

Chaotic Harmony opens window for Korean photography

By DOUGLAS BRITT Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

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Courtesy of th Ahn Sekwon Triptych from the series Seoul New Town (Lights of Weolgok-dong, 2005; Disappearing Lights of Weolgok-dong I, 2006; and Disappearing Lights of Weolgok-dong II, 2007).

Resources

CHAOTIC HARMONY: CONTEMPORARY KOREAN PHOTOGRAPHY

- **When:** Friday through Jan. 3.
- **Where:** Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1001 Bissonnet; 713-639-7300.

South Korea's capital city, Seoul, has grown from a million people in 1945 to more than 10 million people today.

Contemporary Korean art has exploded at a similar pace but in less time, since the end of Japanese rule after World War II was followed by decades of repressive dictatorship.

Korean photography has developed especially rapidly, spurred by the country's belated but swift industrialization, the accompanying rise of information technology, the return of democratic rule in 1987, greater exposure to the outside world and eased travel restrictions.

Now a new exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, *Chaotic Harmony: Contemporary Korean Photography*, spotlights two generations of artists, with an emphasis on work made since 2000. Since Anne Wilkes Tucker, the Gus and Lyndall Wortham Curator of Photography at the MFAH, and Karen Sinsheimer, photography curator at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in California, began planning the show, it's undergone a growth spurt of its own.

As Tucker and Sinsheimer reviewed the photographers they'd discovered during the course of two FotoFest exhibitions and three visits each to Korea, "we ended up with 40 artists, and there are still a couple that I'm really sorry we didn't put in," Tucker says, adding that they had to expand the show beyond its gallery in the first floor of the Beck Building to the hallway downstairs.

"There was adding artists, but also, between when the show was conceived and when we started implementing it, the artists were printing bigger and bigger," she says. "Now they can, and they do. We actually asked all of them to stay below 30-by-40 inches, because they wanted 40-by-50."

While Tucker and Sinsheimer don't intend for the show to be about "Korean-ness," issues of national identity — "what it means to be Korean, whether it matters whether you're Korean" — loom large and distinguish Korean photography from that made in other Asian countries, Tucker says.

"For the Japanese, particularly, there's a much clearer sense of what it means to be Japanese," she says.

Additionally, "the sheer anxiety of North Korea is constant and is real for (South Koreans), now, with the potential nuclear bomb, so that was something that we became aware of" as influencing the mood of work like Seung Woo Back's *Real World 2* series, in which toy soldiers invade private spaces in Seoul, Tucker says.

Something South Korea has in common with other Asian countries is that it's been transformed by urbanization and globalization almost overnight. The rapid changes are reflected in its photography. The handful of works in the show made

before 2000 — the earliest photograph, *Kyung ju* by Bae Bien-U, dates from 1985 and depicts an ancient pine grove — focus on nature and landscape, while the work of the newer generation reflects the fact young Koreans were overwhelmingly born in cities. That's a seismic shift in a country that was, until recently, mostly agrarian and poor.

While Sinsheimer's grandmother saw “the telephone and the car and the airplane and the television and computers” emerge over the course of a lifetime, Koreans have experienced such changes in a much more compressed time, she says.

“You go from no phone to a cell phone,” Sinsheimer says. “You go from no communication to global access.”

Additionally, the lifting of travel restrictions has opened Korean photographers to outside influences. Seventeen of the featured artists have earned undergraduate or graduate degrees abroad, typically in New York, London, Germany or Japan.

Tucker and Sinsheimer organized *Chaotic Harmony* after noticing that *Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists From Korea*, which travels to the MFAH next month from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, didn't include photographers. The companion shows aim to open a window on a growing but rarely explored area of contemporary art.

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