

X-TRA

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**Park Sang Yu, aka Mo Bahc, aka Bahc Yiso
(1956-2004)**

Yong Soon Min



the next Montmartre of Seoul

UP! UP! UP!

beard papa

슈크 전무점

beard papa com

비어드 파파 이대점

BAR LUNA

all bartenders women

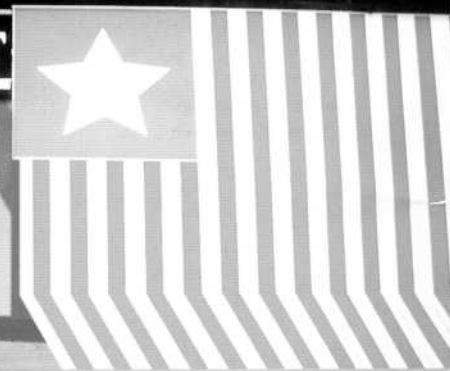
MINI STOP

림픽공원내 체조경기장

004.8.28(7시) ▶ 8.29(6시)



FASTAURANT



Snare, Gi



꽃물 전문점

Only

자연속성 카레전문점

2F

WANT SOME ACTION?



SAN-DIEGO

HOLE AND I DON'T DERSTAND WHO THE BE DOWN IN A HOLE



C O CK S west clu

POSTCARD:

from Seoul

Column by
Allan deSouza

Like Manhattan, but on steroids, Seoul overwhelms the visitor with sensory excess. With its press of strolling crowds, street hawkers, dancing neon and giant video screens, robotic feminine voices whispering instructions and warnings in the subway, there's a Blade Runner hyperbole to the city. Everywhere you turn there's a promise of infinite consumption, often served up by porcelain-skinned, lissome-bodied beauties with identical make-up — that erases any individuality. The city may provide every pleasure, but the labor that goes into it remains guiltily visible. Old men pull overladen carts, women squat outside restaurants peeling mounds of vegetables and kneading vast vats of dough.

Seoul is also highly adept at appropriation, juggling a confusing yet somehow coexisting mélange of signifiers of the U.S. and Europe—particularly England, France and Italy. Languages are jumbled, not to reveal meaning to the outsider, but as encryptions of style and affiliation for the insider, less for the benefit of tourists than for Koreans themselves. Streets are dotted with “Parisian-style” cafes and coffee shops, “Western” bars with names like Texas and Harley; Club Harlem, with a façade banner of Las Vegas; Abbey Road karaoke studios; and the ubiquitous 7-Elevens, Pizza Huts, KFCs and McDonalds. In the neighborhood around Ewha Women's University, there are stores selling UCLA, Princeton and Harvard apparel. There's the Club Cocks, which despite its logo of what look like

anatomical diagrams of how to overcome the gag reflex, is most likely not a dick-sucking club, or even a gay one, for that matter.

Clothing is the canvas on which words break furthest away from the burden of signification, with meaningless phrases or half words adorning t-shirts and jackets. Others leave the English-reader wondering if they really mean what they say; one of my favorites read, “I wish my boyfriend was as dirty as his dirt bike.”

The proliferation of English-language signage has certainly made it easier for me since my last visit here two years ago. Koreans, it was explained to me, once resisted the incursion of English as being a symptom of U.S. imperialism (as exemplified by the Min Joong or People's art movement that peaked in the 1980s), but they now wholeheartedly embrace English as a necessity of globalization.

There may be a more nuanced way to read these words/signs rather than as cases of mistranslation or inherent untranslatability or even as rampant consumerism. Since Koreans revel in wordplay, what may appear wrong or one kind of joke to a foreigner, may to a Korean be another kind of joke. If, as Homi Bhabha suggests, getting a joke may be what defines a community, then “getting” the joke of the untranslatable may be what demarcates an island of Korean-ness within the miasma of globalization.

Apart from Itaewon, a designated tourist zone of Melrose Avenue-type stores and back-street bars catering largely to U.S. GIs — an island of globalization within Korean-ness — it's unusual to see a non-Korean or “foreigner,” as I was rapidly beginning to think of myself. On the rare occasion that I crossed paths with another South Asian (and there are a substantial number here as migrant workers), we would stop to exchange greetings, with the first question to me being the inevitable, “Where are you from?” To keep matters simple I would say that I'm Goan (my history is a little more complex, but it depends on who's asking). My questions to them usually revolved around what brought them to Korea. Origins and destinations.

