

Mix it up with Vietnamese and Korean art

By Jean Oh

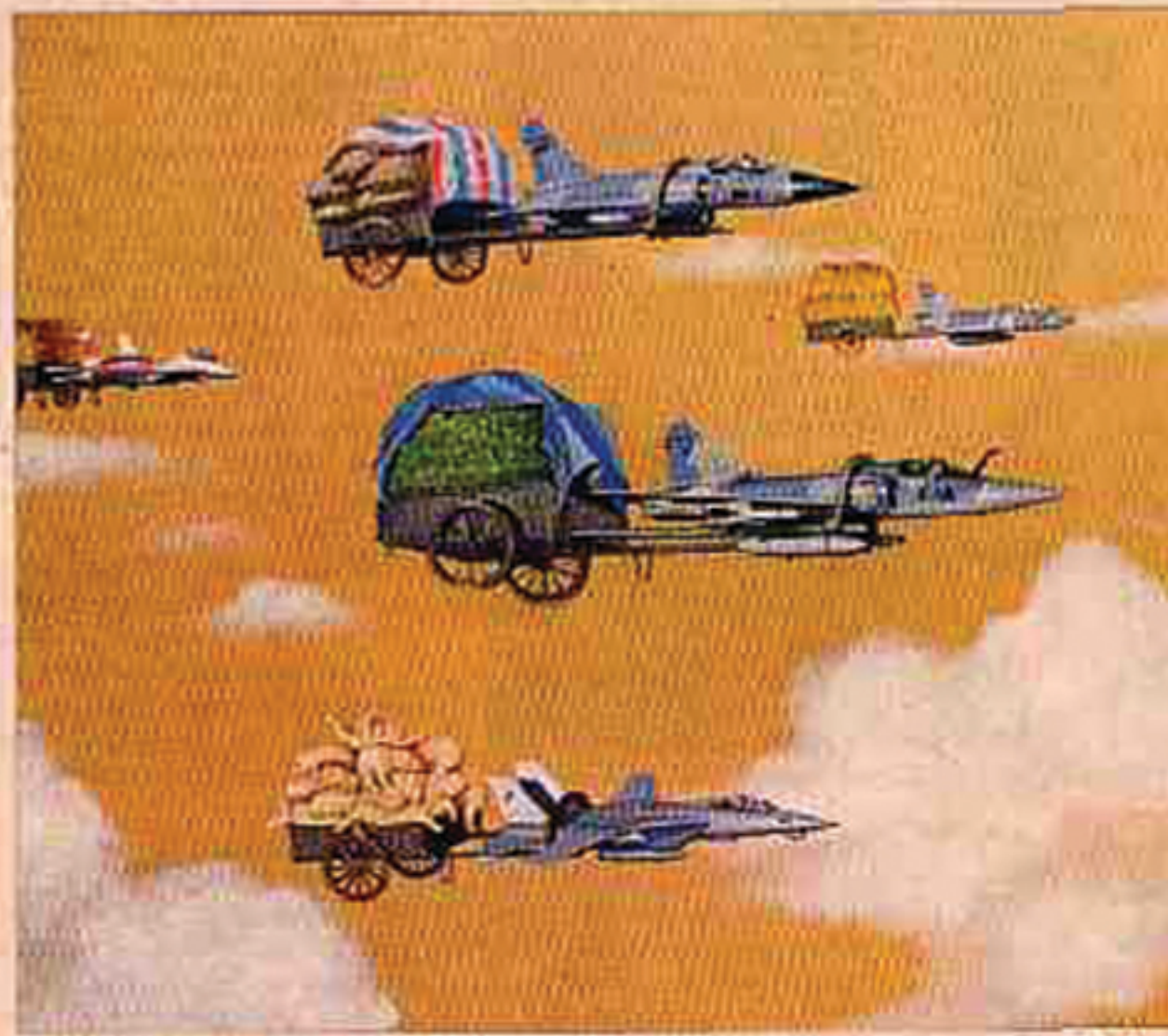
Vietnam and Korea not only shared the trials of the Vietnam War, they also share a history of swift modernization and a hybrid pop culture. In an attempt to reflect on this often overlooked relationship, ARKO Art Center joins with two independent curators from America in their latest exhibition, "transPOP: Korea Vietnam Remix."

An unlikely mix of Vietnamese propaganda films, Korean dramas, and soldiers camouflaged in flowers comes together in this extensive display of art from 16 artists from Vietnam, Korea and each country's respective diasporas in America.

The origins of this strange idea? It all happened over lunch in Los Angeles' Koreatown. Transpop's two curators, Yong Soon-min and Viet Le, brought their heads and cultures together while chowing down, and, voila, the Korea Vietnam Remix was born.

Sitting across from Le and Yong over lunch, yet again, but this time in Korea, not Koreatown, they come across as a bizarre duo. Le is a picture of chic modernity in his sharp outfit and sleek, gravity-defying coif. Yong, with her soft face and flowing clothes, looks earthy and grounded. Just how did the two become friends, let alone, curatorial partners?

But after a bit of chit-chat, it becomes strikingly clear that though they have different styles and different backgrounds, they share similar histories and interests. Both left their countries, Vietnam and Korea, at an early age to immi-



Fighter jets and farm produce meet in Nguyen Manh Hung's ironic painting "Go to Market" (2004).



Boys from North Korea make viewers do a double take in Area Park's "Three-Second Frozen Defectors from North Korea" (2006).

grate to America. And both share a fascination with dramas from their respective countries, with Le growing up on Vietnamese-American TV and Yong becoming addicted to Korean miniseries.

Now the duo has teamed up to create an exhibition of art from both countries, in a demonstration of their relationship and of the overreaching connection that Vietnam and Korea have had in the past and continue to have today.

"Both Korea and Vietnam share this incredible sense of compressed modernity," said Yong, citing Korean involve-

ment in the Vietnam War, both countries' speedy economic development, and the powerful influence of the "Korean Wave" on Vietnam as key factors in the two countries' shared history.

And now the two countries can also share art through the coordinated efforts of Yong, Le and the ARKO Art Center.

But don't expect this exhibition to be a mishmash of Korean and Vietnamese art. Each work stands apart. Each work is independent of the other, reflecting the culture, nationality and creative impulses of its artist. What cultural connections they have to one another are subtle

and faint, and can only be felt after viewing the whole exhibition.

Only then do the themes start to blend inside the viewer's mind — the subjects of war, refugees and modernization, at once similar to each other and yet also distinctively Korean and Vietnamese.

Vietnamese-American artist Tiffany Chung demonstrates the powerful influence of Korea's pop culture over Vietnam in her video "Lam Truong" (2007). In Chung's work, Lam Truong, Vietnam's biggest pop icon, prunes about the stage, bolting out Vpop music. From afar, he

could pass for a Korean pop star, and indeed, according to Chung, Lam is famed for his covers of K-pop songs.

On a more subtle note, Korean artist Oh Yong-seok pokes fun at cultural memory through his Drama series. Montages of Korean landscapes, taken from Korean films and dramas, are patched together with real video footage to create a complete, moving image of each location. Familiar yet fragmented film and drama scenes repeat over and over again in various corners of the screen, before getting abruptly cut off by real footage of the lakes and

fields of Korea.

Oh's works bring to mind the hoards of Asian tourists who visit places where Korean dramas such as "Winter Sonata" and "Jewel in the Palace" were filmed, indirectly emphasizing the influence the "Korean Wave" has on Asia.

While Oh and Chung focus on pop culture, artists Nguyen Manh Hung and Area Park explore the ironic effects of war and modernization on Vietnam and Korea.

Vietnamese artist Nguyen Manh Hung melds war and produce in his painting, "Go to Market" (2004). In this colorful

work, primer grey fighter jets tote carts full of hay, vegetables and slaughtered pigs. The juxtaposition of local produce in traditional carts and the modern and symbolic fighter jets really play on the way Vietnam is stereotypically perceived as a rural and backward country devastated by a horrific war.

Hung's "Building" (2004) takes a more internal look at economic development in Vietnam. Traditional country houses are stacked on top of each other to create a high-rise apartment in this social commentary on Vietnam's rapidly changing culture.

Korean photographer Area Park's works make viewers do a double take. In his "Three-Second Frozen Defectors from North Korea" (2006), three teenage boys lean against a tree on a busy sidewalk. But these boys aren't just your average joes. They are defectors from North Korea.

In their sneakers, shorts and t-shirts, they blend right in, testimony to the power of modernization and pop culture. But once the viewer discovers their true identities, memories of the Korean War flood the brain. The boys are no longer just boys. They are North Koreans, proving that the past cannot be erased or forgotten. Tradition and history, despite modernization, remain embedded in society.

"transPOP: Korea Vietnam Remix" runs through Feb. 29 at ARKO Art Center. Tickets cost 2,000 won for adults and 1,000 won for children and students. To get there, go to Hyeohwa Subway Station, Line 4, Exit 2. For more information, call (02) 760-4599 or visit art.arko.or.kr

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