

12-Year-Old North Korean Refugee Performs at Seoul Museum

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▲ Installation view of Kyungah Ham's "A Drawing by the Soccer Ball Which Bounces above the Alligator River," 2016, at MMCA Seoul.(© Rachel Corbett)

A 12-year-old North Korean refugee is appearing in a new show at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul. The South Korean artist Kyungah Ham enlisted the boy—who defected from the totalitarian country three years ago by swimming across the Alligator River—to participate as part of her entry to the quadrennial Korea Artist Prize exhibition, on view through January 15, 2017. An aspiring professional soccer player, he appears kicking a ball around a U-shaped ramp that has been splattered with paint, spreading the colors as he goes.

"What you see through this performance is the struggle of the artist and of a defector at the same time," said Ham, through an interpreter. It also represents the "struggle between art works and capitalism, artist and dealer." Elsewhere in the show the artist installed undulating white sculptures that turn out to be enlarged abstractions of the camouflage patterns on military fatigues. In another work, a circle of cleats serves as an "archive of boy's journey as a soccer player," she said. Each is inscribed with quotes from the boy, including "I crossed the river on top of a man's shoulders" and "They told me my mom is in Pyongyang." Things are looking up for the boy since his arrival, however, Ham said. His mother has also now defected and is reunited with her son in Seoul, where he is currently a youth professional soccer player and has "scouts already lined up for him."

Ham is one of four artists competing for the \$37,000 prize, alongside Kim Eull, Back Seung-Woo, and the collective Mixrice. The winner will be announced in October.