

Artists of the North Korean Mansudae Art Studio in galerie son

Only a few steps away from the North Korean embassy, galerie son is exhibiting from the end of August a small selection of works by some of the most renowned artists of the Mansudae Art Studio of North Korea. The paintings and prints were chosen in Pyongyang and show a variety of styles and techniques in dealing with the subject of landscape, which has become very popular with the Mansudae-artists since the Seventies. Water, be it the sea, a lake, river or waterfall, plays a central role in most of the works, as does the mountainous Korean landscape. The association of artists Mansudae should not at all be understood as a variant of the Chinese artists' village Dafen, which produces copies of paintings on an industrial scale. Although the Mansudae Art Studio also produces "utilitarian" art – for example official sculptures and paintings that are often commissioned from Africa – it is at the same time a pool of about 1.000 artists working individualistically, who have gone through a long period of training and demanding studies. This exhibition is the first step in a long-term project of galerie son, which intends to bring a few North Korean artists to work over a longer period of time in Berlin. Later, an exchange is intended to take place with South Korean artists, a rapprochement similar to the one that took place between artists from East and West Germany after the fall of the Wall: an approach in the field of art as a small miracle!



Against our expectations of North Korean art, the works in the exhibition show a picture of complete normality. Thus, KIM Myong Un shows Pyongyang in evening mood, full of shimmering lights at the border of the river Taedong and resembling both fin-de-siècle Paris with its bridges overspanning the Seine, and a contemporary Asian megacity. In the background, a skyscraper in the form of a paintbrush can be seen that represents the Chuch'e ideology of Kim Il Sung.

Herein artists have the task of creating art with a content matter understandable to the masses and embodying the ideas of Socialism and community. The Chuch'e ideology integrated the intellectuals in the process of moving the nation forward: the emblem of the Korean Worker's Party shows the paintbrush beside the hammer and sickle.

Within such an ideology, abstract art is not acceptable. But particularly in the representation of water, painters are able to create big surfaces that integrate both the virtuosity of realistic depiction and the zest of the abstract. This becomes specially evident in the oilpainting by KIM Song Gun showing a seashore landscape with water masses wildly rising before a background of jagged rock formations belonging to the Kungang-mountains, which look as if they are collapsing due to the impact of the water. The representation of little seagulls in the foreground further emphasizes the quality of water as a powerful force of nature. Whether this force is a metaphore for the regime or just a representation of the passing of time is left to the viewer. This picture is a variant of a painting by the same artist, which was often used as a background for official photographs of politicians, like when Bill Clinton came on an official visit in 2009. The Wall Street Journal's reporter Eric Gibson condemned it all to quickly as "totalitarian kitsch". But even he noticed that "the waves were bigger than the figures



posing for the photograph, and they dominated the foreground as if ready to break out and drown the assembled dignitaries.”

Many of the Mansudae artists still work in traditional Asian techniques that have a long tradition. There will be woodcuts on show, and also the *chonsunhua* or “brush-and-ink” technique, which in Korea always was a bit bolder than in China. A special aesthetical allure is unfolded in the woodcuts of HONG Chun Ung.



He shows two depictions of Mount Baekdu in all its majesty and gravity: the mountain seen from far away, and the lake within its snowy edged crater. The unusual colours shine like lacquer, a specificity of Korean woodcut.

The Baekdusan (“san” meaning mount) has a great symbolic value both for North and South Korea, since it is seen as a sacred place where the origin of the Korean nation lies. Here is where the first kingdom of Gojoseon was founded in 2333 BC. Also the following dynasties revered the mountain, and even North Koreans still mystified it in a Socialistic way by emphasizing it as the location from where resistance against the Japanese took place and as the birthplace of Kim Jong Il. Through the vicissitudes of history, this mountain and its craterlake are now divided by a border and belong half to North Korea and half to China.

The art historian Michel Poivert wrote about the Mansudae artists: “we witness humanity rising visibly to the surface through the softness of bodies and attitudes, seemingly rejecting all these enduring images of authority in its heart of hearts”. Perhaps that’s why we perceive the artists in this exhibition as being nearest to us and most modern precisely when they are working in the softer and more traditional way. And we are granted an insight into a world in which artists work under utterly different conditions.

Text: Verena Alves-Richter

LANDSCAPES FROM PYONGYANG

exhibition 25 August – 29 September 2012
OPENING Saturday 25 August 2012 at 17:00

Part of LONG NIGHT OF THE MUSEUMS on Saturday 25 August 2012 from 6pm - 2am
Tickets fro the Long Night 18 / 12 €

galerie son

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