

Korea used to be called 'the Hermit Kingdom'. In many ways this image explains much about the country and about dealing with it on international levels. The image is of control, restraint, simplicity of life, denial of luxury and pleasure, of turning away from outside relationships, of being true to one's own way. And the image is male.

Koreans see themselves as one, separate people. It is almost impossible for non-Koreans to 'become' Korean. There is no word in Korean for immigration or concept of an outsider going and living there.

One of the strongest visual impressions of this—and one of the most beautiful places—is the recreated eighteenth-century Korean scholar's room at the National Museum in Seoul. It has white papered walls and floor, a plain dark wooden desk, a simple cushion and simple dark implements with which to write. A white cube with the merest notional marks, like a piece of calligraphy itself: so restrained, so focused, so apart. What a place to contemplate, and think of the essentials of existence.

The forced link Korea has had to other cultures hasn't been kind. There is the super power of China, always there; and Japan, which colonised Korea until World War II, well within living memory. And since the early 1950s, the Americans, their huge bases still in the centre of Seoul.

In a very short time, since the late 1980s, Korea has said it wants a wider role in the world; the Olympic Games credited as forcing an internationalisation of attitude. The outsider sees this going on. S/he sees the economic push of course, with Hyundai, Samsung, Daewoo and the others. And s/he sees the young people now pushing aside the rigours of the past, pushing aside the strong controlling principles of the Hermit Kingdom.

The outsider cannot but see this duality. It is dynamic, alive, thoughtful and revealing.

The selection of Korean artists for the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial did not set out to reflect this duality, but in the end does it, I think, quite well. Kim Hong-Joo's remains the classical piece, but seen in contemporary mode, full of double meaning and wit; Yun Suk-Nam's work retains too a dignity worthy of the old ways. She also makes strong reference to the old ways of women and, in the craft references and decorations of her work, reinforces the feminist message she carries. In a way, Yun Suk-Nam's work has a stronger hold once one knows the male dominance of Korean culture. Outsiders are invisible in Korean nationalism; equally, women are invisible in the acknowledgment of a family (for example, they are not included on family trees).

Kim Myung-Hye is a younger woman making a clear statement about her country—and all the countries of the region—reaching for their economic goals. The 'Tigers' of the region are talked about but seldom referred to so clearly in a wider cultural context.

A more abrupt challenge to the Hermit's world are the works of Choi Jeong Hwa and Kim Joon, whose works celebrate popular culture in different ways—grotesque, wonderful, sinister, ridiculous and fun.

Soyeon Ahn, Associate Curator at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, was the key figure in the selection of the artists. She discussed the issues both in Australia and Korea; she gathered material, guided, accompanied on visits, and gave her always sound judgement to all aspects of the selection. Her presence mediated the project and introduced the Australians involved in the Korean selection: David Williams of the Canberra School of Art, Chris Saines of the Queensland Art Gallery and myself. Peter Saville and, in particular, Choi Moon Sun of the Australia Embassy helped us greatly during our week in Korea, particularly with travel, interpreting and general negotiation.

Alison Carroll, Manager, Asialink, Melbourne, Australia

Artists from South Korea in the first Asia-Pacific Triennial 1993 were Duck-Hyun Cho, Kwan-Soo Kim, Bohn-Chang Koo, Bul Lee, Ok-Sang Lim, Kwan-Wook Park and Sun-Ok U. In the second Triennial 1996, South Korea is represented by: Choi Jeong Hwa, Kim Jong-Hoo, Kim Joon, Kim Myung-Hye and Yun Suk-Nam.

1996 Curatorial Team: Alison Carroll, Soyeon Ahn, David Williams and Christopher Saines.

The Queensland Art Gallery has consolidated its relationship with South Korea with three visits by Director Doug Hall to Seoul and the exhibition of contemporary Australian art 'Australia: Familiar and Strange' at the Seoul Art Centre in 1996, curated by Timothy Morrell of Queensland Art Gallery and managed by Asialink, Melbourne.

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