

MMCA Hyundai Motor Series 2019: Park Chan-kyong - Gathering

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In a world where conditions of crisis are increasingly seen as the new normal, art can offer opportunities for reflection on our changing reality and a means of comprehending catastrophe. Park Chan-kyong's latest project gives viewers plenty to process, incorporating multiple mediums and modalities to propose a multivalent consideration of the value of community in trying times. While grounded in a rigorous conceptual framework (navigating notions of modernity, tradition, representation and historicisation), *Gathering* also delivers on an emotional level by moving beyond polemics of institutional critique and postcolonial discourse to contemplate how individuals in society cope in the aftermath of disaster. The result is an ambitious, compelling and occasionally unwieldy exhibition that probes the depths of this acclaimed photographer, filmmaker and critic's meditations on community and crisis, conjuring a motif of duality as its unifying principle.

On entry, visitors are funnelled through a visual archive of sorts, which serves as a test ground for alternative art histories and exhibition methodologies. In *Small Museum of Art* (all works 2019) Park imagines a museum structured to reflect its regional context and specific historical legacy, rather than acquiesce to the world-views perpetuated by archetypal Western art institutions. This maze-like installation comprises photographic reproductions of works by other artists, interspersed with a selection of reference images and sparse wall texts, articulating a loose network of indeterminate relationships between elements. Here, objects by conceptual artists Kim Beom and Chung Seoyoung are presented in dialogue with a largescale ink painting on folding screen by avant-garde modern artist Lee Ungno, while photos that document the construction of MMCA's original flagship building during the 1980s appear beside images of traditional Korean mountain spirit shrines. Park's unorthodox approach to installation schematics in *Small Museum of Art* reinforces a sense

of scepticism towards institutionalised systems of display and reifies the contingent nature of Park's proposed framework: unmounted photographs are fixed directly to the wall; texts and captions are handwritten in pencil. In this way, Park promotes the idea of the museum as a subjective frame of thought rather than a vehicle for predetermined or necessary ideologies. And that paradigm informs the rest of the works in the show.

Emerging from this prelude, viewers encounter a configuration of discrete, non-sequential works by Park that form a robust platform for regarding contemporary concerns within an East Asian dialectic. At the heart of this constellation is *Water Mark*, a sculptural installation of 16 cement panels that seem to float parallel to the floor. Inscribed with stylised renderings of waves that reference Korean folk art, Japanese rock gardens and computer-simulated seascapes, these hardened, heavy masses project an uncanny sense of buoyancy. Crucially, for Korean audiences who gather around this symbolic body of water, the simultaneous presence and absence manifest in *Water Mark* induces inevitable associations with the sinking of the *Sewol* ferry, a national tragedy that claimed more than 300 lives in 2014. The shared sense of loss sparked by Park's subtle monument to victims of this disaster elicits and reflects a collective solidarity among visitors in the exhibition space.

This dynamic is echoed in a nearby photographic installation that examines the repercussions of national tragedy on an ecological level by visualising the unseen effects of radiation on a local environment. *Fukushima, Autoradiography* centres around images of plants, animals and objects collected from the Fukushima exclusion zone after the 2011 Daichi nuclear disaster. Presented in slideshow format, this work cross-cuts photos of the lush Fukushima landscape with black-and-white autoradiographic images that reveal glowing, ghostlike masses of radiation harboured by an array of specimens. The stark contrast between these two sets of images

creates an interstitial space of subjectivity between positive and negative, where the un tethering of what is seen from what is known reminds viewers to think about which to trust, as well as of the potential for disaster within our contemporary energy infrastructure and beyond.

Among a somewhat redundant assortment of the remaining works of photography, mixed-media installation and sculpture on view, Park's new film *Belated Bosal* serves as the conceptual centre of the exhibition. A black-and-white photonegative effect suffuses this work with an otherworldly quality that inverts normal patterns of perception to envision a landscape in which the sun is black and shadows are white. The film unfolds slowly and deliberately against this disorienting background, incorporating dreams of previous lives and elements of magical realism in a vague narrative that follows two women as they separately traverse a rugged mountain landscape before jointly performing an unusual funeral rite. Both visually and thematically, a lingering sense of disaster pervades this quiet and slow-moving film, which at interludes makes mention of nuclear facilities and testing programs that adopt Buddhist nomenclature in semantic confluences of science and superstition.

The film's overtly Buddhist title simultaneously references a specific account of Siddhartha Gautama's death, as well as the notion of pursuing a path towards enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. *Belated Bosal* draws heavily on Buddhist scripture for nearly all of its narrative elements, which combine with the haunting and surreal mountainous setting to situate the work in the discursive domain of Korea's rich folk-religion traditions. By placing such classical indigenous ideologies in the context of crisis, this work permits viewers to question different types of gatherings, the manner of their formation and the objectives they seek to accomplish. Like the rest of the exhibition, *Belated Bosal* denies the possibility of a singular interpretation, favouring a pluralistic logic reflective of the relativism intrinsic to Eastern belief systems. Andy St Louis

facing page, top *Water Mark*, 2019,
cement, 5 × 110 × 110 cm (each).
Photo: Hong Cheolki. Courtesy MMCA, Seoul

facing page, bottom *Fukushima, Autoradiography*, 2019,
film photo converted to digital image, autoradiography, text, slide show, 24 min 40 sec.
Collaboration with Masamichi Kagaya and Satoshi Mori. Courtesy the artist

