Mix it up with Vietnamese and Korean art

By Jean Oh

Vietnam and Korea not only share the threat of invasion but a history of war, democracy, and a hybrid pop culture. In an attempt to reflect on this often-overlooked relationship, ARKO Art Center joins two independent curators from America in their latest exhibition, "transPOP: Korea-Vietnam Remixed."

An unlikely mix of Vietnamese propaganda films, Korean dramas, and soldiers coddled in flowers come together in this extensive display of art from 10 artists from Vietnam and Korea and each country's respective diaspora in America. The origins of this strange idea? It all happened over lunch in Los Angeles' Koreatown. Yong Poong-mian and Viet Le, brought their heads and cultures together while eating lunch and, voila, the Korean-Vietnamese Remixed was born.

Sitting across from Le and Yong over lunch, yet again, but this time in Korea, not Koreatown, they come across a history doc. Le is a picture of how modernity is in his shirt outfit and seed, gravity-defying hair. Yong, with his soft face and flowing hair, looks like a cool rock-and-roll star. He has the two become friends. Let's see curatorial poetry?

But at this point, the duo becomes strikingly clear that their art is different styles and different historic contexts and interests. Both left their countries, Vietnam and Korea, at an early age to move to America. And both share a fascination with drama from their respective cultures. With Le living up on Vietnamese-American TV and Yong becoming addicted to Korean nobles, the duo has teamed up to create a collaborative piece. The result is a display of art from both countries in a demonstration of their relationship and the overarching question that Vietnam and Korea have had in the past and continue to have today.

"Both Korea and Vietnam share this incredible sense of compressed modernism," said Yong, citing Korean involvement in the Vietnam War, both countries' rapid economic development, and the power inscribed in the power of the "King of the Wave" in Vietnam as key factors in the two countries' shared history.

And now the two countries can also share art through the mediated efforts of Yong and the ARKO Art Center. But don't expect this exhibition to be a display of Korea and Vietnamese art. Each work is independent of the other, reflecting the cultural, historical, and political contexts of both Vietnam and Korea.

Vietnamese-American artist Tiffany Chang demonstrates the playful influence of Korea's pop culture on Vietnamese in her video "Love Troubled" (2007). In Chang's work, Lum, Trung, Vietnam's biggest pop star, plays about the night, belting out pop music. From after he could pass for a Korean pop star and, indeed, according to Chang, Lê is favored for his looks of K-pop stars.

On a more suitable note, Korean artist Oh Yang-seok paints the marriage of culture in his "Elephant in Asia" (2006). "The elephant in Asia" was created to reflect the influence of Korea's "leapfrogging" pop culture and Asian media on Vietnamese. The result is a blend of K-pop and traditional Vietnamese culture, creating a unique fusion of the two.

Korean photographer Ahn Park's work makes viewers do a double take. In his "Three Second Frozen Defectors From North Korea" (2006), three teenage boys scavenge a tree for a broken mirror. The boys are all tank soldiers, but they seem to just average people. They are defectors from North Korea.

In these members, shorts and t-shirts, they blend right in, testimony to the lack of modernization and pop culture. But even as the skewer diaries their true identities, memories of the Korean War fade the blur. The boys are no longer K-pop fans. They are North Koreans, proving that the past cannot be erased or forgotten. Tradition and history, despite modernization, are embedded in society.

"transPOP: Korea-Vietnam Remixed" runs through Feb. 29 at ARKO Art Center. Tickets are $6 for adults and $4 for students. To get there, go to the Hynes Convention Center and take the Red Line to the Symphony Station. For more information, call (617) 393-3515 or visit www.transpop.com.