

Park Chan-kyong: Ghosts, history and an Asian sublime

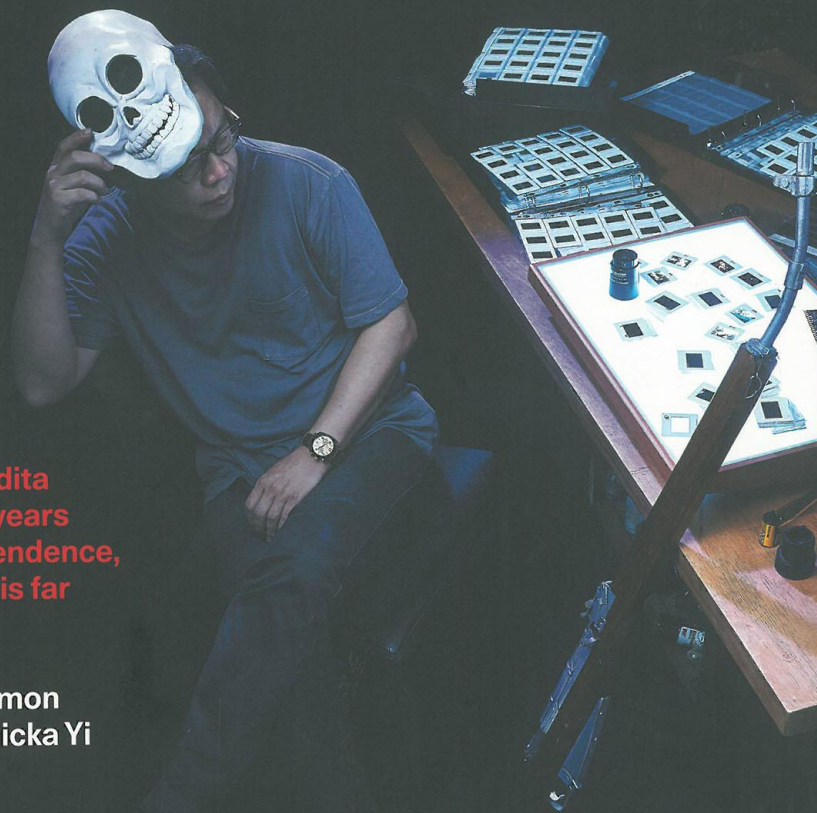
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ArtReview Asia



Park Chan-kyong



Charu Nivedita
on why, 70 years
after independence,
India today is far
from free

The uncommon
sense of Anicka Yi

From Hitler and
Thai diplomacy
to Portuguese nuns
and egg thong yod





The ghosts of history haunt Park Chan-kyong's recent works. Of course this haunting occurs metaphorically. But in *Citizen's Forest* (2016) the Seoul-based artist renders them actual: a series of figures processing through a mountain forest. In *Kyoto School* (2017) they are mere voices, from the diaries of Japanese kamikaze pilots, and in *Way to the Seung-ga Temple* (2017), they manifest as the items abandoned over the years by nameless visitors to Bukhan Mountain. All of these – restless souls, fragments of thought and trivial objects – are beings that have been forgotten, or are ignored, beings that do not exist in mainstream observation and discussion. What Park does in his art is to summon them by means of moving images and then, particularly in the case of *Citizen's Forest*, lay them to rest in quietness and peace (as *annyeong* – part of the title of Park's recent solo exhibition at Kukje Gallery, Seoul – means when translated from Korean) with a shamanistic farewell ceremony.

Park is an art critic, film director and visual artist who first came to prominence during the 1990s and early 2000s, via works dealing with recent history – the Cold War and the division of the Korean peninsula – as well as through a film collaboration with his older brother, Park Chan-wook. Then, in a 2008 essay ('On Sindoan: Some Scattered Views on Tradition and "The Sublime"', translated from the Korean by Doryun Chong), the artist described how a change in his attitude towards tradition had led to a shift of interest: to someone 'who was born in Seoul and raised as a Catholic in a high-rise apartment complex,' he explains, 'Korean traditional culture, especially traditional religious culture, is unfamiliar from the very start and may be even said to belong more to the realm of the imagination than to reality.' Consequently, the artist had long postponed any engagement with traditional culture, until, as he puts it, he felt that 'like a rock that you repeatedly trip over because you have neglected to move it out of the way, it becomes something you end up regretting somewhere down the line.'

The first result of this shift was *Sindoan* (2008), a 45-minute film, also presented as a six-channel video installation, that leads people through the past and present of a village by that name on Gyeryong Mountain, which was once home to many neotraditional religions – or as Park puts it, folk religions. According to local history, whenever the nation was threatened, as was the case, for example, during the Japanese occupation and after the Korean War, the population of Sindoan has grown. From 1924 to 1975, 80 different religious organisations exploded onto the scene in Sindoan alone, including Cheondogyo (which grew out of Donghak, the movement behind the Donghak Peasant Revolution of 1894, which later that year led to the First Sino-Japanese War, a conflict that changed the history of Northeast Asia), Korean Shamanism and other variations or hybridisations of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity.

The historian Prasenjit Duara would call these religious practices 'dialogical transcendence', and he would see them as philosophies of sustainability that arise as alternatives to Western modernity.

Park takes this a step further: 'If there is religion on the other side of modern science and technology,' he writes (again in 'On Sindoan...'), then 'there is superstition on the other side of religion.' In other words, folk religion functions as 'other' to institutionalised religion and rational science. In Korea, its primitive, dark, mysterious characters, and the history of its suppression – particularly after the Joseon Dynasty adopted Confucianism as its dominant ideology and during the Japanese occupation – have made its presence a ghostly one that has restlessly haunted what is called 'modernity'.

Significantly, Park's pursuit of tradition and of critiques of global and Asian modernity are not undertaken from a high-altitude perspective. Instead he walks into real, physical sites of historical activity – Bukhan Mountain, Gyeryong Mountain, Keigo Falls – and depicts what he calls the 'tradition-real' via moving image. In Park's conception, 'tradition-real' is a modification of the narrow meaning of 'tradition', which is often treated as a static symbolic code that needs to be preserved and promoted. Instead, when we talk in his basement studio in Seoul, Park states that tradition "is not a cold language, and it is not culture. It's not in your brain, not in your heart. It is a long-term existence in your body." Tradition has a physical presence.

But to Park, engaging folk religion as an approach to tradition-real is about more than offering an 'other' to the myths of the West and of modernity. To him, it is also a path towards the sublime, an aesthetic experience that is commonly said to be triggered by visions of mountains, the sun and the moon, and

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often represented via graphs of the cosmos in the ideology of Korean Shamanism and other folk religions. And it is to this that a series of paintings and drawings – such as *Sixteen by Nine* and *Radiance* (both 2010) – and object-based works – such as the *Bright Stars* series and *Seven Stars* (both 2017) – that he has produced in recent years relate.

In his writing, Park describes how his first awareness of the sublime was triggered by an accidental encounter with Gyeryong Mountain: 'an indescribable shock came over me. Though covered in snow, with reflection from the full moon the mountain revealed itself in its glorious fullness even in the middle of the night.' Since then, the sublime and its forms and meaning in the East have become a major part of his art. Park's theory is that, in the West, the sublime is generally represented vertically, while in the East, it is normally presented in the horizontal, and its typical format is a *shansu* (or *shanshui* in Chinese, meaning, literally, mountain-water, but more generally used to refer to landscapes in art), where it might appear at the far end of a horizontal scroll. This idea is taken up in *Citizen's Forest*, a work in which Park's interests in exploring tradition-real and the sublime in Korean landscape painting come together.

Citizen's Forest is a black comedy, described in a language that is at once nightmarish and humorous. Park believes that, due to the rapid changes that resulted from the Japanese occupation, the Korean War and the modernisation of South Korea, in contemporary Korea

preceding pages *Citizen's Forest* (production still), 2016,
three-channel video, ambisonic 3D sound, 26 min 6 sec

