

A conversation with Kyungah Ham

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page 1 of 8



Image: Kyungah Ham. Photo: Keith Park. Courtesy Kukje Gallery.

You don't have to paint a fist to challenge authority; it is only natural that the mode of fighting was to devote oneself to the abstract, to deny the unreal reality.' [-Lee Ufan](#)

At first glance, [Kyungah Ham](#)'s embroidered canvases are beautifully seductive. From afar the works seem to be brightly coloured high-resolution prints. It's only up close that one sees the tightly woven stitches, like millions of tiny pixels that make up the detailed embroidery. And after a deeper investigation, the stories behind the works begin to surface, washed up by the tides of history.

Earlier this year, as part of the Encounters sector of Art Basel in Hong Kong, Seoul-based artist Ham exhibited an installation of five large-scale works titled, *What you see is the unseen / Chandeliers for Five Cities* (2014-2016), from her series that began in 2008. Luminous threads glinted in the artificial exhibition light, making the woven chandeliers seem alive—animated by a flickering illumination and the complexity of the stitch work against its black background. They appeared to sparkle and reflect, swinging and falling into a dark abyss. But although the works bore Ham's name, these panels weren't the work solely of one artist, rather they had been sewn by numerous unseen and unknowable craftspeople in North Korea. Ham's ongoing 'Embroidery Project' is as conceptual and political as it is beautiful. The image is not the primary point: it is the story that lies in the making of the work that makes them powerful, controversial and political. The process is part of their meaning.

Through a complicated, lengthy and dangerous process, Ham uses an intermediary to smuggle distorted blueprints of works she wants embroidered across Korea's Demilitarized Zone and into North Korea where they eventually, but not always, make their way into the hands of the artisans. The process is often fraught with obstacles: the work becomes an abstract embodiment of the tension and conflict between the two sides of the divided Korean peninsula, making a forbidden meeting temporarily possible.

Ham's compositions call to mind the symphonies of Dmitri Shostakovich, whose sole expression of defiance against a repressive Stalinist state was subtly worked into his music. Thematic symbolism was woven into his symphonies which were full of references to Stalin and the sufferings of the Russian people. Ham's work is full of symbolism as well. Appropriated words and imagery and references to history and politics are woven into the works, hidden or revealed like a coded language. Through Ham's embroidery, North Korean artisans are exposed to images and ideas that they may otherwise never encounter: abstract art images, slogans using South Korean internet slang and pop lyrics, seemingly innocuous influences that are forbidden in a country where the personal is also political. The embroideries are a means for Ham to communicate with people completely cut off from the outside world. They challenge authority, both in South Korea and in the repressive North.

Ham is a political diarist, an agent provocateur who blurs the boundary between the personal and political. What these works signify—a creative collaboration between people of the North and South—is a gesture of defiance in the face of politics and history. They are a critique of the legacy of war and power structures, as well as a denunciation of the absurd division of the Korean peninsula.

Ham works across installation, video, performance and traditional media. She has exhibited widely in Seoul and has participated in several group shows including at the British Museum, London (2005), Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna (2010), National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), Korea, and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2013). She also participated in the fourth Guangzhou Triennial (2012), the seventh Liverpool Biennial (2012), and this year's Guangzhou Triennial/Asia Biennial. Most recently, Kyungah was selected as one of four artists to participate in the Korean Artist Prize 2016 exhibition to be held at Seoul's MMCA from 31 August. This year, she will also participate in Taipei Biennial curated by Corinne Diserens and the first Suzhou Documents curated by Roger M Buergele.

Tell me a little about 'Embroidery Project' and how the idea to use embroidery as a collaborative art project between South Korea and North Korea came about.

It's been an eight-year project doing this work. It's been full of miscommunication and mistakes, and has required a lot of patience. The first time I decided to do this, I was not clear on how to make it happen. Simply because there was no one doing this kind of work, there was no system, no agent. One day I found a propaganda flyer under the gate of my parents' house [in Seoul] blown there by the wind. I believed it came from North Korea, as it was very common to find these propaganda flyers on the small mountain in my town and on the streets when I was young. At the time, South Korea was under a regime that strongly imposed anti-Communism under the military dictatorship. When we brought the found flyers to the school, we would receive compliments and rewards. We were taught and believed that the communists had horns on their heads.

On the propaganda flyer that I found in 2008, there was a picture of Kim Jong-il, the previous leader in North Korea, surrounded by flowers—the national flower called *Kimjoingilia* is named after the leader Kim Jong-il. There was propaganda written on it. I was shocked when I saw the flyer; it seemed bigger and prettier than what I remembered as a child, but still I could see it was propaganda. It represented an unknown world. Holding it in my hand it felt like an unexpected, alien thing, almost like an unidentified object blown from beyond Earth. The entire experience is still very palpable in my imagination and I wanted to remain in that moment, where I was struck by an uncanny object that had no reference.

I wanted people in North Korea to feel what I felt, so I thought, what if I sent these sorts of flyers to communicate across the border with North Koreans in an artistic way? I was inspired to use this kind of medium to communicate. This propaganda had a specific political purpose, but I wanted to make it more artistic—to use it as a point of departure. I had to think about what to send, and how to communicate with them. I had to use my imagination and be really organised, I wanted to share this feeling by using my own artwork, developing imagery that represents me and is my avatar, in order to reach North Koreans and help them learn things.

Initially I thought about sending stories and sharing information from our world, the outer world, so I collected news articles. We're living in a digital era and we can access any information with just a click of the mouse, whereas you can't in the DPRK. I decided I could convert collected internet news articles, images and text into embroidery in a sense translating something forbidden into hand stitches. What's nice is that embroidery is so different compared to the digital in terms of duration and the way it frames values of humans versus the computer. I also expected that even if any censorship occurred, they would still have had enough time to read the news articles and they could gradually experience the new images and texts as they slowly made the works.



Image: Kyungah Ham, *Set in their studios corners, the players move the gradual pieces*, 2012-13. North Korean hand embroidery on silk, 1600hrs/4people, 186 x 191 cm. Image courtesy of Kukje Gallery.

The work is quite politically sensitive, both for North Korea and the South. So how was this logistically possible for you?

If politics, systems, and rules are based on some sort of ideology, I think that art is something that lies on the edge where it can transcend, translate, and express one's experience. I think my work puts art at the edge of the relationship between these two hostile forces. When you look at the edge from the inside, it may seem like it is placed on the outside. However from the edge, it may seem like it is placed nearly at the end but it still exists inside.

What were some of the problems you encountered in getting your works made?

It has been difficult for me to proceed because the sociopolitical tension has been heightened in recent years. By working on a project that is dependent on these circumstances, I have been under tremendous stress, continuously experiencing various unexpected incidents and have therefore had to constantly question the extent to which I should push this work. Throughout the process I have suffered from deep personal anguish.

Have you had works disappear or be confiscated?

When I first began the news article pieces, the work was confiscated by the Communist authority when it was almost completed. Sometimes, the original designs that contained images that were perceived as more capitalistic were confiscated. On the other hand, the most recent work I sent, *At first, it is the dark*, was flagged by the censors and I had to pay bribes at the border to have the work returned to me.



Image: Kyungah Ham, *Abstract Weave – Morris Louis, DeltaGamma*, 1960. Installation view, Kunsthalle Duesseldorf and Kunstmuseum Bonn. Courtesy Kukje Gallery.

This mirrors the history of conflict between the two countries and their ongoing tension.

One of the 'SMS (Sending Message Service) Series' has the text 'Perhaps I long for our liaison to fail', which is a lyric from a Korean pop song. I see the relationship between South and North Korea as longtime lovers. But our failing liaison also has political and historical connotations.

What other kinds of images have you used in your embroideries?

Besides the 'Chandelier Series', I made the 'SMS Series' and the 'Morris Louis Series'. In all of these I was interested in using abstract forms because of the political and historical context of abstraction's advent in the West and the ironic perception of Abstract Expressionism today. Moreover, as an artist I want to experiment by creating new realities in North Korea where abstract art is not allowed.

Do you know the reaction of the artisans on the other side?

Sometimes I see evidence in the work that reveals subtle reactions to our collaboration and I feel like I have communicated with them. At times, I receive some sort of feedback from the artisans through the intermediaries.



Image: Kyungah Ham, *Distorted Such Killing AKs*, 2008. Blue and White Porcelain, Drawing of Traditional Landscape, Adolf Hitler's Painting, 95x9x34cm. Courtesy Kukje Gallery.

Your pieces are quite laborious. Some works involve more than 2,000 hours of work.

Yes, there's a lot of labor in them, but in addition there's a lot of other factors involved: a middleman, censorship anxiety, bribery ... not just manual labor. There is so much more behind the scenes work that goes into making each piece happen.

Why hand embroidery in North Korea? Is this a particular craft unique to the country?

Embroidery is an encouraged and accepted form of art in North Korea. I have heard that they give embroidered portraits to leaders from other countries as gifts.

You used chandeliers as images for your Encounters series at Art Basel. It's a very bourgeois and capitalist symbol, suggesting wealth and power. It's interesting you're using North Korean labor to represent forbidden bourgeois ideals and images.

Well, I imagined a kind of invisible mapping when I conceptualised the 'Chandelier Series', in that they would hang in five different cities of the countries that participated in the Potsdam Declaration (the agreement where Korea's division from Japan was ratified). I wanted to signify that the North Korean female embroidery workers, who are the victims of world history made by super powers, exist behind the stitches.



Image: Kyungah Ham, *Phantom Footsteps*, 2015. Installation view, Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Courtesy Kukje Gallery.

Your exhibition last year [at [Kukje Gallery](#) in Seoul] was titled *Phantom Footsteps*.

There are many layers of meanings behind the title *Phantom Footsteps*. It can refer to a situation filled with the vestige of the collapse of ideological beliefs. It can also be referring to capital that ultimately makes everything possible beyond physical and spatial limitations. In addition, it can also be said that artistic images or texts are leaving a trace as some influential history by settling down in a new place as seeds and blooming there. It could also describe the way that North Korean embroidery artisans communicate with the outer world. Lastly, phantom footsteps could be my obsession with revealing something that is present but not visible. It is an ironic phenomenon, wherein what is not real, like the footsteps left by a phantom, constitute reality.

You're providing choice in a system where there is none.

I would say that it is an invisible part of the work. The viewer can only see the visible part of the work and complete the whole work with their imagination.

How is your work perceived in South Korea? Is it dangerous for you there too?

These embroidery works were first shown abroad in exhibitions including at the Kunstmuseum in Bonn (2013) and Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf (2013), as it was a sensitive issue in Korea at the time.

I find that the work is perceived as being both extreme and whimsical in South Korea. Long term issues, like the political situation between South and North Korea, easily becomes a conventional topic. However, when the tension gets serious, people tend to focus on it more than the value of the artistic experimentation.



Image: Kyungah Ham, *Odessa Stairs*, 2008. Construction material, furniture, bidet, carpet, tv, golf shoes and ball, videotape, supermarket cart, boombao tree. Installation view, MMCA. Courtesy Kukje Gallery.

What do you make of the often repeated and tired assertion that embroidery is a 'female' art form?

You can say that and it is true that embroidery is often made by women. I want to make myself neutral: I'm not female; I'm not male; I'm not Asian; I'm not a gender or a race. I don't want audiences to have any preconceptions about my work. I have to disconnect the relationship between my work and myself. Maybe some embroidery workers would share my ideas?

What are you working on next?

I am currently working on a new series that will be showcased at the Korea Artist Prize exhibition. I am also working very closely with the curators of two upcoming biennales in Asia, Taipei Biennial and Suzhou Documents, in order to share my works with a broader audience. —[O]