

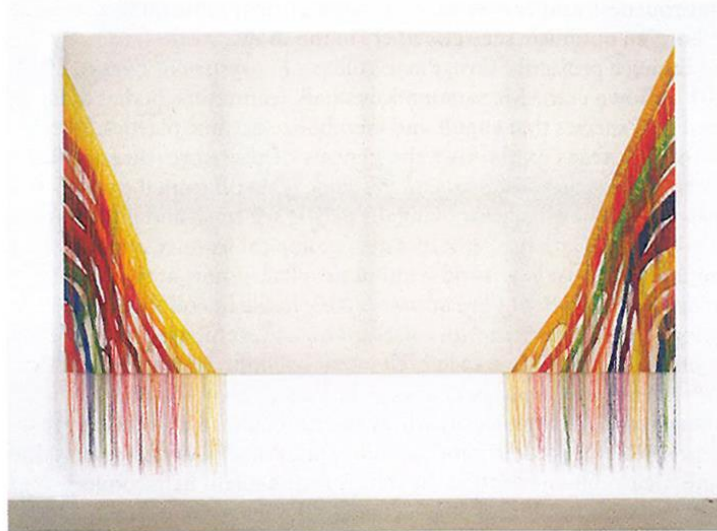
Kyungah Ham

CARLIER | GEBAUER

This was Kyungah Ham's first one-person show outside South Korea—yet to call it a solo venture felt odd, not just because some of the exhibited pieces were the work of many hands, but also because Ham herself seemingly operates as two artists simultaneously. The first is a producer of strikingly lush, colorful, and imposing “paintings” made not with paint but with embroidery on canvas. The works of this artist are lavishly sensual, often very pleasurable to look at, possibly a little too slickly produced, and occasionally—as in a series that imitates Morris Louis's 1960–61 “Unfurled” paintings (their unprimed centers flanked by more or less symmetrical pairs of sequences of more or less diagonal pours of color) but with excess thread hanging down from the canvas to the floor, embodying a kind of dry pouring—too clever for their own good. But Ham's explanation for these “Abstract Weave/Morris Louis” works, 2012–15, is surprising: They're not just one more commentary on the gendering of modernism and the idea of replacing a supposedly masculine approach to painting with the putatively feminine art of embroidery. With their colorful lines flowing from the canvases' lateral edges toward their bottom ones, approaching each other but never meeting, they also emblemize the two Koreas straining ineffectually toward unity.

The notion is a poignant one, though the results don't quite hold up on the wall; the mere act of appropriation remains more vivid than its meaning. But this allegory of the two Koreas serves to introduce us to the second artist in Kyungah Ham. This one is not primarily a painter or a maker of painting-like objects, but a Conceptualist working with communications systems and their political implications. One might think, for instance, of Cildo Meireles with his “Insertions into Ideological Circuits” of 1970 (wherein he stamped subversive messages onto banknotes and returnable Coke bottles). What's important for this Ham is not the impressively scaled (in this show, up to nearly nine by twelve feet) and eye-catching results so much as the furtive, circuitous, and risky system she has set up to achieve them.

Kyungah Ham,
Abstract Weave /
Morris Louis Alpha
Upsilon 1960
 NB001-01, 2014,
 North Korean machine
 embroidery, silk
 threads on cotton,
 middleman, anxiety,
 censorship, wooden
 frame, collected
 world internet news
 articles, tassels,
 6' 4¼" × 11' 7⅞".



Here it would be worth citing the artist's list of materials for the largest of the works on view here, *What you see is the unseen / Chandeliers for Five Cities BR 01-04*, 2016–17: "North Korean hand embroidery, silk threads on cotton, middleman, anxiety, censorship, ideology, wooden frame, approx. 2,200 hours / 4 persons." In other words, given the present state of armed confrontation between the two Koreas, Ham's process involves illicitly smuggling the plans for the embroideries via a third country to the people who will produce them. Naturally, these instructions don't always get through, and I can only wonder by what means the massive works make their way back to Seoul—they're not things someone could slip into a suitcase.

In an interview, Ham explained that her embroidery works, begun in 2008, took form in her mind after she accidentally found a North Korean propaganda flyer that year. "It felt like an unexpected, alien thing," she said, "almost like an unidentified object blown from beyond Earth." Her idea was to send in return not political messages but ones that jam the codes of politics. Take such imagery as crystal chandeliers (even ones lying uselessly on the floor, as in one of the works in the eponymous series, or others swinging wildly in the air as if blown by the storm of history); abstract art made in Washington, DC; or—in a third group of works begun in 2013, the "SMS Series in Camouflage"—brief, emotive texts, such as lyrics from pop songs, half-hidden by random splotches of color: These things, all scandalously bourgeois, might therefore indeed be politically suspect in the eyes of North Korean authorities.

—Barry Schwabsky