

ArtReview Asia



Art Reviewed

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page 109 Kyungah Ham, *Needling Whisper, Needle Country* from SMS Series in Camouflage, 2014–15, North Korean hand embroidery, silk threads on cotton, middle man, anxiety, censorship, wooden frame, 202 × 199 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul

Kyungah Ham *Phantom Footsteps*
Kukje Gallery, Seoul 4 June – 25 July

Kyungah Ham is one of many artists who deal with politically sensitive matters of the world. So what is it that makes *her* practice appealing? On the evidence here, it's the tenacious, sometimes absurd actions that highlight distorted aspects of reality. In previous works, Ham stole crockery and cutlery from every foreign hotel at which she'd stayed over a ten-year period and then presented them in a form of display parodying that used in Western museums filled with stolen cultural relics. For another seven years, for the project *Abstract Weave / Morris Louis* (2014) the artist, via a middleman, asked North Korean women to fabricate hand embroidery, combining phrases from Internet news articles onto images of paintings by the American abstract artist Morris Louis, which she would receive after a long wait. The list of materials for a typical work from the series reads: 'embroidery, collected word from Internet news articles, middleman, anxiety, censorship, tassel, wooden frame', and is accompanied by the number of hours and people required to produce it. It was her response to the outdated North Korean propaganda leaflets that arrived at her house seven years out of date.

Ham's new embroidered project *SMS Series in Camouflage* (2014–15) takes a different approach. The images are much bigger, more complex and more figurative. Amidst the richness of colour and detail, you will occasionally spot the marks left by the needles; probably the points at which the workers would stop sewing and take a look at the whole picture. You cannot stop imagining what they were thinking at those points. Whereas *Abstract Weave...* contains a collage of words from news articles, the new series uses more sentimental quotes from a South Korean pop song, like 'Are you lonely too?' or 'Though, if you are like me'. Whereas *Abstract Weave...* mocks North Korea's communist regime through the American star artist, *SMS Series...* becomes a personal message to the workers in North Korea. Each letter appears subtle and is often overlapped with different layers of patterns in strong colour variations that mirror the background images. Hence the texts are not clearly visible unless you look for them carefully. From a distant view, you can at last recognise the fragments of the sentences.

These elusive letters also appear in the embroidered series *What You See is the Unseen / Chandeliers for Five Cities* (2012–15), which depicts

huge swinging chandeliers with yellow lights on a black background. Trying hard to read vague characters hidden in the beautifully perfect patterns, which resonate with images of North Korean mass games, I suddenly ask myself: 'Do I only see what I want to see? Is what I see actually there? What can I see and what can I not see?' This confused feeling might be connected to my imaginative thoughts about North Korea – curious, ambiguous, sometimes romanticised – all coming from the absence of actual communication.

Can Ham's art communicate with North Korean workers in such slow and complicated ways? It is possible. Similar to an echo in a mountain in thick fog, even after long silence, the artist's voice is always bounced back from far away. The fact that the finished works' colours go deeper or that the patterns are partly missing can be seen as evidence that the workers in North Korea interpreted Ham's design in certain ways, even though it was related to her tactical self-censorship to pass the North Korean government's inspection. Just like an echo, what completes Ham's work is its immateriality and temporality due to the current political situation of the two Koreas. *Tiffany Chae*



Money Never Sleeps 01, from *SMS Series in Camouflage*, 2012–13,
North Korean hand embroidery, silk threads on cotton,
middleman, anxiety, censorship, wooden frame, 188 × 183 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul