

Flags

Curated by Sue Kim

Kim Lee-Park, Noh Suntag, Park Gunwoong, Grim Park, Andeath

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Opening Reception: Thursday, January 31st, 6 – 8pm

Opening Hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 10am – 6pm

DOOSAN Gallery New York 533 W 25th Street, New York, NY 10001

"Wait till you're my age and see. This country won't change no matter what you do... I wish adults wouldn't say such things."¹

This was the headline of an article featuring interviews with Korean secondary school students serving in the Youth Assembly. When I read the article some time ago, I was reminded of a conversation I had with my mother two years ago. We were having coffee at a café when the subject of the Candlelight Demonstrations (a nationwide movement to oust President Park Geun-hye from office in 2016 and 2017)² came up in conversation. My mother asked me if I went to "those sort of things" too. Taken aback by the implication of those words, I replied to her, "Of course I go to those places too, mom. But not every week." My mother looked at me with a mixture of compassion and pity in her eyes. She smiled bitterly. "Do you think [your actions] will change the world?"

I am one of the older members of the "millennial" generation in Korea—those born between 1980 and 1994. We learned modern history edited according to the political leanings of whoever was in power at the time. Our tiger parents drilled us through the fervently competitive education system to ensure we entered the top universities and lived more comfortable lives than theirs, but we cannot ever hope to achieve the same level of economic success as their generation with the Korean economy in constant depression and with the real estate market plagued with speculative investments. While we are adept with technology as either "digital natives" or "users" and receive the benefit of higher education, we are also moving out of our familial homes later than preceding generations.

The generation before mine, the generation of my youngest aunts and uncles, is called the 386 Generation³ or the Democratization Generation. Before that is the Baby Boomers, my parents' generation, who spent their adolescent years during the two military dictatorships. Their parents' generation, the Silent Generation, acquiesced to their given fate. Each generation's knowledge of modern history was shaped by the political aims of those in power, which is why although I was raised by my parents, their view of the Candlelight

¹ [Song Hyeonsuk's Long-term Vision] "Wait till you're my age and see. This country won't change no matter what you do... I wish adults wouldn't say such things." (Opinion / Interview section of the *Kyunghyang Shinmun* newspaper), Song Hyeonsuk, 2018.11.02, http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201811021705005&code=940100&sat_menu=A074

² The candlelight demonstrations began in October 29, 2016, lasting until March the following year. The protesters demanded the investigation of the charges of against President Park Geun-hye and her associates for illicit meddling in state affairs, and later the removal of President Park from office. The majority of the National Assembly voted in favor of President Park's impeachment in December 2016. She was later removed from office when the Constitutional Court unanimously upheld the impeachment in March 2017. Over 1.5 million people are said to have participated in the demonstrations.

³ Born in the 1960s, the members of this generation spent their young adulthood in the 1980s to lead the way in student demonstrations and civil movements for the democratization of South Korea.

Demonstrations differs from mine. Of the legacy each generation leaves behind for the next, some things are meant to be forgotten and relearned. As Korea is an ethnically homogeneous nation, issues like class conflict and racism are relatively obscure. However, there clearly are disagreements between the generations, mainly surrounding the blatant lack of understanding on gender issues and acceptance of multiracial families. Korean millennials are now in the process of exposing such issues and bringing about change.

Flags is an exhibition I have built through the process of observing, interacting with, and studying my family, neighbors, and others in and around my life: separate generations of a seemingly homogeneous Korean society. The exhibition begins with the imagery of “flags” hoisted by many individuals and groups during the Candlelight Demonstrations of 2016 and the responses that followed thereafter. The groups represented by the flags during the protests of 2016 and 2017 went beyond the scope of the usual protesters, largely comprised of universities, labor unions, and political parties. Such new flags included the flag of the Green Party, which advocates for environmental movements, the rainbow flag of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as countless flags of other civil organizations. Other protesters engaged in a playful jest using flags by parodying existing organizations. Flags for the Korean Confederation of Cat Unions, Rhino Beetle Research Association, Aquarium Sans Frontiers, and the Federation of Korean Dog Owners were raised. These flags served as “floating *signifiants*” (@jangpoongyeon, the Rhino Beetle Research Association's Twitter account), whose bearers participated in and contributed to the protests in the context of their respective interests. The flags they hoisted proclaimed their identity, beliefs, and orientation and signified the bearers' social coordinates.

Meanwhile, the supporters of President Park hoisted the national flags of Korea and America while the National Assembly voted to impeach President Park. As the majority of these “Taegukgi (South Korean Flag) Protesters” are in their 60s or older, they ignited a generational conflict amidst the political divide between the left and the right. While progressives in social, political, and cultural arenas discussed how to erase discord and to learn from the past, the elderly felt threatened by the possibility that their legacy was about to be erased. In their panic, they aligned their own lives with the fate of President Park Geun-hye. Waved in protest of the dictatorship in the 1980s by true patriots, the South Korean flag now belonged to the so-called patriotic parties that fondly remember the very same dictatorship. Parents attending the Taegukgi Protests find themselves juxtaposed against their children in the Candlelight Protests. I too worried that my parents' phones may be filled with fake news. The generational gap between parents and their children became as wide as the number of years between them.

Even after the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment, the flags did not disappear from the streets and squares. Many more protests continued to ensue, including the feminists' protests fueled by the viral spread of the Me Too Movement, protests for and against the Yemeni asylum-seekers on Jeju Island, Christian protests against gay pride parades, and the protests by small business owners calling for a solution on the minimum wage issue. The outdated perspectives toward such issues revealed themselves through these protests, prompting a call to address the conflicts through governmental policies made through humanitarian perspectives. Many continue their fight to bring about change.

The rage demonstrated by some of the protesters exemplifies the dangers of repressed trauma, anger, and religious zeal—a danger that doesn't distinguish between generations. Some feminist groups have defined men as the enemy. Christians who believe homosexuality is a sin have written letters in their own blood in protest of the gay pride parades. Members of the Taegukgi Protest designed a combination of the Korean and American flags to wave about while they demand the release of now former President Park from jail; they argue for the “eradication” of the so-called “North Korea advocates” whom they have framed according to their whim.

We now live in an era of protests. The flags used in these protests are turning the plaza into a stage of heated debates and explosive changes in Korea. This exhibition enlists the participation of artists who each have a flag (orientation) to illustrate the on-site feeling of the protests or their personal stance. The artists present

intuitive, visual devices that represent the flags hoisted by many individuals and groups in their effort to secure democracy in Korea (not unlike the "pussy hats" in front of the White House) to represent the beliefs of certain communities, to protest massive power and gender issues, and to affirm the existence of alternative cultures. The artists' "flags" serve as slogans for individuals or groups to call out awareness on such multi-layered issues. By collecting the works of individuals who raise their voice for various issues, this exhibition affirms the ways in which we lack as a society and gives hope for the future. Whether the flags physically exist or not and regardless of the direction in which they are headed, each of them certainly possesses the power to draw the winds of change.

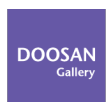
Kim Lee-Park: As a floriculturist, Kim Lee-Park's work presents gestures representing a caring for and reviving of plants, shedding light on the sentimentality of those who find stability in nature and encouraging viewers to observe the ecology of plants that live indoors. Kim reinvents the plant as a subject of ornamental consumption, dealing with contexts where plants are used as a gesture of comfort and gratitude in human affairs. In his solo exhibition *Mimosa: Sensitive Plant* held in Seoul in the summer of 2018, short videos of Koreans exploding from stress and anger, found on the internet, were collected, edited, and juxtaposed with *Mimosa pudica* and *Codariocalyx motorius* (dancing tree), plants which respond instantly to external stimuli. Through this work, the artist repudiates the idea of a plant as something that gives unconditionally and presents a reality in which there is no choice but to respond violently to violence.

Noh Suntag: Noh Suntag's photographs capture in close proximity individuals and communities marginalized by authority and the capitalist system. Noh, who was a university student at the end of military dictatorship in Korea, witnessed countless political upheavals in which the government tried to prolong its reign through politics of fear and engaged himself in journalism. He voices his sociopolitical consciousness built up since then, through text and photographs and currently calls himself a recorder and a social activist. Noh captures the intense tension, desperate moments, and remnants of absurd scenes left by authority at the site of demonstrations and rallies. Noh contemplates on how the camera, situated where it is absolutely necessary, can 'testify' to the social problems of which the medium of photography can effectively expose. Noh often connects photographs he takes from separate sites, leading the viewer to reflect on how the same problems are instigated in different ways.

Park Gunwoong: Choosing to major in painting, Park Gunwoong originally aspired to become an artist. His involvement in socio-political activism in the 1990s, however, led him to draw banners, posters, and hanging pictures used at the site of rallies. Around this time, Park also sensed potential and his own yearning for storytelling through comics. While fulfilling his military service and for three years after, Park worked on *Flower*, the graphic novel that won him the Korean Published Comics Award for New Cartoonist. Since then, Park has been delivering stories hidden beneath mainstream Korean modern history through the medium of comics and in effect reflecting his conviction for human rights and strong progressive tendencies. Park shed light on the civilian massacre at the Nogeunri Twin Tunnel committed by the US army during the Korean War in *Nogeunri Story* and recalled the testimony of the late Kim Geun Tae, who was tortured under the military dictatorship of the 1980s, in *Tale of the Beasts*.

Grim Park: Grim Park is an artist who majored in Buddhist painting and deals directly with queer content. He is an uncommon Korean artist, one who has publically come out of the closet. During his time as an apprentice in Buddhist painting, he explored what is traditional and Korean and in that process, became keenly aware of the medium's limitations and conservative restrictions; he could not reveal his true self through its original form. Since then, he began observing and participating in queer communities in which he could talk about his gender identity and ego. He began depicting beautiful queers active in social media or dating apps on silk using the same technique used for the portraits of kings. Currently Park is engaged in self-introspection through his new series of work, which transforms the Buddhist or Taoist narrative *Shimwoodo* (a series of epic tales that captures a young child monk's journey with a bull to explore his true nature) into 'Shimhodo' (tiger). Park was awarded the 2018 Absolut Artist Award.

Andeath: Andeath experiments with ideas of copy, originality, and good design produced in industrial products and the clothing business. She extends and saves the lifespan of clothes through long-term archival/performance projects such as *Daily Coordination* in which she collects old clothes and objects, and *Daily Spin* in which she spins around wearing the old clothes. These actions shed light on the objects' past, such as their circulation and source, while giving them a chance to dominate, at least for a moment, in the unit of a day. For this exhibition, the artist produced a video work based on her recordings of the rallies that took place in Gwanghwamun Square, the cradle of democratic rallies in Korea. On a Saturday in November 2018, the artist captured glimpses of unrealized hopes in the flags flying in the square, intersecting and saturated with multiple generations and their interests, going in there and "turning around and coming back out".



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