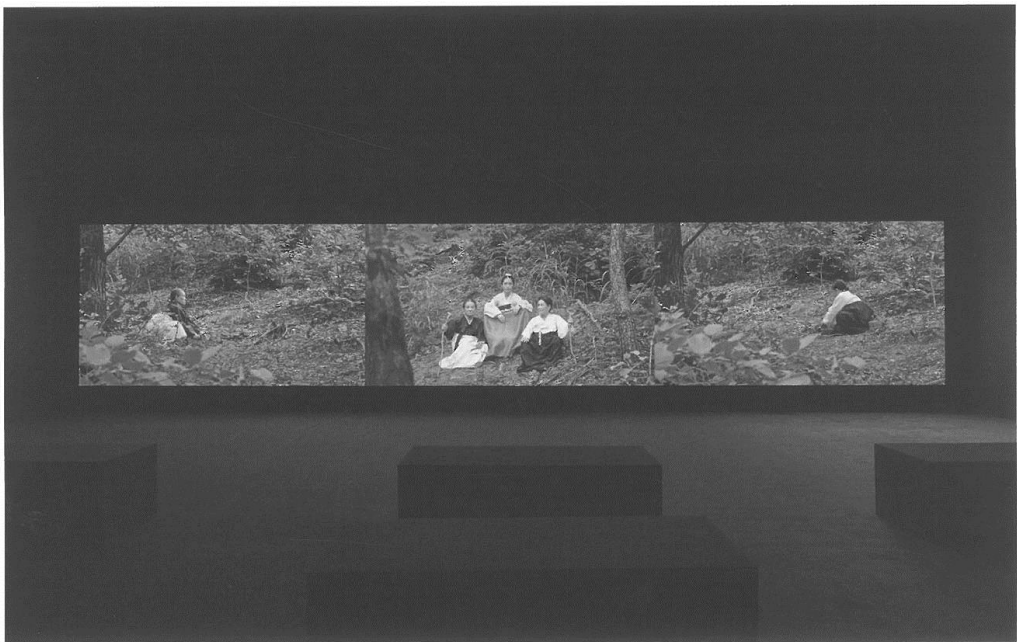


top Way to the Seung-ga Temple (detail), 2017, multichannel slide projection in loop and installation, dimensions variable

above Park Chan-kyong in collaboration with Sangdon Kim, *Bright Stars 2*, 2017, Myeongdu (shaman implement used as a spirit mirror), dancheong (traditional multicolored pigments) on a birch plate, 66 × 47 cm

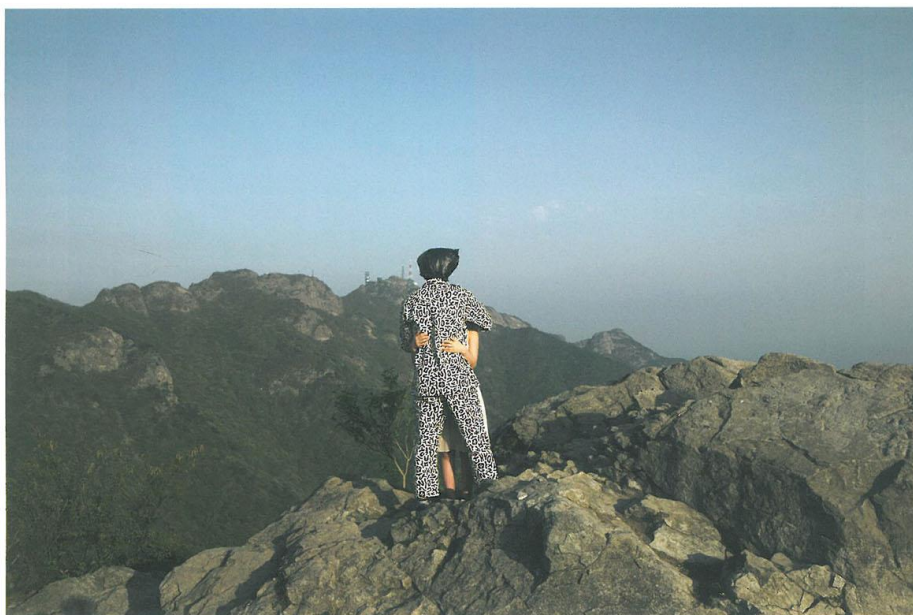


above and facing page Citizen's Forest (details), 2016,
three-channel video, b/w, ambisonic 3D sound, 26 min 6 sec





Manshin: Ten Thousand Spirits (still), 2014, HD video, 104 min



Sindoan (detail), 2008, mixed-media installation



many historical issues have never been investigated or resolved, and that consequently, a continuity of historicity has been lost. The costumes worn by the ghostlike figures who march around the mountain indicate that they are victims of various events in Korean history: the Donghak Peasant Revolution, the Korean War (1950–53), the Gwangju Uprising (1980) and the recent Sewol Ferry Disaster (2014). The victims of the events listed above have become ghosts, restlessly lingering in Korea's memory, in the deepest, darkest part of its collective consciousness. Park describes the projection of moving image as articulating the presence of 'something' that at the same time 'doesn't exist'. Consequently it is the perfect medium for depicting a present that is haunted by the past.

Moreover, the fact that *Citizen's Forest* is a three-channel projection, and that at times the images on those three screens synchronise, allows it to occasionally function as if it were a continuous horizontal *shansu* landscape. At the Taipei Biennale in 2016, the work was installed in a space that lacked sufficient depth for the audience to view all three screens at once, requiring visitors to move physically in order to see one screen or another. This is perhaps the best way to see the work – just as, to see a classical horizontal scroll painting, a landscape produced from multiple perspectives, a viewer must approach it from multiple points of view. Through the movement of the camera in landscape direction, the zooming-in and -out, the shift between synchronisation and division of three screens, *Citizen's Forest* experiments with how to visualise multipoint perspective images in media art.

The late French philosopher Paul Ricoeur describes narrative as a tool for capturing time. In this context, Park's recent works could be seen as a proof that film is a means of producing historicity, the deep structure used by the collective and the individual to generate historical narrative. In recalling the ghosts of history in *Citizen's Forest*, Park is also recalling, and projecting, layer by layer, historical moments into the contemporary moment. In this sense, the target of Park's recent filmworks is not the past, but the present, a present that is haunted by the layers of forgotten, ignored, unresolved past. In order to view the present as a continuous unity, we must first look to the past.

Kyoto School is another example of how the imaginative transfiguration of narrative can be used to produce historicity. The work consists of 320 slides on two projectors. On one are portrait photographs of Kego Falls (Nikkon, Japan), on the other, in landscape format, are quotations from the journals of Japanese kamikaze pilots who died in the attack on Pearl Harbor. Over the past century, Kego Falls has become infamous in Japan as a place for committing suicide. On 26 November 1941, 11 days before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the waterfall was particularly mentioned in a roundtable attended by philosophers of the Kyoto School (a group of Japanese intellectuals, centred around Kyoto University, who sought to fuse the intellectual and spiritual traditions of East Asia – notionally centred around notions of nothingness – with Western philosophy – notionally cen-

tered around notions of being – some of whom further developed this into a narrative of Japanese uniqueness). Titled 'The Standpoint of World History and Imperial Japan', the roundtable proposed Kego Falls as the symbol of world history, and Japan as a suicidal rock, throwing itself into the waterfall and looking forward to the confrontation between the water's flow and itself.

Not surprisingly, during the war, the Kyoto School's ideas were used by imperial Japan as a philosophical tool to support its militarist ideology, and many young intellectuals, including kamikaze pilots, were deeply influenced by the aesthetic attraction of these ideas. In Park's eyes, Kego Falls, as a metaphor, is not only a symbolic image of Japan's commitment to engage with world history, but a projection of Japanese, or oriental, aesthetic values: fearlessness, absolute sacrifice, the Zen-ish absolute 'nothing'. In short, the Japanese sublime. Meanwhile, in the diaries of the kamikaze pilots, he sees young, intelligent people who were passionately attached to world (Western) culture: they loved Western poetry (Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud), Western philosophy (Benedetto Croce, Martin Heidegger), cosmopolitan lifestyles. They were young (mostly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three), extremely romantic and sentimental, holding an ambiguous attitude to the militarist empire. One common thing in the voices of the kamikaze pilots and those of the intellectuals of the Kyoto School is that they were both ambitiously

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looking at the world with a sense that they had put themselves at its centre. How this commitment to world history, the aesthetic value of the Japanese sublime and the passion for Western culture could end in disaster for the country and for those young souls is a question that continuously haunts Park's mind. *Kyoto School* captures a historical moment – the very one in which the Japanese tradition encountered the world, the intellectuals of a quasi-modern state stated its desire to play an active role in the mainstream of world history – by bringing voices from the past back to life. These voices were once buried in the deep part of history, obscured by mainstream history. But they never really disappeared; they were always wandering somewhere in the dark, like the ghost of thoughts, carrying within them the complexities of history and, in a way, the potential of the time. And this, as Ricoeur would agree, is how historicity, produced by individual and collective memory, becomes fundamental to reaching such potential. ara

Work by Park Chan-kyong is on view in Ghosts and Spectres – Shadows of History, NTU CCA Singapore, through 19 November; in Asian Diva: The Muse and the Monster, SEMA Buk-Seoul, through 9 October; and in Reenacting History – Collective Actions and Everyday Gestures, MMCA Gwacheon, from 22 September through 21 January

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facing page *Kyoto School* (detail), 2017, two-channel slide projection
all images Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul