transPOP: Korea Vietnam Remix

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Arko Art Center, Seoul

by Park Soon-mae

In many ways transPOP: Korea Vietnam Remix - an exhibition featuring 16 artists from Korea, Vietnam and the United States - takes an amusing path to exploring the emotional residue shared by three nations. It delves into local pop culture as a symbol of loss and desire born of historical traditions, and of the confusion and reality artists face in the changing states of their societies. As a means to express these complex emotions, the artists often borrow a dose of sentimentalism from pop culture.

One of the most poignant works comes from Bae Young-whan, who is known for his use of banal everyday objects such as digestive tablets, plastic flowers and broken pieces of soju (cheap Korean liquor) bottles as sources for lyrics of sad love songs or as actual materials to express grand ideas on his 'canvas'. In this exhibition he presents Revolution, a stencil of flower on paper accompanied by the word 'revolution' in Korean and English, much like an illustrated dictionary. The central idea of the work is self-pity, an element common in Korean TV dramas and music videos. On a deeper level, however, the notion of self-pity is also political in the Korean context, because it reflects a means by which Koreans came to recognize and acknowledge their traumatic past, riddled with the memories of war and colonization.

The exhibition also mimics a function of pop culture in society in that it illustrates the artists' efforts to seek hope in their present conditions. The point clearly gets across. The artists mark their political positions differently with directness, sarcasm or plain earnestness. Yet none of the works are devoid of hope - a tendency perhaps intrinsic to human nature.

For decades, Vietnam and Korea were enemies. South Korea dispatched 320,000 troops to fight alongside American and South Vietnamese soldiers in the Vietnam War. Today, the tables are turned: trendsetting pop stars, singers and television actors from Korea dictate everything from cosmetic brands to what Vietnamese teens wear, eat and watch. On a similar note, Vietnam considers Korea an economic role model, and Korea sees Vietnam as a target for exporting its 'refined' cultural products. But transPOP also suggests that this cross-cultural trend may have at its source deeper connections, such as shared Confucian values.

Indeed throughout the exhibition similar signs of confusion and hope pervade the subjects of many works dealing with the dilemmas of contemporary Vietnam. In Lam Truong, Tiffany Chung reflects an idealized vision of modernity by taking glamorous music-video footage of the famous Vietnamese pop star Lam Truong on stage and paralleling it with men in shabby shirts and jeans on bicycles who hang around the city's streets. Nguyen Manh Hung as well playfully delves into socio-economic aspects of Vietnam's rapid urbanization.

The show seeks to find the cultural ties between Korea and Vietnam through their common history of war and colonization. And by including the U.S.-based diasporic communities of the two nations, the exhibition
examines how the history of trauma is tolerated, shared and healed through art.

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