plexiglass. There was plenty of colorful and playful work on display, like Tiffany Chung's Marioland-esque hued characters in her *Bubble Double Bazooka* prints and her weird sea anemone styrofoam stalk *Sugarcane-Kumquat Mixed Juice*. But Llouquet's tiny renderings are little worlds of their own that kept me coming back for another look.