



KIM

THE

UTOPIA

Paintings from North Korea



Idyllic scenes of family life, brave soldiers, heroic labourers and songs of praise to the Great Leader. The Drents Museum is delighted to present for the first time an extraordinary collection of paintings and works on paper providing a unique glimpse behind the North Korean curtain.

The works are all owned by the Dutch collector Ronald de Groen, and were created in the period 1960-2010 by professional North Korean state painters. The exhibition shows how the regime uses socialist-realistic art to create and maintain a utopian North Korea. De Groen started his collection in North Korea together with his colleague Willem van der Bijl. Van der Bijl, a stamp dealer, had an official office in Pyongyang, thus enabling him to conduct legal business there. In the late 1990s, De Groen asked Van der Bijl if he could bring back paintings for him. The two collectors hired a North Korean to travel through the country looking for paintings for them in factories and government buildings. This unique collection of about 3,500 works thus took shape from about the year 2000.

An exhibition about North Korea also raises questions. Recent political and other developments make us wonder what kind of country it is.

In the West, everyone has an opinion about this incomprehensible and closed country about which we know so little, dominated by an erratic leader. North Korea guides, manipulates and controls perceptions about the country and its leaders, making it difficult to differentiate between fact and fiction. But what about images that are not produced under the direct or indirect control of North Korea? Do they offer a glimpse of the reality of North Korea? And art? Can art that is supposedly socialist-realistic teach us anything about the North Korean reality? However, we must not forget that art in North Korea fulfils a completely different role and function than in our Western societies. There, art serves the revolution and the Leader and is intended to educate.

Paintings from North Korea

In North Korean society, visual art plays a special role. Unlike what we are used to, art is a matter of state and is closely related to socialist ideology and the legitimacy of the Kim dynasty. Art is therefore not created by individual artists but by state-regulated art studios. Before they can start work, the artists united in these studios must undergo a combined ideological and artistic training. In this way they are prepared for the important social role they fulfil through their art. Within the North Korean political system, art plays an educational role. Artists must be able to convey reality as seen by the Party and the Great Leader in a straightforward way to the population. Despite these strict guidelines, there is also room for creative freedom and individual stylistic development as this will only benefit the emotional convincing power of a work of art.

In the Mansudae Art Studio (founded in 1959) in the capital city Pyongyang, for example, no fewer than 1,000 artists are at work, probably making it the largest art studio in the world. Although North Korean painting shows similarities to the art of the Soviet Union in style, technique and ideology, it is important for North Korea to emphasize the uniqueness of its style and themes.

This aim results in a strong emphasis on the development of its own national art forms, free of foreign influences. Certain North Korean artists were trained in Russia and later in China. Their artistic starting points are rather traditional. Diagonal lines and triangles dominate the composition diagrams.

As a result, the works appear in a compositional sense to be very 19th century. On the other hand, the use of colour is syrupy sweet: pink, yellow and light green dominate. Most of the works are oils. Those on paper are watercolours or tempera.

Heroes of labour

In Juche socialism, which strives for North Korea's economic independence, everything revolves around the workers. Art seeks to portray heroic workers taming the wild forces of nature. Blast furnaces, the 'cathedrals of heavy industry', are a favourite subject. At the same time, scenes of this kind show how far North Korea has already come towards a utopian society, one in which people are free from material cares. Work ennobles and gives meaning to life. In North Korean art, work is elevated to something of beauty. Portraits show proud, free workers with an immense sense of responsibility. They are not exploited, as are workers in the capitalist world, but are in control of their own destiny. Through their enormous efforts, they are rapidly making the workers' paradise a reality.



R. H. S.
At the northern railyards, 2002
Oil on canvas

Soldiers are hard at work constructing a railway viaduct in inhospitable terrain. While large quantities of material are needed to bring nature to heel, it is people who have to carry out such projects. The best workers are mobilized for this task, motivated and inspired by the Juche spirit. These '*shock brigades*', identifiable by the red flags, are the main subject of this painting. Together they will overcome the brute forces of nature.



Ra Sun-ok
Corn noodles, 2008
Oil on canvas

Lunchtime in the city. Four cooks specialize in corn noodles as women in traditional dress queue up outside. We can see from the cooks' faces that they take pride in their work – the food they are producing is of high quality. Traditionally, less rice was produced and eaten in the north of Korea than in the south. Along with rice, noodles have always been a staple food in the north.



Kim Sŏng-nyong
(Mansudae Art Studio)
Joy, 2002
Oil on canvas

These three women are sharing the joy of a successful salt harvest. The picture appears to illustrate the slogan that is discreetly visible: *'However arduous the journey, we advance with a smile'*.



Sŏ Yŏng-shik
Spring feeling, 2008
Oil on canvas

Three women are proudly bending over a beautiful harvest of protein-rich bean sprouts, which – thanks to their care and dedication – they have managed to grow in the depths of winter (it is snowing outside). North Korea is unable to feed itself – hence the emphasis on food production. With clockwork regularity, a host of successes and breakthroughs are reported in the press. Success stories of this kind are also depicted in paintings. And yet this work is not about national policy, but rather about the women's individual efforts and sense of responsibility. It is linked to the 'military first' policy, based on the view that every citizen should individually apply themselves and contribute to the country's development.



Rason Art Studio
Dry dock, 2000
Oil on canvas

A shipyard on the northeastern coast of North Korea. Here too, the workers are dwarfed by a giant ship in dry dock. A grandiose banner hangs along the ship's side: *'Let us all become frontline heroes in the battle to add further lustre and glory to the 55th anniversary of the foundation of the Korean Workers' Party'*.



Yun Kyŏng-su and Song Nam-chŏl
(Central Art Studio)
On newly reclaimed land, 2002
Oil on canvas

This volleyball team comprises members of the second automation team who are working on a land reclamation project. To combat the famine, all efforts went into expanding the amount of agricultural land. Large-scale land reclamation projects were part of this effort. They involved the mass mobilization of workers in a 'speed battle' (*soktojŏn*), aimed at producing results within a short space of time. Despite the heavy work pressure, there is still time for sport and relaxation, which not only promotes teambuilding, but at the same time reinforces the competitive spirit between the different work brigades. This painting illustrates the slogan on the mountainside: *'However arduous the road, we advance with a smile'*. However heavy the work, nothing can dampen the unstinting commitment and the workers' joy in their labour.



Chŏng Tŏk
Pride, 2005
Oil on canvas

A proud traffic officer phones her workmates with the happy news that she has tickets for the New Year's concert. Through the window behind her, we see the bustling, snow-covered streets of Pyongyang. A sense of community is being rewarded with tickets to cultural events.



Kim Chŏng-t'ae
Even on holidays, 1997
Oil on canvas

Conscientious and obliging, these traffic officers are ready for action on a wintry New Year's Eve. This is not a police force that curbs citizens' activities, but a group of helpful officers who take pride in guiding both traffic and society along the right path.



Ri In-su
Untitled, 1998
Oil on canvas

A train driver is showered with compliments and floral tributes, as is customary whenever a driver has travelled a certain number of kilometres without accidents. As with logistics in general, the railway network remains a bottleneck for North Korean economic recovery. The transport sector is a consistent priority area in annual economic policy plans. This painting dates from 1998, when North Korea bravely sought to overcome the severe famine. A banner on the bridge railing bears the slogan: '*Marching towards the ultimate victory*'. With this encouragement in mind, the train driver climbs into his cab.

Fruits of the land

Famine has raged in North Korea for twenty years and the country is now highly reliant on international food relief. Yet paintings and drawings show the North Korean countryside as a cornucopia. This has nothing to do with reality, and everything to do with a vision of reality. The problem of famine is much older than the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In the north especially, there is little agricultural land and the climate for agriculture is very unfavourable. Thus in the utopian North Korea created by art, we see peaceful villages, abundant harvests and well-stocked shops.

A special role is set aside for the men and women who work the land. They are the advance guard who subdue nature to make it productive. Workers on the land are the link between nature and the well-nourished children of North Korea. The countryside is also the cradle of the nation. The capital Pyongyang stands for modern urbanity and ideological purity, but the Korean soul resides in the countryside – a matter of much pride.



**Kim Sŏng-guk and
Han Nam-hyŏk**
A soldier's skills, 2003
Oil on canvas

The title is a reference to the village women being impressed by the army cook's knife skills. In North Korea too, the kitchen is primarily a woman's domain. One of the rules of North Korean art theory is to pay attention to the interaction between the various figures depicted. The rather frivolous title suggests a light-hearted tone, which is further reinforced by the rarefied light. And then there is the abundance of fruit and vegetables that the women have brought, and which they have grown themselves. The soldier is cooking in a mobile kitchen used during army exercises. This is a good example of a painting from the 'military first' period, stressing solidarity between the people and the army.



Chŏng Chu-hwa
(Pyongyang University of
Fine Arts)
Filled with love, 2002
Oil on canvas

These women are delivering soya milk to a primary school in Pyongyang. Above the school gate is the motto 'We are happy'. It exemplifies the considerate and caring state in action.



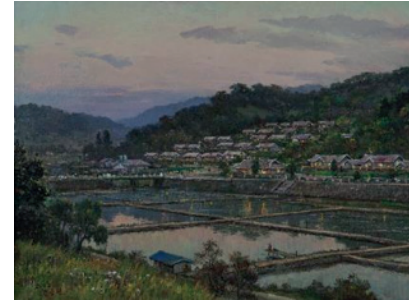
Shim Kwang-ch'öl
(Pyongyang University of
Fine Arts)
The pride of the breeder, 2002
Oil on canvas

An ostrich farm in North Korea, although there are no ostriches in the foreground. The workers, and their pride in their work, are the main subject. The document in the bike's basket shows that production on this farm occurs in accordance with scientific principles.



Ch'ŏn Sŭng-t'aek
A smelter's joy, 1998
Oil on canvas

A metalworker sits in the boat on the right. He has gone with the fisherman to bring in the day's catch. They are pulling up a net filled with abalone, a local delicacy.



Kim Sŭng-ch'öl
My home village, 2002
Oil on canvas

An idyllic village at dusk, with the lights from the houses reflected in the fishponds. This is a thriving agricultural cooperative. The houses appear modern and there is clearly no shortage of electricity. The village exudes an air of peace and tranquillity; the caring Leader is watching over them.



Kirho
Untitled, 1997
Oil on canvas

In 1997, when this painting was made, North Korea was suffering from an acute famine. Therefore this trial field with its bountiful rice harvest in no way reflects reality. Two women, bearers of life and symbols of nurturing nature, stand amidst a golden sea of rice that is ready for harvest. Civilians and soldiers work together in this trial field to ensure a good harvest. The more general message is that the solidarity, unity and combined forces of all the people of North Korea will enable the country to overcome every challenge and to grow in strength. The focus here is on people, 'Juche' people who refuse to be subjugated and instead take on and overcome every challenge.

Children are the future

Children and young people signify joy, strength and the future. In a revolutionary society young people symbolize utopia. They are not only pioneers, but also the guardians of the revolution. Although it is difficult to follow the right path, North Korea continues to believe in the creation of the communist individual. The right education and upbringing is essential here.

The family is the cornerstone of revolutionary society, but the family also has a special relationship with the Great Leader. Domestic bliss is closely linked to the unconditional belief in the Leader's work.

Young people are the future, but there can be no future without history. Young people must follow the example of previous generations, who, with their hearts and souls, resisted the Japanese colonial oppressors and American imperialists. Their sacrifices must not be in vain. Young people must finish the work of their parents and grandparents. This also applies to the Kim family itself.



Kim Tong-p'il (North Hamgyong Province Art Studio) and Kim Sŏng-jin (Ch'ŏngjin Art School)
My old classroom, 1988
Oil on canvas

A celebrated officer visits his old school teacher and gives her a pair of new glasses as a thank you gesture. She is a link in the chain that has made him what he is, just as he is part of a larger machine serving society and the Great Leader. The subjects here are the importance of upbringing and education, and respect for the teaching profession. A painting of Mangyongdae, with the cottage where Kim Il Sung was born, hangs on the wall; the Leader's birthplace is one of the holiest places in North Korea. Of course, all the ordinary school subjects have to be taught too, and we see a maths textbook on top of the pile of books. Some pupils are looking in through the classroom window, entranced by the unexpected guest. It goes without saying, they too would like to be soldiers when they grow up.



Yun Kyŏng-su (Central Art Studio)
Memories of a veteran, 2003
Oil on canvas.

A decorated veteran of the Korean War takes his children and grandchildren to visit the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Memorial in Pyongyang. Together with the partisan struggle against the Japanese colonizers, the Korean War was the most important historical milestone in the creation of a North Korean identity. This picture is not only about respect for war veterans, but even more about solidarity and passing on that history to subsequent generations, about keeping the memory alive. This painting follows the principles of traditional Korean painting (*Chosŏnhwa*): the play of light and dark that seems to divide the canvas into yin and yang halves, with the clearly drawn main figures (grandfather and granddaughter) in the centre and less finished figures in the background.



Kim Kwang-ch'öl
Untitled, 2004
Oil on canvas

A sailor on leave is going on a picnic with his family. He is carrying his son on his arm while his wife walks behind him, with the picnic bag and holding a bunch of daisies. The fact that she is wearing traditional costume suggests that it is a holiday. The father also has a Kimjongilia pinned to his chest. The wife is looking proudly at her husband, who gazes cheerfully ahead. The background shows the typical North Korean countryside: paddy fields and beyond that banners among the fields and on the hillsides.



Chang Ch'il-lyong
The son, 2000
Oil on canvas

A proud father looks tenderly at his son who has fallen asleep while researching a potential breakthrough in boiler technology. The titles of the books on the shelves in the background tell us that he is an engineering student. The content of the shelves is significant: we find not only the collected works of Kim Jong Il, but alongside them, among books on steam boilers and other technical texts, a book with the inspiring title *'Heroes of our time'*. This painting is about transitions from one generation to the next, from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il and from father to son. The calligraphy slogan on the wall – *'a powerful and prosperous country' (kangsŏng taeguk)* – will no doubt be achieved through the young generation.



Kim Hyŏn-ch'öl (Central Art Studio)
Congratulations, 2003
Oil on canvas

This scene of domestic bliss shows family relationships and the importance of the family in North Korean society. The father is the pillar of this family; he exudes steadfastness, pride and dedication. He is also a tower of strength for the community and for the Leader, who inspires him and whom he serves, symbolized by the certificate on the wall and the Kimjongilia (begonia) on the windowsill. He looks out into the community through the open window. The mother only has eyes for her daughter and hence for her family, emphasizing women's traditional serving role. However, by caring for her family, she is also serving the revolution. A calendar on the wall shows the month of September, when the founding of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea is celebrated.

The calendar photo of the Juche tower shining its ideological light over this family too is the ideological beacon that inspires them.

The Great Leader

The veneration of the Kim family is the cornerstone of North Korean politics and society. What began as a social and national revolution has evolved into a system in which everything revolves around the Great Leader. History has since become so closely intertwined with the life of the leaders that a revolution and future without them is unthinkable.

Propaganda, art and culture portray Kim Il Sung as a revolutionary genius. He liberated the Korean people from Japanese oppression and exploitation. He is a guide who directs his people on the road to a utopian future without cares. Kim Il Sung is the loving, caring parent who, out of compassion, sacrificed himself to serve his people. This has given rise to the picture of the Leader as the great inspiration for the people.

After his death in 1994 North Korea almost went bankrupt. The country faced immense problems. The response was to reinforce the personality cult. Kim Jong Il had to protect his father's legacy against the hostile outside world. The North Korean dream could only materialize if the people stood united behind their Leader, so that he could lead them – in his father's footsteps – towards utopia.



Paekho Art Studio
Untitled, undated
Oil on canvas

Here Kim Il Sung is probably paying a visit to the construction of the West Sea Dam at Namp'o, a 1980s engineering feat. It was designed to combat the silting-up of the Taedong estuary and to improve the supply of drinking water. It also raised the river's water level to permit more shipping. Historically, this scene does not look quite right because Kim Il Sung seems very young. The message is clear, however: the Great Leader is showing the way. His pose is reminiscent of similar images of Stalin and Mao. Here we see the visionary genius Kim Il Sung, who is behind the building and development of North Korea.



Song Il
Untitled, 2004
Oil on canvas

On 25 April 2004, ten years after the death of Kim Il Sung, a vast military parade was held in the centre of Pyongyang to mark the anniversary of the founding of the Korean People's Army. The troops marched past a mosaic of Kim Il Sung's official portrait. In other words, the parade took place under his watchful eye – it is almost as though Kim Il Sung is reviewing the parade, rather than the party leaders who are standing a little further along on Kim Il Sung square.



**Pak Myōng-il and
Chang Kwang-ch'ōl**
(Central Art Studio)
The eternal heart, 2002
Oil on canvas

Won Tai Sohn (1914-2004) and his wife Yoo Shin Lee are visiting the mausoleum where Kim Il Sung lies in state. The mausoleum also features the carriage shown here, containing Kim Il Sung's desk. This mobile desk evokes an image of a leader who was constantly on the move, always out and about among the people to make sure that all was well. Just as he had clutched the people to his heart during his lifetime, so too does he serve as their guide and example after his death. In 2003 Won Tai Sohn wrote the book *Kim Il Sung and Korea's struggle: an unconventional firsthand history*. He was a childhood friend of Kim Il Sung, but worked as a doctor in the US. His brother was Admiral Won Il Sohn, a one-time South Korean Minister of Defence (1953-1956).

Here Won Tai Sohn represents not only a personal friendship, but more particularly Koreans residing outside their country of birth. In this respect, people tend to think only of the pro-North-Korean minority in Japan (represented by Sören), but here we see a US citizen represented. The suggestion is that Kim Il Sung is missed not just in North Korea, but throughout the world, and that he was a world leader.



Pyo Se-jong
(South Hamgyong Province
Art Studio)
*The Central Square of Hamhung
on New Year's Day, 2000*
Oil on canvas

Citizens prepare to shovel snow on New Year's Day, urged on by a propaganda brigade. At the front is a factory worker with the red flag of the Hamhung fertilizer factory. In the street you can see the usual slogans: '*Autonomous reforms are the only survival strategy*', '*However arduous the journey, we advance with a smile*', '*Military First Policy*', '*Let us vigorously support the villages*' and '*Vigorous and prosperous country*', etc. This last slogan refers to the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth. The stele visible in the distance is also a reference to him as it bears the text: '*The Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung will always be with us*'. These steles were erected in squares throughout the country following his death.

This scene is therefore a subtle illustration of how everything in North Korea revolves around the Great Leader.

The armed forces – shield of the nation

The history of North Korea started with a long period of warfare. The wars began with resistance to Japan, during which resistance fighter Kim Il Sung fought in neighbouring Manchuria. Then came the Korean War (1950-1953), with North Korea trying to reverse the division of the peninsula into two countries. This bloody war with neighbouring South Korea ended in an armistice. The conflict continued in the form of a cold, sometimes ice-cold, war.

War thus determines the nature and the language of North Korea. The country is keen to see itself as the underdog with respect to a hostile outside world. At the same time, a great deal of attention is paid to the heroism of the anti-Japanese resistance and the Korean People's Army. And of course to the visionary leadership of Kim Il Sung. Everything revolves around solidarity, perseverance, self-sacrifice and courage. These examples serve as a source of inspiration for every North Korean citizen.

In the middle of the 1990s, North Korea was faced with a devastating famine and an economic crisis. This was the rationale behind the songun ('military first') politics of Kim Jong Il. He shone the spotlight on the army – the ultimate protector of the revolution, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Leader. The population should take the dedication of the country's soldiers as their example. Under the flag of songun, citizens are encouraged to display heroic courage and total dedication to the Leader.



Unknown artist
Untitled, Undated
Oil on canvas

Behind the front of the Korean War, women with camouflage nets around their shoulders are seen in a paddy field cheering at the sight of friendly fighter planes. For a short while, Soviet pilots were able to fly from bases in Manchuria in unmarked MiGs, allowing the army to spread a 'shield' across the land and protect the crops. Women and children could harvest the rice in safety and the threat to Utopia was averted. However, it did not take long before the US dominated the entire airspace.



Paekho Art Studio
Untitled, 1991
Oil on canvas

The liberation of Seoul by North Korean troops a few days after the start of the Korean War, depicted here as a victorious entrée. The population is cheering the troops, throwing flowers and waving welcoming banners. One of them reads: *'Long live the visionary General Kim Il Sung'*, while another proclaims that patriotic boys and girls will sign up as volunteers. The scene is set against the backdrop of the former Japanese government building in the centre of Seoul.



Unknown artist
Untitled, Undated
Oil on canvas.

This picture of an accordion player from the anti-aircraft battery exudes an air of relaxation.



Hwang Ch'öl
(Central Art Studio)
Encore, 2003
Oil on canvas.

During a delay at a station while troops are being transported during the Korean War, soldiers find time to smoke a cigarette and flirt with the train guard. They ask her to sing another song, and she blushingly agrees. This style of depicting a wartime event does not correspond with the traditional critical wartime literature and art seen in Europe since the First World War.



Kim Pong-nam
(Nampo Art Studio)
Valiant protectors committed to the barrel of their guns, 2002
Oil on canvas

This painting is brimming with references to 'Army First' campaigns and slogans. The scene is simple: the army is united behind its Leader in an imaginary war. The title cleverly intertwines two different campaigns: '*Victory/peace comes from the barrel of gun*' and '*Valiant protectors*'. The latter campaign called on soldiers and civilians to sacrifice themselves for the Leader, without fear for their own lives.

The flag in the background is another reference to a similar military campaign.



Chi Chae-ho
(North Hamgyong Province Art Studio)
This is where we shall remain, 2003
Oil on canvas

A suicide attack is launched in response to a military incident. A marine is dispatched to put the slogan on the ship's banner into practice: 'All intruders will be destroyed'. An officer has passed on the order sent by Supreme Command. A wounded marine can be seen behind the officer. The painting does not show the soldier who is carrying out the suicide attack, but depicts instead his wife and daughter. Their expressions exude determination and conviction rather than grief. Although this is a one-man operation, the painting is not about the courage and self-sacrifice of the soldier concerned. It reflects the determined, resolute solidarity felt for the Leader, who must be defended to the death, which unites the people left behind.



Kang Sŭng-nyŏl
(South Hamgyong Art Studio)

Encore, 1995

Oil on canvas

A military train convoy on its way to the Korean frontline. No sign of shell shock, just unshakeable faith in ultimate victory. The remains of an abandoned American tank stand by the wayside: the North Korean army is unstoppable in its advance. The picture focuses on a train guard, who has just sung a song for the brave soldiers on their way to the front to join the fray; they are asking her for an encore.

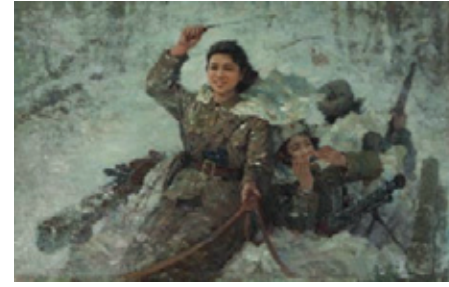


Ch'oe Hyŏk-shin

Proud of the twinkling gold stars, 1987

Oil on canvas

A group of newly decorated North Korean soldiers go out to celebrate on a warm summer's evening.



Unknown artist

Untitled, Undated

Oil on canvas

Three uniformed women travel through a snowy landscape by horse and cart during the Korean War, delivering weapons to troops at the front. They are fearless – paragons of courage and high spirits. The style of this painting is related to the traditional Korean Chosŏnhwa style, with the face of the main subject being reproduced in almost photographic detail while the background is in impressionistic tones.



Pak Sŏng-yun
(the People's Army Art Studio)

Maiden voyage, 2007

Oil on canvas

It is not the pilot making his maiden voyage shown in this picture, but his fellow-pilots. They share the thrill, excitement and pride in this young pilot's first ever flight. The theme of the painting is comradeship and solidarity. Success is the result of joint effort, not individual actions.



Pak Yŏng-il
(Paekho Art Studio)

Sailors, 2000

Oil on canvas

Impressionist painting of sailors on their ship in the home port.

Pyongyang: centre of the Kim Utopia

Pyongyang is the capital and showpiece of 'Kim country', the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Completely destroyed during the Korean War, the city was rebuilt as the revolutionary capital, complete with political symbols and monuments. It has since become the shining centrepiece of national pride and identity.

At the same time Pyongyang is a dream city for many North Koreans, a perfect example of the good life. Pyongyang embodies the future – it is where the ideals of the revolution are realized. In this utopian park city, people are liberated from all social, economic and material constraints.



Chang Kwang-min
Untitled, undated
Oil on canvas

A bird's eye view of a Pyongyang intersection. This is the Pyongyang that is dedicated to venerating the Great Leaders – in the centre is a monumental stele bearing the inscription 'The great leader comrade Kim Il Sung will always be with us'. Such steles were erected across the country after his death in 1994. Here too we see an important ideological axis – from the stele to the revolutionary cemetery visible in the distance, where heroes of the fatherland have found their final resting place. The Kumsusan mausoleum, where Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il lie in state, stands at the foot of the cemetery.



Kim Yu-dong
(Mansudae Art Studio)
Building site on T'ongil Street,
1992
Oil on canvas

In North Korea, the state is the property developer and Pyongyang is where it shows off its best side by erecting architecturally imposing apartment complexes – fine places in which to live. These typical sites are highly publicized in the national press. Building projects of this kind can always count on the attention of the Great Leaders, who want to make sure that the latest developments are benefiting citizens' quality of life. It might appear odd that a building site is the subject of a painting, but in North Korea labour is seen as a form of beauty.



Mi-söp and Ch'ung-jik
Untitled, undated
Oil on canvas

An impressionist city scene of Pyongyang on a Sunday afternoon. Families dressed in bright colours saunter along the river that is dotted with floating dinghies – a model of lively enjoyment under the vigilant flame of the Juche tower.

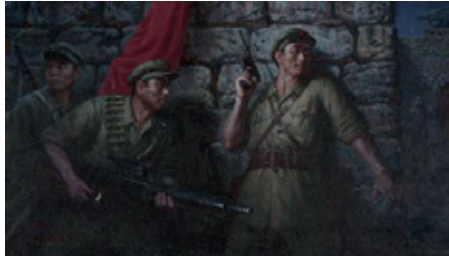
A pleasant and carefree Sunday afternoon stroll – that is what the revolution offers its citizens. Across the Taedong river, the national library (Grand People's Study House) and the pyramid silhouette of the Ryugyong Hotel at the foot of the Juche tower dominate the view. This axis – between the Juche tower and Kim Il Sung square, where the national library stands and where the Great Leader reviews mass parades – is one of the ideological axes of the city.

Colonial oppression and anti-Japanese resistance

Under the Japanese, life in North Korea was hell on Earth. We can see this reflected in the historical scenes. This image of history is diametrically opposed to the idyllic world of independent North Korea. This situation was reached thanks to the achievement of Juche, self-reliance, Kim Il Sung's gift to the Korean people.

Before the revolution, the Korean people were oppressed and exploited by the Japanese. Art illustrates this in two different ways: helpless women and children miserably suffering their lot, as well as brave, rebellious workers who no longer accept these humiliations.

Eventually the resistance fighters attack the Japanese occupier and liberate the Korean people. The illustrations of the war of resistance are overflowing with emotions – loyalty unto death and an unswerving belief in the revolution and its Leader. These are values designed to inspire the North Korean citizens. Opposed to these bold resistance fighters are the Japanese colonists and their Korean sidekicks. They are shown either as arrogant or decadent and anxious. The anxiety is because they are intimidated by the superiority of the Korean workers.



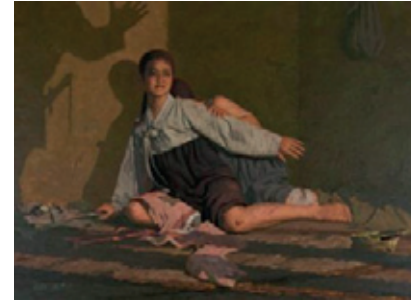
Ko Hak-ch'öl
(Rail Ministry Art Studio)
Attack on the stronghold, 2000
Oil on canvas

Korean partisans stalk a Japanese guard post near a city gate in the middle of the night. The three resistance fighters are alert and fearless, ready for a surprise attack. The Korean resistance could do little more than carry out this type of guerrilla attack. North Korean history and culture portrays the partisans as paragons of patriotism, sacrifice and dedication, the highest



Kim Tōk-shin
(South-Pyongan Province Art Studio)
The conviction of resistance fighters (mindful of Comrades Kwōn Yōng-byōk, Ri Che-sun, Ri Tong-gōl and Chi T'ae-hwan), 1998
Oil on canvas

Four resistance fighters await execution. They show no fear, emanating instead conviction, hope and disdain. Signs of torture are visible on the chest of the man on the right.



Kim Chong-jōng
Untitled, 1986
Oil on canvas

A failed attempt at rape. A student protects a woman whose upper garments have been ripped off by a rampant Japanese soldier. The soldier himself does not feature in the painting, but his cap can be seen on the floor and his shadow is projected onto the wall behind the women.



Chōng Hyōk
Untitled, 1985
Oil on canvas

It was not only the Japanese colonial state that oppressed and exploited the Korean people during the colonial period. Their own social elite was keen to collaborate too, as shown in this picture. A Korean land-owner enjoys a siesta after a lavish lunch. Two young girls fan him as he sleeps, while their parents work in the paddy fields beyond. The ledgers and abacus next to the reclining man signify his status. The abacus in the picture represents the greed of major land-owners, suggesting that this man is only interested in his counting his own riches.

The Korean War and American barbarism

North Korea has two archenemies: Japan and the United States. According to official North Korean history, the country won a resounding victory in 1953 over the American imperialists who were attempting to conquer North Korea. This success was due to the Great Leader Kim Il Sung, the unstinting efforts of the Korean People's Army and the unconditional support of the population. North Korean art makes it clear to the people that the United States still seeks to trample North Korea underfoot.

North Korean art uses history to teach the people. The images resemble Hollywood films in which everything revolves around the struggle between good and evil. There is no room for nuance. Optimism, combativeness and solidarity unite the North Korean people and the People's Army. Opposed to that is the barbarism and cowardice of the Americans and their immoral South Korean henchmen.



Han Hŭi-bok
(Central Art Studio)
We won, 1996
Oil on canvas

Kye Sun-hŭi stands on the podium after winning a gold medal for North Korea at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996. Aged 16, she beat her Japanese rival in the judo final for the under-48 kg weight class. Not only was this the first ever Olympic judo medal for North Korea, but the fact that this young athlete defended her nation's honour against Japan, the arch enemy of the Korean people, and in the United States, in other words on enemy soil, added further lustre to her victory. Her success occurred at a time of severe famine in North Korea, in the mid-1990s. As well as portraying an international sporting success, this painting is therefore about national pride, hope and confidence in the future.



Chŏng Yŏng-ch'ŏl
On the captured tank, 1997
Oil on canvas

A scene from the Korean War, behind the frontline. Two armed women with camouflage netting over their shoulders, whose job it is to guard and defend the village, watch children playing soldiers on a disabled American tank. One boy has drawn the silhouette of a surrendered American soldier on the tank, together with the words 'I caught him!' Another boy has simply written 'American dogs' (migungnom), the classic derogatory term. This almost tranquil scene is a reference to the US troops being defeated and driven back; only the tank points to the enemy being repelled. The picture tells the story of the men at the front who are fighting to preserve the idyll of a free and carefree Korea. But it also shows the unshakeable belief in a positive outcome – there is no hint of fear that the US troops might return.



Hyök-shin
Untitled, 2003
Oil on canvas

Fifty years after the Korean War had ended, there was another flare-up of tension between North Korea and the US following the outbreak of the second nuclear crisis in October 2002. Dating from that time is this portrayal of the signing of the armistice that ended the Korean War. General Harrison signed on behalf of the United Nations and General Nam Il on behalf of North Korea (and the People's Republic of China). Those are the historical facts. However, realistic art doesn't simply document – it adds depth to an event's historical significance by both summarizing and supplementing the facts. Here, despair prevails in the UN camp. As always the international press is only interested in the victor. The facial expressions speak volumes, and the message is further reinforced by the contrast between light and dark and General Nam Il's central position. He looks down triumphantly on General Harrison and the defeated UN delegation, while the 'recalcitrant' Paek Sun-yop, a South Korean general, makes a last-ditch attempt to persuade Harrison not to sign.



Ro U-dam
American dogs torching a paddy field, undated
Oil on canvas

The destruction of a paddy field shows the inhumanity of American troops during the Korean War. This is emphasized by the malicious grins on the faces of the soldiers bearing torches. The dehumanization of the American soldiers is further reinforced by the use of the insult 'dog' (süngnyangi).



Kim Ch'ang-bok
Untitled, 1990
Oil on canvas

The torture of Korean civilians by US soldiers, an example of a very primitive anti-Americanism intended to engender feelings of hatred in the viewer. The expressions on the faces of the American soldiers suggest degenerate and deranged minds.



O Hyön-ch'öl
Untitled, 1998
Oil on canvas

South Korean paramilitary troops have captured an ally of the North Korean occupying forces. Around his neck is a North Korean certificate, dated July 1950. The Inch'ön landing on 15 September 1950 not only halted the North Korean advance, but drove back the North Korean Army. Manhunts for anyone who had collaborated with the North Korean forces were carried out in the villages recaptured from the North Koreans. Above all, this scene shows the cruelty of the representatives of the South Korean state – henchmen and puppets of American imperialism.

South Korea and the longing for reunification

North Korea started the Korean War to reverse the division of the peninsula into North and South. The country celebrates that war as a victory over the American imperialists. After all, the Americans were unable to destroy the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The two Koreas have not yet been reunified. However, the dream is still alive.

Paintings depict emotional scenes of the pain caused by the division and the longing for reunification. There are also images of the heroic battle of the South Korean people against the Americans. After all, the South Koreans also dream of reunification under the enlightened leadership of the Kim family. The student protests and the fight for democracy in the 1980s were of course mainly due to the desire for reunification. In addition, it is suggested that real democracy can only be found in North Korea. Anti-American protests in South Korea are also a welcome topic for North Korean artists.



Sŏng-hwa
The daughter of a resistance fighter, 1999
Oil on canvas

The daughter of a dead protestor lays flowers on her father's grave. Her mother stands behind her, surrounded by democratization activists. The painting is set in South Korea, at the graveside of a man who died during the suppression of the Gwangju uprising in May 1980, when Chun Doo-hwan deployed the South Korean army against its own people. The suppression of this public uprising only added fuel to the struggle for democratization in the South.



Son Chin-ch'ŏl
Flying the kite for reunification, 2002
Oil on canvas

A boy poses with a kite against the backdrop of a classic Korean city gate (Taedong-mun). However, although this would appear to be an innocent New Year scene showing a boy with his kite, the word 'reunification' on the kite below the North Korean national flag gives the picture a political undertone. The dream of reunification is still very much alive for many North Koreans.



Kim Kil-ung
(Central Art Studio)
The spring of life, 1998
Oil on canvas

Kim Ku, a member of the nationalist right with a long history of anti-Japanese opposition, is shown visiting the graves of his parents in the north of Korea in the spring of 1948. On returning to the South after liberation, he became the main opponent of Syngman Rhee within the right-wing movement. Kim Ku was also fiercely opposed to communism, but unlike Rhee, he was desperate to retain Korean unity. When Rhee was pushing for elections in southern Korea, Kim Ku tried to stop him by travelling to Pyongyang in April 1948 for final discussions with Kim Il Sung. This failed to have the desired effect, but he still refused to take part in elections that would prolong the dichotomy. The visit to Kim Il Sung by a South Korean troika was a godsend for the North Korean propaganda machine, which used the visit to plug its legitimacy.



Kyŏng-ho
Untitled, 2007
Oil on canvas

A reunification march attempts to leave the campus of Yonsei University in Seoul, but is prevented by South Korean riot police under the watchful eye of the international press. Student activists made various attempts to organize reunification marches in the late 1980s, all of them thwarted by police intervention. The visual image is correct, but the slogans have been reinterpreted into North Korean political jargon. This painting, after all, was intended for the North Korean public.



Han Myŏng-ch'ŏl
(Hamhung Railway Agency
Art Studio)
Oath in blood, 1988
Oil on canvas

A student writes a slogan on a banner in his own blood during a protest at the gates of a university campus in Seoul. The slogan reads: 'We'll leave from Halla; come from Paektu and we'll meet in Panmunjom'. The Halla and Paektu mountains, which are the highest mountains in the South and North respectively, are located on the furthest tips of the peninsula. Both are mythical mountains that symbolize Korea. Panmunjom is the only spot along the demarcation line where the two parties could meet. Initiatives like this were met with great enthusiasm and used for political ends in North Korea, although they were firmly opposed by the South. The main slogan is not the only one visible in this picture: 'Independent reunification' can be seen on the student's headband, and for anyone still in doubt, a slogan in

the background reads: 'Get rid of the Yankees and reunify.' In other words, the presence of US troops in South Korea is preventing autonomous reunification.



Ri Myŏng-il
(Namp'o Art Studio)
Echoes of Pusan, 2003
Oil on canvas

In 2002, the Asian Games were held in the South Korean city of Pusan. North Korea not only sent athletes, but also cheerleaders to cheer them on. They were received with great enthusiasm, just three months after the historic summit between Kim Jong Il and the South Korean President Kim Dae-jung. The people of Pusan were happy to fraternize with the North Korean cheerleaders, as shown in this painting. They can be seen cheering both North and South Korean athletes under a huge common 'Reunification flag', which outlines the contours of the Korean peninsula in blue against a white background. At the same time, the North Korean cheerleaders are seen waving their own North Korean national flags. The scene emphasizes the unity of the Korean people and shows North Koreans rubbing shoulders with the people of South Korea. There is, however, no reference whatsoever to the South Korean state.



Han Hŭi-bok
(Central Art Studio)
Flames of anger, 2003
Oil on canvas

The death of two schoolgirls after a collision with a US army vehicle on 13 June 2002 led to public outcry in South Korea. When an American military court acquitted the soldiers responsible of involuntary manslaughter in November, a wave of anti-American feeling erupted in South Korea, even influencing the results of the presidential election of Roh Moo-hyun as South Korean president. This painting shows one of many wakes held in Seoul. Typical North Korean terms and images have been added to the picture, such as the slogan 'It's payback time for our enemies, the American dogs that mowed down our comrades'. The main subject is a teenage girl in school uniform setting fire to a dummy of George W. Bush. Her face exudes grief, determination and anger. The painting illustrates the mounting tensions with the US in 2003, when North Korea left the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the second nuclear crisis broke out.



**Im Hyŏk and
Ch'oe Kang-rim**
Untitled, 1999
Oil on canvas

A supporter of the Workers' Party of Korea (evident from the slogan on the wall) is branded as a 'commie' by members of a South Korean paramilitary organization during the Korean War. The frontline shifted during the first year of the Korean War. Once Seoul had been taken by UN troops, a paramilitary organization claiming to uphold public order (*ch'iandae*) carried out revenge attacks against supposed supporters of North Korea. This scene portrays the barbarity of the South Korean state and its accomplices.



**Ch'oe Nam-su,
Ri Ch'ŏl-ho,
Shim Kwang-ch'ŏl and
Hŏ Yŏng-bŏm**
(Mansudae Art Studio)
The song they sang, 2003
Oil on canvas

A group of South Koreans, including farmers, schoolchildren, intellectuals and manual labourers, valiantly sing a song expressing their support for the Workers' Party of Korea. Evidence of their support is visible in the slogans on the wall behind them. Some of them have been injured during clashes with the oppressive South Korean state, but it is their ardent, resilient gaze and the physical unity in their linked arms that really stand out.

Watercolours



SOUTH KOREA AND THE LONGING FOR REUNIFICATION

Unknown artist
Untitled, 1976
Watercolour

A postwoman carrying a letter gazes across the River Imjin that divides North and South Korea. A sign on the barbed wire fence reads '*military demarcation line*'. The painting is a reference to the problem of families spilt by the division of Korea and the emotional call for reunification. An idyllic village can be seen in the background, with a prominent 'tower of eternal life' (*yōngsaeng-t'ap*), a pillar proclaiming the long life and good health of the Great Leader. The fertile paddy fields and mechanized agriculture are symbols of how much better life in North Korea is than in South Korea.



COLONIAL OPPRESSION AND ANTI-JAPANESE RESISTANCE

Kim Ryong
Untitled, 1998
Watercolour

Partisans regrouping in the mountains after an attack on Japanese troops. The focus is on the unit commander, a paragon of physical and mental vitality. Next to him we see the red flag of the revolution. The expressions on the soldiers' faces lead us to believe that the attack was successful. The sight of so much pain and suffering in the background is unusual. Beneath the red flag, a soldier cries inconsolably for a lost comrade. This picture was painted at the height of the famine: it does not only depict close comradeship within a partisan unit, but also carries an indirect reference to the famine. But despite the grief of losing a comrade, nothing can shake their dedication to the cause and their belief in ultimate victory.



THE GREAT LEADER

Ri Kwang-yŏng
Untitled, 1988
Watercolour

This painting dates from September 1988, the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. A cross-section of the population is taking part in this procession to commemorate that joyous occasion. At the head is a party official, dressed in a neat Kim Il Sung suit and with a girl on his arm. On either side of the procession are flying banners with congratulations on the founding of the glorious people's republic, the economic plan for 1948 and the desire for an independent, united fatherland. The red banner in the centre reads: '*Long live General Kim Il Sung, unrivalled patriot and wise leader of the Korean people*'.



THE GREAT LEADER

Kim Ch'ŏl-wŏn
A February morning, 2003
Watercolour

A group of children are on their way to a flower exhibition in the Pyongyang exhibition hall. They are carrying a Kimjongilia, a variety of begonia named after Kim Jong Il, which is protected by a glass bell-jar. A girl is holding up an umbrella to protect the flower from the falling snow. It is a morning in February, the month in which Kim Jong Il was born. Pride and excitement shows clearly on the children's faces. Like many North Koreans, they have spent many hours cultivating and caring for this flower, a sublimated form of personality cult.



THE GREAT LEADER

Artist unknown
Untitled, undated
Watercolour

The calendar on the wall and the illuminated advertisement outside the window show that it is New Year. A girl sleeps happily, holding an unopened present in her arms. On the table in the foreground is a hand-held drum and a traditional garment. Perhaps she has taken part in a dance performance and been given a present from the Great Leader. On important public holidays, he liked to show off his most generous side. Food rations, for example, were increased. This must be a present from the Great Leader, as a gift from the girl's parents would not be an appropriate subject for a painting. With a Great Leader who cares so much for her, this girl can sleep peacefully and dream blissful dreams.



THE GREAT LEADER

**Ri Yŏng-shik,
Kang Yŏng-ch'ŏl and
Hwang Hyŏn-ch'ŏl**
Yearning for the General, 2001
Watercolour

Four women and a man are tending a flower bed on the side of the road from Pyongyang to Namp'o. Three women gaze into the distance, hoping to catch a glimpse of the General, Kim Jong Il, as he sweeps by in his motorcade. This picture effectively encapsulates what the cult of personality means in North Korea. The women must do their work well so that the Great Leader has a comfortable journey and can cast his gaze over an immaculately maintained roadside. The message here is not that the Leader serves the people, but that the people serve the Leader.



THE ARMED FORCES –
SHIELD OF THE NATION

Unknown artist

On the road to a decisive battle,
2003

Watercolour

In the foreground, a soldier relieves an injured comrade of the flag of the Republic. The soldiers in the background forge ahead on the road to victory, driven by their determination and total belief in their superiority. This scene from the Korean War conveys the 'Army First' message.



THE ARMED FORCES –
SHIELD OF THE NATION

Unknown artist

Untitled, Undated

Watercolour

A winter scene showing two female soldiers at target practice at an outdoor firing range. They are not shown pulling the trigger for the perfect shot, but inspecting the target and celebrating their success. The painting exudes solidarity and shared joy.



THE ARMED FORCES –
SHIELD OF THE NATION

Mun Kwang-ch'öl

Untitled, 1987

Watercolour

Civilians and soldiers work shoulder-to-shoulder to supply the front during the Korean War. Nothing will stop them bringing supplies to the troops fighting at the front. An emergency bridge is quickly erected after a bombardment so that the anti-aircraft guns can be positioned. The painting conjures up a feeling of forward movement: on the road to victory, the path to the future. It is visible on the face of the girl; she appears intrepid and confident of a good ending.



THE ARMED FORCES –
SHIELD OF THE NATION

An Myōng-jin

Untitled, 1996

Watercolour

This is an officer shock brigade (tolgyōktae). They are building an irrigation tunnel, one of many infrastructure projects carried out by the army.



**THE ARMED FORCES –
SHIELD OF THE NATION**

Chŏn Myŏng-ch'ŏl
Veterans, 1998
Watercolour

These four veterans are working as guides at the Monument to Victorious Fatherland Liberation War in Pyongyang, visible in the background. They are sitting on a bench, approvingly reading an article in the Rodong Shinmun party newspaper, entitled '*Let's not forget what the 1950s youth achieved*'. Veterans often work as guides in historic places so that they can pass on their memories to younger generations as an example and source of inspiration. The headline serves to illustrate this: you must not forget what was earned with blood, sweat and tears. Young people have the obligation to continue the good work; they owe it to the older generation, who paid a high price to put the country where it is today.



**COLONIAL OPPRESSION AND
ANTI-JAPANESE RESISTANCE**

Ri Mok-ran
Untitled, 1995
Watercolour

A Japanese businessman orders a boy to go fishing in a rickety boat during a heavy storm. His sister holds him tightly, not wanting him to go. Three adult fishermen can only stand back and watch. The contrast in lifestyle and comfort is blatantly obvious. The disadvantaged Koreans are barefoot, while the businessman is fashionably dressed and shielded from the rain by his clerk, who dutifully holds an umbrella over his head. The boy's expression is full of disdain. The seed of the North Korean revolution has been planted; the stage is set for Kim Il Sung to channel their pent-up anger.



**COLONIAL OPPRESSION AND
ANTI-JAPANESE RESISTANCE**

Kim Yŏng-ho
(Mansudae Art Studio)
A life of slavery under the Japs.
Watercolour

A very young servant girl washes the feet of a bloated Japanese man, who appears to treat his dog better than the girl. The picture is a powerful depiction of the humiliation that the Korean people suffered during the Japanese occupation. The contrast, which is made even more powerful by a perspective never shown in pictures featuring heroic North Korea, is a reference to the North Korean paradise, where Koreans are no longer slaves but in charge of their own destiny. This scene is probably not true-to-life, but an attempt to visualize the essence of the nature of the colonization.



**COLONIAL OPPRESSION AND
ANTI-JAPANESE RESISTANCE**

Ri Pyŏng-ho
Untitled, 1985
Watercolour

Korean labourers rebel against their Japanese masters after a fatal accident involving a child. The condition of the steel cables on the left of the picture seems to indicate that the accident could have been prevented if the necessary maintenance had been carried out. This painting focuses on rebellion rather than exploitation, and has a nationalist ring to it. The man holding the dead child radiates superiority as he confronts the shocked Japanese business manager, who is accompanied by an anxious soldier with one hand on his sword.



HEROES OF LABOUR

Pak Kwang-rim

Untitled, 1995

Watercolour

Workers at a mechanical engineering factory work together with an engineer to find a solution to a technical problem. This scene demonstrates that the technical knowledge acquired by workers through practice is important to the engineering graduate. In ideological terms, this is known as the Tae'an method of management, introduced by Kim Il Sung in 1961. Unusually, it is the woman who takes the lead in the discussion, under the approving eyes of her male workmates.



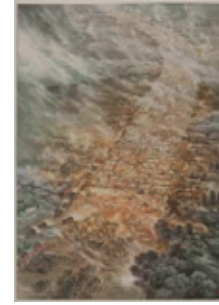
HEROES OF LABOUR

Kim Sŏng-gŭn

May the dignity of my fatherland, acknowledged worldwide as a powerful and prosperous country, shine yet more abundantly in the universe, 2000

Watercolour

A North Korean rocket on its launch pad, all set to put a satellite into space. North Korea has set its sights on technological development, seeking to join the select group of countries that have succeeded in independently putting their own satellites into orbit. In 1998 North Korea made its first, unsuccessful, launch, followed by another unsuccessful attempt in 2009. In 2012, however, it surprised the world by putting an object into orbit around the Earth. The message of this highly futuristic painting is clear: a successful space programme will only boost North Korea's fame.



HEROES OF LABOUR

Mun Se-ung, Kangsŏng Taeguk motorway, 2000

Watercolour

An unusual bird's-eye view of an enormous construction site at night-time. A motorway is being built, together with a motorway bridge.



HEROES OF LABOUR

Il-sŏn and Sŏng-ho

Pouring the first steel, Undated

Watercolour

A proud steelworker rings the bell to announce the first steel pouring. The slogan in the factory calls for the building of the new democratic Korea.



HEROES OF LABOUR

Sŏng-hwa, Heroic builders erecting the 1 May stadium, 2003

Watercolour

The 1 May stadium in Pyongyang, an engineering feat in the shape of a magnolia flower, is the largest stadium in the world, holding 150,000 spectators. It was completed in 1989, just in time to host participants in the 13th World Youth and Student Festival. Artists' interest in construction sites of this kind relates not only to the political importance of such prestige projects. There is also a deeper ideological motive – showing that people are resourceful and will not allow their progress and development to be halted by any obstacle or constraint.

