

*Southern Island That Does Not Sleep* \*

Yong Soon Min

Taking place sixty-six years since the events known as April 3, 1948 (or 4.3 or *sasam* in Korean), *Camellia Has Fallen: Contemporary Korean Artists Reflect on the Jeju Uprising* presents a welcomed opportunity to introduce a diverse group of artists to new audiences. Recognizing its renewed significance, this museum exhibition establishes an overdue and necessary consideration of *sasam* history. My discussion raises salient aesthetic and discursive qualities of the selected art works, while considering relevant aspects of a history rooted in the Cold War conflicts that will shed some light on the constellation of *sasam* events.

The fact that the mere mention of *sasam* was forbidden for over forty years gave these artists an ever greater sense of urgency and the strength to make work that would have the power to speak the truth while also contributing to the healing and reconciliation necessary for the people in Jeju (Jeju island) and beyond. The artists have varied approaches to this legacy. Some probe and critically examine the discourse, facts and details of this history while others questioning but also offer analysis and conclusions, or express a felt truth. All artists in essence have immersed themselves in the vortex of historical events from which their voices have emerged loud and clear, to bear witness for the record.

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*Kang Yo Bae*

Kang Yo Bae is a renowned artist, largely known for his *sasam* art. In 1988, an artists group that he belonged to, organized a *sasam* art exhibition held discreetly near Korean Air Line Hotel in Jeju, titled *April Exhibition*, as the term *sasam* was forbidden. Works in this show were more abstract and symbolic rather than literal but when this exhibition was moved to Seoul, more explicit works were included. Attempts were made by the authorities to censor and confiscate art works but was persuaded otherwise.

In addition to his involvement with *sasam* art organization, Kang was also the co-founder of Tamna (ancient name for Jeju) Artist Association in 1991, which has a large membership and holds annual exhibition.

In 1992, Kang's *sasam* art shown in Jeju, Seoul and Daegu in an exhibition entitled, *The Camellia Has Fallen* was considered a major and influential event. When the Jeju 4.3 Peace Park opened in April 2008, fifty of Kang's drawings were displayed. Also inside the museum, a mural size painting encircles visitors who can look above and view idyllic pastoral scenes of peasants working and relaxing in the fields.

Fortunately, Kang's famous painting about the camellias, painted in 1991, is in this exhibition. In a close-up, almost claustrophobic view of a scene in a forest, a prominent, large, red camellia is depicted falling from a bush above while in the

distance, in a clearing of a stream lined with rocks, reveals an ugly scene of a soldier beating a figure among a small group of other soldiers. Like camouflage, the soldiers painted in muted greenish brown would disappear into the forest were it not for the patches of red on the ground drawing attention to that area.

Another 1991 painting, *Sky is Crying* conveys a cataclysmic scene of villagers fleeing their homes consumed in raging flames in the distance under a heavy dark sky that occupies nearly the entire painting. In the glow of the fire, a cow anchors the middle and figures. Most prominently are a mother carrying an old man holding a cloth bag and a boy next to them clutching a bag against his chest while looking backward to the grandmother in the distance holding ceremonial screen. Dark figures can be seen next to the stone fence on the left that bodes ominous fate for the doomed family.

Kang's more recent painting, *Cenote* depicts the treacherous depths of a sinkhole with a bluish water flowing below, close to the viewer. This is one such area that many people looking for hiding places have fallen into and perished. Like this painting, all of Kang's paintings in the exhibition are expressive in style with confident, bold strokes in dramatic compositions with just enough definition to provide meaning.

### **Kang Moon-seok**

Two seemingly simple bowls presented by Kang Moon-seok are white with bluish line circling the rim, with identical Chinese characters gracing each bowl. Instead of the usual porcelain, these are made of marble that distinguishes this work as art. The use of marble also lends these objects a greater sense of permanence and importance while the word, *bok* in Chinese translates as good fortune, luck, blessings, or happiness. Kang has created a brilliant conceptual sculpture that invariably invites the viewer to think and to imagine what these bowls may represent. Emptiness is vital, open to the possibilities that may fill the bowl.

Understanding the many efforts that have been made to achieve forgiveness and reconciliation Kang is also wary of those who distort history or play political games continue to complicate or to muddy the situation. When April comes, the descendants presents food offerings to pay respect, hoping for forgiveness but the bowls remain metaphorically unfulfilled. The artist wishes that the bowlful expectations for peace and justice may be filled to the brim soon.

Kang's work about memorialization and fulfillment points to the complex and involved process that Jeju villages have had to face. Heonik Kim, a scholar who has been studying death commemoration and ancestor worship, most notably in Vietnam, has in recent years been examining these rituals in Jeju related to the 4.3 tragedy. His research covers the rituals displaying the lamenting spirits of the dead that have become public events in Jeju since the end of 1980s and were part of the forceful nationwide civil activism in the 1990s. The activism was focused on the

moral rehabilitation of the casualties from *sasam* as innocent civilian victims, instead of their previous classification as communist insurgents. The hidden histories of mass deaths have become one of the most heated and contested issues of public debate since the early 1990 and their emergence into public discourse is regarded by many to be key features of Korea's political democratization. Institutional support has been established to document victims of 4.3 atrocities, province-wide memorial events have been programmed and excavation of mass burial sites and plans to preserve these sites as historical monuments have been set. But these promising initiatives have suffered setbacks since conservative government took power in 2008. The struggle continues.

### **Koh Gil Chun**

As one of the most active and influential artist, Koh Gil Chun is also a *sasam* artist who is represented in the 4.3 Peace Museum. In the display indoors, *Death Island* shows a grouping of 23 alto-relievo sculptures in white plaster and clay that depict the broad range of victims' torture and deaths. The other poignant outdoor piece, *Biseol*, conveys a woman holding a child on the verge of dying amidst a circular ground of snow. *Biseol*, a Jeju term meaning a pile of snow being scattered by strong wind, suggests in this work that ideology is meaningless to this woman's struggle to live.

In this exhibition, Koh presents a powerful work, *Shirt*, a rubbing with charcoal on *rice* paper of a shirt that was unearthed amidst about 250 bones of victims of *sasam* that were excavated on the site of the Jeju International Airport in 2009. A clear bullet mark can be seen in the rubbing of the middle of the shirt. This work received the grand prize at the National Alliance of Art Association Exhibition held at the Jeju Museum of Contemporary Art.

*Landscape of YoungNam Village* is a diptych painting that portrays two scenes. Painted with convincing details, including pixilation, of a survival computer games, the left side shows two shooters against one target in the distance in a one-point perspective view while on the right, through the crosshairs of a circular view is of a green field with a lying figure. What most computer gamers remain ignorant about is the story of YoungNam where fifty or so villagers were massacred at dawn, and the village was burnt. Now it is called the *lost village*. As Koh states, "just like the background of some computer game, the lost village gets further and further away from reality and memory." This ironic work questions how to maintain the truth about 4.3 history when so much in contemporary life works against knowledge and remembrance.

Since 2007, Koh has been active with the villagers of Gangjeong in Jejudo to wage fierce resistance against the construction of a massive naval base. Koh sees a relationship between his *sasam* work and the struggle against the navy base. Although Jeju was officially designated the *Island of Peace* in 2006 by the South

Korean government and it has received the UNESCO-designated World Natural Heritage site, it has built the base--which will host 20 warships including two Aegis destroyers that will be connected to the U.S. Missile Defense System. In the building process, the fragile ecosystem was also destroyed.

Koh has met Noam Chomsky in (Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and spoken with Gloria Steinem at New York University public event in 2011, and welcomes their activism to address the link between the 4.3 history and the resistance work against the naval base.

### **Kim Su Beom**

Kim Su Beom lived in Gangwan-do, (a northeastern province in the southern peninsula) as an art teacher until recently when he was able to get a transfer to his hometown of Jeju-do. During his lengthy period in Gangwan-do, one of my distinct memories was their (he is married to Kil Yekyung, a diasporic Korean Canadian translator and designer who moved back to Korea and resides in Seoul) rigorous and disciplined effort to attend *Chusok* (a national holiday) which they treated far more seriously than most in Seoul. As I write this essay, my speculation about his dedication to attending Chusok has become clearer. Chusok gave him the yearly opportunity to pay respects to his grandfather who was a victim of 4.3 uprising and furthermore, the fact that no images exist of his grandfather could be the reason why Kim became a photographer.

*Spring Day* is a triptych of B&W vertical photographs. The middle picture is of a young man, a distant relative who was also a casualty of 4.3 incident. The other images are of street scenes with elders seen from their backs. Kim recalls a line from a novel by Hyun Ki Young, that *the back of an elderly man makes you think about his past days*. This line triggered an imagination of his grandfather walking the neighborhood streets during his college days.

On each of the three photos, he had laid two violets that were pressed in books then printed as images. Violets, sometimes called *orangkae* (foreign intruder) is considered a legendary flower in sad historical dramas. Kim re-imagined these tiny flowers into gigantic images within these photographs, much like the bitter sadness that exists among those who have survived.

Kim's deft compositional senses contribute to the collective intimating sensitivities that are ever present and felt. In addition to the violets that evoke a strong presence in these three images, a subtle yet dynamic current is felt in the diagonal lines that accentuate the photos: the slanted entry of the building of the street scene on the left and the diagonal power line is echoed by the stark white band that runs across the boy's hat is then met on the right photo with the curved sweep of the dark entrance area as well as the angled line that happens to be on the ground.

## Kim Young Hoon

Stones are plentiful and an integral part of what makes Jeju a special place as evidenced by Jeju Stone Park, a large preserve that highlights large and small stones in multitudes, including an intimate, secluded forest punctuated with numerous *dongjaseoks*, child stones that are customarily placed at the entrance to a town or near tombs. Geomantic principles indicate that areas deficient of energy flows can be boosted with these stones, or can prevent misfortune, guard the area or be effective in the birth of a great man. *Dongjaseoks* inspire two sets of sculptural installations that animate Kim Young Hoon's world. *People of my Hometown* consists of 33 terra cotta figures that he had fired carefully with soot glazing and completed with a thorough smoking process. These figures resemble *dongjaseoks*, in that both are small, situated on the ground and have faces. Kim figures have faces with expressions that are intricate and individually defined, such that males and females are distinct, as are elders from the younger.

Made of porous black basalt, *dongjaseoks* are usually placed in pairs, near tombs, as guardians of the graves to perhaps keep the dead company. Simple in shape with straight body below a head and arms defined by lines, they appear to some to be placid and unrefined while to others they seem to have affectionate, even playful demeanor. In *Paper Pageboy Dongjaseok and Paper Costume of Death*, Kim has made twelve couples from *hanji* (Korean made paper). These are so well made that they completely resemble their stone counterparts. The installation is filled with 47 female *hanboks*, also made of *hanji*, suspended above the display of *dongjaseoks*. With these children guardians keeping company with the dead, Kim likens the suspended figures as mothers or daughters hovering above, listening to their pains and keeping them well.

## Park Kyoung Hoon

With as much attention paid to language and discourse as to images, Park Kyoung Hoon has created two works that reverberates broadly. In *Language Research. Reds*, Park presents a drawing of five figures, who are specific but could also be considered representatives of Jeju: elder male, mother towing an infant on her back and holding a toddler in her arms, a school boy, an older high school girl and a *halmoni*, an elder woman. Screen-printed in red is this infamous quote: *For the good of the Republic of Korea, we should pour gasoline throughout Jeju, set it on fire and burn the 300 thousand residents to death all at once*. This statement is by Jo Byeong Ok, who was the Chief of Police of the United States Military Government. This statement represents the level of rabid hatred that motivated the unsparing brutality and massacres committed on the island.

In the digital print, *Low Intensity War-Make A Fight in the Same Race*, Park has used images of heads to cover a grid of six heads vertically by thirteen heads across. A variety of actual faces from Jeju are overlaid by this text alternating in red and

white colors, between English and Korean: *Low Intensity War*. Park concludes here that divide and conquer was an effective strategy to wreak chaos.

Little has been brought to attention about the group of Japanese officers and soldiers who have been secretly brought back to the island to help in the *all out guerilla extermination campaign* under U.S. control in 1948. The indelible role of Japanese brutal colonial period was sublimated yet relied on by the US occupiers of Korea. Heonik Kwon (identified earlier) tells of the complex background to the inventive new ancestral shrine of Hagui (in northern Jeju) completed in 2003. Hagui had been divided into two administrative units in 1920 by the Japanese colonial administration, such that during the chaos of the *sasam* period, one part of the village were labeled the *red* hamlet and the other part was against them. By the end of the *sasam* campaign the whole village of Hagui was considered politically impure and subversive. The villagers have come to realize that they had been victims of divide and rule strategy of the Japanese rule. It was a lengthy and creative process by which the people of Hagui had reconciled enough to build the communal ancestral shrine.

### **Yang Mi Kyeong**

A documentary film by Kim Dong Man entitled *Grandmother with White Head Scarf* tells the story of the grandmother who was shot in the chin in 1949 when she was 35 years old and has lived for 55 years, unable to speak or eat properly. The artist Yang Mi Kyong created a three-panel work that I consider to be an affectionate tribute, by the same title, to Jin Ah Young, the grandmother who has suffered a long and painful life. Against a black background, she created images made of cotton fabric sewn collages, that lends a nuanced and textured appearance. The left panel depicts grandmother's head with a white head cover and white cloth wrapping her chin while the right panel has isolated the head cap on top and the white strap below that must be the chin cover. The middle panel presents an imaginary woman, seated, wearing a pink *hanbok*, one of the items that the grandmother left behind, that also included hand sewn quilted cushion, bead necklace, a ring and lip-gloss. From the items left behind, Yang surmised that the grandmother wished to portray herself as an attractive woman.

The psychological trauma that *Grandmother With White Scarf* suffered recalls other accounts of heinous torture and atrocities associated with the 4.3 nightmare. Sonia Ryang, a *zainichi* or Korean resident of Japan, and an anthropologist states the importance to realize the intent of the army and its allied gangs who took their time to use their knowledge of kinship tradition and social taboos to methodically target their victims so as to maximize the devastation. Examples include forcing a grandson and grandfather to fight until one of them dies; forcing a father-in-law and daughter-in-law to have sexual intercourse in public; gang-raping women and girls before killing them; family member were forced to witness the mass execution of captured rebels; many people were shot on the cliff and were dumped into the

water below (Jeongbang Waterfall, in Seogwipo, located in southern Jeju, the only one on the island to feed directly into the ocean was one site of massacres) and often loved-ones would follow; and a case of a woman who was tortured by having the breast burnt then cut off afterwards. She later in 1981 published a short story in Japan under the title, *A Woman Without Breasts*.

## **Oh Seok Hoon**

Oh Seok Hoon's *The 1st Killing Report* is based on reports made on May 1995 of the very first killing's actual casualties, derived from testimonies and data. The list numbered 14,125 casualties. Listing the names organized by village, then grouping the names into columns, Oh presents white names against a red background and lets the names roll, as in movie credits. One pauses to contemplate the ephemerality of names seen in this manner. Additionally, two TV monitors situated adjacently display photographs, video clips of eleven corpses from Darangshi Cave along with eyewitness accounts that created shockwaves at the time of its discovery in 1992. Images containing some historical material laden with strong emotional power provide stark contrast to the more austere appearance of names, profuse nevertheless.

Calculating the death toll of the largest massacre in Korea's modern history has been at best a guessing game. Oh Seok Hoon made the smart move in basing his work on a specific report that produced the number. Most authorities agree on 30,000 deaths, constituting ten percent of the population at the time. But many consider this number to be a conservative approximation, given the scores of deaths that were not and could not be recorded, complicated further by the long length of time prevailed of enforced silence. Bruce Cummings relates that by August 1949, with the apparent ending of the insurgency (the official conclusion of the 4.3 conflict would last until 1954), the governor of Jeju privately told American intelligence sources that 60,000 people had died, with only 170 villages remaining from the initial 400 villages. Cummings thinks 80,000 might be closer to the reality--Sonia Ryang concurs, from the vantage point of Jeju *zainichi*. Not to defend this figure, her purpose is to reinforce the fundamental difference of Jeju people from mainlanders. Among the various points she makes is to trace various differences, including marriage customs, to language and spiritual beliefs, even Jeju's origin myth--of three men, Ryang (Yang), Ko (Go), and Pu(Bu) from different caves--whereas the mainland origin myth has a woman coupling a bear, giving birth to Dangun, the country's first king.

Since the colonial period, there has been much movement to and from Japan, concentrated in Osaka, mainly striving to attain better livelihood. An estimated 60,000 islanders returned to Jeju, relieved and excited after the liberation from Japan. During the *sasam* period, some 40,000 Jeju people fled to Japan.

## Jane Jin Kaisen

Last year alone, Jane Jin Kaisen has had two exhibitions in Jejudo, her birthplace but adopted to Denmark and currently based in Copenhagen. 4.3 Peace Park was one of the sites that featured the full version of *Reiterations of Dissent*. This installation is a five-channel video arranged in a circular format, with monitors placed far enough apart for the easy sitting and viewing from the middle. Each of the five videos play concurrently, each showing different aspects of 4.3 history, including (among others) the atrocities recalled by survivors, the shaman's rituals, the cremation of victims, the excavation at the Jeju International Airport, ex-president Roh Moo-hyun's official apology in 2003, and live footages of Gangjeong resistance movement. Each video has a singular presence but viewed in context with neighboring videos as well as those across, in different combinations, assume a deeper meaning until a composite narrative begins to take shape. *Every monitor seems to show a different version, a different possibility to address, to tell, to invent even a relationship with an unsayable (in the words of Theodor Adorno) episode of Modern History, the massacre of Jeju Island in Korea.* (This was a part of the jury statement of Enterprize 2011.)

The circular structure of the five monitors was important to Kaisen where meaning is not contained within one single video but seen across and alongside other videos. Furthermore each video is looped, for an additional endless, cyclical structure. In a conceptual orientation for circular structure, she points to Jeju's circular geography, and to reiterate the fact that Jeju is an island, with an isolating feeling where all the memories seem to be contained within the place, with a distinct sense of time.

Translation also figures as a central concept for her work in general but especially in the context of *sasam*. Kaisen speaks of translation as *a political act and as a condition or the state of being* and as *an alteration that implicates a form of defiance, a dissident of being someone who disagrees with or whose opinion diverges from that of the government or the authority of power*. With 4.3 legacy, issues about naming reveal the ideological nature of translation, whether on the political spectrum it is known as a peoples uprising or on the other extreme stance, a communist rebellion.

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Having always considered myself a cold war baby, born just four months before the Korean War ended with an armistice in 1953, I have felt personally implicated in this cruel historical development and wanted to maintain a vigilance against the Cold War. Deep in my *maeum* (Korean word without a close translation but comparable to heart or inner being), I believe in the reunification of Korea against all odds.

Our father who experienced the Korean War as a civil servant, was a translator for the U.S. army. He covered the entire span of the peninsula from as far north as Yalu River all the way south to Busan. He left for the U.S. right after the fighting ended to resume studies then eventually got a position teaching Korean to military personnel in Monterey, California. Our family lived in Seoul for a seven years separation until



Syngman Rhee was ousted by a popular uprising that I was able to witness as a seven year old and we managed to migrate to the states and reunite with our father. My returns to Korea, first one in the fall of 1979, gave me a taste of Park Chung-hee's authoritarian, military state with midnight curfews and monthly air-raid drills--that ended with his assassination by KCIA director (Korean version of CIA) later in October. In September of 1989, I returned to Korea to encounter more clamp downs of activists and I happened to catch the display at Min Gallery in Insadong neighborhood, filled with the copy of the painting, *Rice Planting* by Shin Hak-Chul and the copy of the mural and prints by Hung Song Dam. These two artists were behind bars then for violating Korea's draconian National Security Act. Shin was considered *dangerous* by authorities for producing what was deemed to be pro-North image and Hung for sending a slide of his mural, in consort with many artists, to the North. Couple of national security agents tried to close the show but the sheer size of the crowd in the gallery forced them down.

Beyond my brushes with the ideological reality of South Korea, I had the opportunity to travel with two other feminist academics to spend ten days in North Korea in 1998. Though the trip has been a deeply ambivalent experience overall, my belief in the people and their need for reunification remains intact. Through all the years I've lived in the U.S., I know that I am living in the belly of the beast. I will continue to feel this way until my country issues a redress to Jeju people for the shamefully cruel events that have occurred during the occupation of Korea.

Jeju people have dedicated themselves to the democratization of Korea and the artworks in the exhibition bear this truth.

\* Title of South Korean student/labor movement song referring to the 4.3 uprising.

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