Once, at a social gathering of Korean artists and curators, going around the room we established that at one time or another, mostly in the late '80s and early '90s, we had each lived in New York, usually to study. Someone remarked that it is Koreans who have kept the American educational system going. Now however, with rising tuition fees and visa restrictions in the U.S., more Koreans are turning to England and Germany, which explained why I came across a number of artists who spoke English with German accents. Origins and destinations, but also transitions.

Another fact about Seoul that once noticed becomes inescapable, is that it is a city mired



Left: Allan deSouza, *Government escorts at Busan Biennale opening with billboard by Bahc Yiso in background*, 2004
 Opposite page: Allan deSouza, *Men in Black*, 2004

in militarization. A mere hour's drive from the border with North Korea and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), at the main train station there was a constant traffic of soldiers, both American and South Korean. With a compulsory two-year draft in operation, the gates to the platforms were jammed with farewell scenes between young boy-soldiers and even younger women. It was like a wartime scene, or at least one from an old war movie. And the sobering thought is that, officially, South Korea is and has been continuously at war with the North since 1950, an armistice having never been signed at the "end" of the Korean War.

Seeing these kids in uniform reminded me of Picasso's 1951 painting, *Massacre In Korea*, in which he — borrowing the format of Degas' *Young Spartans* (1860) — divides the canvas in two, the right side depicting a group of men in battle helmets and wielding swords and guns, the left depicting a huddle of women and children. While Picasso's image condemns the American massacre of over three hundred Korean civilians at No Gun Ri, perhaps it was more Degas' earlier luscious painting, with its naked, lusty young men facing off against a group of young women that I had in mind. As a teenager, I saw it as a perfect rendition of the homoerotic bonding between young men as they face/flee from the chasm with women. The painting's warm, almost pulsing, fleshy tones were a wonderful evocation of hormones both at war and at play. Picasso's update grimly removed all element of play.

I was at the station to catch a bullet train to Busan for the biennale. The train hops through misty mountains (apologies to Led Zep) and lush green valleys. It reminded me of the Korean infatuation with the Irish, and the oft-heard lament of "Danny Boy." All, however, is not as pastoral as it appears. This summer, Seoul was infested with mosquitoes since the bass that normally feed on mosquito larvae have been wiped out by pollution. It's a sharp lesson on the immediate consequences of destroying ecosystems.

At first sight, Busan is not what one imagines as an art center, its resort beachfront primed with imported sand and with more neon per foot than Times Square. Constant complaints by artists about lack of help in installing their work, inability or refusal of staff to carry out artists' requests, lack of information, or simply the feeling that artists were pawns in a game of local politics, weren't conducive to a happy biennale experience.

The exhibition themes, *Point of Contact*, *Chasm* and *Hang In There My Dear Geum-Sun*, sounded so broad or unintelligible that it was difficult to imagine how they might shed light upon the works. The first two themes were immediately forgotten when I entered the exhibition space, with the works themselves being so loosely selected and displayed that the notion of themes became wholly superfluous. Despite sounding like one of those mistranslations I had seen on Seoul t-shirts, the third theme, *Hang In There...*, held interesting possibilities. Premised on a

Korean War-era song about loss, separation and the suffering of women, it is re-interpreted as being about survival and feminism. It sounds very much like a Korean version of *Danny Boy*, aching for an imaginary authenticity and in this case — again, like Ireland — the loss of a unified self, fragmented as it is by the divided nation.

The work that most evoked a sense of loss and longing caused by wartime was *Paramita*, 2004, by the Filipina artist Lani Maestro, who is based in Canada and France. Installed in two adjoining, dimly lit rooms, the work consisted of wall drawings based on renderings by the artist's younger brother of their father's experience in the Korean War. Scratchy, child-like and slight, the drawings and the rooms themselves were permeated with an acute but intimate suffering that had been handed down generationally.

Another installation of rooms that provoked similar responses was *Ashes* by the Nigerian artist (and critic, curator and art historian) Olu Oguibe, who is based in Connecticut. His piece, originally exhibited in New York in 2002, consisted of a series of enclosed spaces, each recreating a room from an apartment blanketed with a thick layer of dust. Given its title, and the date and place of its conception, the obvious reference is to the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Center. The piece is somber, yet delicate in its details; a suit, for example, is laid out on the bed as if the inhabitant had suddenly vanished without even having had the chance