Sunag Noh, South Korea lives in Seoul
RED ROOM III NORTH KOREA IN SOUTH KOREA

The series shows images taken in a historical theme park, war museum, an art gallery in Seoul, and the Imjingak Peace Park in the demilitarized zone on the border between North and South. All these places commemorate the Korean War of 1950 - 1953. The scenes aim to provide an experience of the prisoner of war camps from the period, what the war felt like, but also how the current regime is viewed in the South, and how the neighbors surveil each other constantly.

Ari Hatsuzawa, Japanese lives in Tokyo
NEIGHBORS: NORTH OF THE 38TH PARALLEL

Japanese fashion photographer Hatsuzawa travelled to North Korea four times during a three year period. As all travellers to North Korea, Hatsuzawa had state menders to watch over his every move. But, instead of challenging them, he befriended them, chatted with them, took them out to drinks, and over time he gained a different type of access to the people of Pyongyang; closer, warmer, and resulting in images that show a city in bright colors with happy inhabitants. He insists that this side of life exists as a normality in the country.

Tomas Van Houttve, Belgium lives in Paris
BEHIND THE CURTAINS – NORTH KOREA

Photojournalist Tomas van Houttve posed as a Belgian businessman looking for investment opportunities in North Korea and as such he travelled with a group from the North to the South of the country. Pretending to be in position to be able to provide the much needed hard currency for the economy, this was his strategy to gaining more access. His work shows us a harsher reality of broken roads, empty fields, and the ever present images of the Leaders of the country.

Philippe Chancel, French lives in Paris

ARIRANG

The annual mass games are staged in the May Day stadium in Pyongyang in August and September. Up to 30,000 people participate in card stunts to create stunning images, accompanied by dance performances with hundreds of dancers. Chancel photographed the event from the exact seat where the Leader himself is said to watch over the spectacle. The perfect choreography of thousands, the iconic images showing the guns that liberated Korea from the Japanese in the 1940s, the fatherly smile of the eternal president and Great Leader of the nation, embody the conformist nature of the Korean people, and the strength of its revolutionary leadership and army.

Pierre Bessard, French lives in Paris

PERSONALITY CULT SERIES

Bessard travelled to North Korea during the reign of its first leader and eternal president Kim Il Sung who he met on several occasions. His work into the personality cult of the leadership suggest a relatively free interpretation of scenes that the photographer encountered during his travels. Upon second glance however, the scenes seem to be that: stages onto which the players appear to be placed by a director in order to be photographed. These images suggest that the North Korean People are directed in their behavior by the state, even if they are not explicitly expected to perform.

Hyonsoong Yoo, South Korean lives in Chicago

BRAVE NEW WORLD

The installation uses images distributed by the North Korean Press agency KCNA, but in cropped version and shown in old-fashioned viewfinder cameras. She questions with this method the technological progress of North Korea but also the credibility of its propaganda. The viewer is asked to reconsider the value of the mass grievé of the Koreans when their leaders passed away. But also to question the reality of the photographic image, in which anyone can easily add extra elements to boost its message. The pixel perfect reality of the mass games hides people, a pixel at a time, whereas the social realistic painting style depicts scenes that are far from reality. The last two images of the series use an iconography that is not necessarily known to those outside of North Korea. The Rising Sun stands for the Great Leader, Kim Il Sung, the eternal president, the two guns for the liberation from the Japanese colonial yoke by the Great Leader himself.

João Rocha, Portuguese lives in Lisbon

KIM JONG IL LOOKING AT THINGS

Portuguese artist João Rocha collected official images of the Dear Leader while he went around to country to give field guidance and published them on a tumblr account titled kimjongillookingatthings, later assembled in a book. The of the matter-of-fact titles and the number of images of the leader in often the same attire, result is an absurd and comical rendition of Kim Jong Il, that provides a unique insight in the personality cult around the leadership.

Alice Wielinga, Dutch lives in Amsterdam

NORTH KOREA – A LIFE BETWEEN PROPAGANDA AND REALITY

Wielinga uses propaganda paintings from North Korea and combines these with photographic images that she took herself while on a tourist trip through North Korea. She was able to photograph these harsh scenes as she travelled in a group that included her father. He was the one who carried a large DSLR camera, and heavy lenses, thereby attracting the attention of the menders. Wielinga photographed with a small, but high quality compact camera which allowed her to escape partly from the control of her chaperones. The resulting tableaux confront the beauty and prosperity of the propaganda machine with the harsh and dry reality as Wielinga pictured it during her trip.

Seung Woo Back, South Korean, living in Seoul

UTOPIA

Seung Woo Back uses images originating from North Korea that should impress on the viewer the strength and grandeur of the Korean People through its architecture. The artist has turned these into dystopian landscapes that, according to him, are closer to the reality of North Korea than the propaganda images distributed through the official channels.

David Guttenfelder, American

INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT

As the Pyongyang bureau photographer for the Associated Press, Guttenfelder was able to feed a unique instagram account with images he took while traveling apparently freely in the country. His images of ordinary scenes of hotel rooms, elevator switches, and karaoke bar songbooks, show a mundane life that had not been seen until he started sharing his work.

North Korean Perspectives

Photo exhibition

In order to still show the country from a different angle, some photographers have found ways to escape the control of these menders, or to use the existing photography in different ways. Appropriation of existing work can sometimes reveal a new point of view, as will be shown in some of the projects on show here.

French journalist Philippe Grangereau travelled to North Korea in the year 2000, under the guise of being a tourist. Upon his return he published a small book with photographs he took there and a text under the title 'A Pays du Grand Mensonge- voyage en Corée du Nord'. The Country of the Great Lie. The pun with the Great Leader was no doubt intended. The title of this little book is perhaps the best starting point for this research into the the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North-Korea.

If Grangereau talks of a lie, someone must be a liar. For him it is clear that the North Korean state impersonated by their Leaders, is the liar. I wanted to decipher this lie, to try and take it apart, and to show if there is a truth that contradicts the lie. Before all we can already conclude that the 'truth' is not something we will be able to find or identify, and the 'lie' that contradicts an unfindable truth is equally unfindable. So, instead of getting stuck in a semiological discussion on the meaning of truth and lie, let us approach the issue from a slightly different angle.

The North Korean state uses imagery, photography, painting, and typography in its slogans to present a version of itself that is positive, forward moving, blooming, growing, and most of all happy and proud. The arch enemies of the state, the South Korean government and the United States are portrayed as the embodiment of evil: child murdering rapists, with only one wish: to dominate the world at the cost of the North Korean people.

It is mainly this positive and progress prone version of North Korea that we, in the West, are most often confronted with. Through our eyes it looks too colorful, too beautiful, too orchestrated to be realistic, but as we lack a different point of view, these images seem to dominate our impression of the Hermit Kingdom. Even if we see images taken by foreign tourists who are allowed to travel in North Korea, they often confirm this point of view. Tourists, photographers, even the sparse international journalists who work in the country are very restricted in their work: what they photograph, where, and sometimes even how. During their travels they are constantly joined by state-appointed menders or chaperones.



photo exhibition

North Korean Perspectives

