

PARK CHAN-KYONG

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SEOUL

Kukje Gallery

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FAREWELL



Park Chan-kyong's exhibition at Seoul's Kukje Gallery was titled "Farewell" in English, but its original Korean title—"Annyeong," which is both greeting and valediction, as well as a query about another party's wellbeing—tinged the show with other connotations. The artist sought to leave behind traditions, and paid respect to the lives lost on Korea's road to modernization.

The *Seoul* ferry disaster of 2014, in which 304 lives were lost, along with other historical tragedies, was commemorated in the 26-minute, three-channel video *Citizen's Forest* (2016). Its panoramic, grayscale footage of an arboreous mountain is a throwback to traditional East Asian landscape ink painting. Actors dressed in school uniforms—most of those who drowned as the *Seoul* went underwater were high school students—as well as shamans' robes, military garb and royal garments, played roles that typify societal strata. As the shamans pour libations onto the ground, troops with skull masks march to the beat of a drum, and young students break the fourth wall by gazing at the viewer. Together, the characters build a boat grave that is set aflame on a river. There is no dialogue. Instead, howls peel throughout the video, referencing shamanistic rituals that comfort wandering, restless souls.

Citizen's Forest was first showcased in last year's Taipei Biennial, and was inspired by *Colossal Roots*, a poem written by a politically engaged literary figure, Kim Soo-young (1921–1968), four years after the 1960 April Revolution that overthrew the First Republic of South Korea. Kim's poem was a response to British explorer Isabella Bird Bishop's Orientalist portrayals of the peninsular nation in her 1897 book *Korea and Her Neighbours*, subverting foreign mischaracterizations by stating, "Even a messy tradition is still a tradition."

Similarly, *Minjung* ("people's") artist Oh Yoon (1946–1986) left an imprint on Park and molded *Citizen's Forest*. Oh's unfinished painting *The Lemures* (1984), which portrays the ghosts of civilians killed in revolts, is quoted in Park's video. A brass band formed by soldiers wearing skull masks ambles in the realm of the living, unable

to rest in peace. Oh and Park both memorialize the lives lost during the 1894 Donghak Peasant Revolution, the Korean War (1950–53) and the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, all of which were stepping stones in Korea's sociopolitical progression.

The Lemures is visible in another of Park's works: *Small Art History* (2014/17) tears down and reconstructs the annals of art, with the artist inserting commentary beneath well-known artworks for cultural reformulations. Handwritten notes—under an image of Ed Ruscha's *It's a Small World* (1980), one reads, "Asia is on the back side of the globe in this painting"—make light of the rigid structures drawn up by art historians, and even tease out a smirk from the viewer.

Upstairs, *Way to the Seung-ga Temple* (2017) introduced a dose of pragmatism to "Farewell." The color-slide projection shows mountain routes, river banks and street views along the path to the Seung-ga Temple on Bukhansan, a mountain on the northern edge of Seoul. Though the viewer joins pilgrims on a journey for spiritual illumination, the account is one devoid of divinity and myth. This work instantly ballasts *Citizen's Forest*, juxtaposing its shamanism with a Korean love for hiking. The air of mysticism present earlier was dispelled by images of post-hike celebratory meals complete with kitschy plastic tables and chairs.

The banality did not last long, with occult elements appearing in *Seven Stars* (2017), a birchwood panel stained by traditional pigment and dotted with round, brass spirit mirrors, which are used by mystics to commune with the dead. A seven-piece collateral series, "Bright Stars" (2017), featured the same materials, with each rectangular plate stained a different shade. Park plots a direct line between his works and Korean tradition: the spirit mirrors of *Seven Stars* are arranged to echo the positions of the Big Dipper's stars, which shamans believe are spiritual beings. The colors found on each panel also appear on old wooden buildings, linking new and old not only via hue, but also in process. Despite the artist's intentions, perhaps tradition can never truly be left behind.

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