

## Stitching Across the Korean Peninsula

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page 1 of 2

### Art



ABOVE AND BOTTOM, TIM FRANCO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

# Stitching Across the Korean Peninsula

Kyungah Ham employs embroiderers in the North.

By DAVID SEGAL

SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA — Growing up here in the 1970s, Kyungah Ham would occasionally find propaganda leaflets sent from North Korea via helium balloons. Like her classmates, Ms. Ham turned in the leaflets at school, where she was given a reward for doing a small part in South Korea's simmering ideological war with its neighbor.

In 2008, when Ms. Ham found another North Korean leaflet — this one under the gate of her parents' home — it felt like an alien object, blown in from another planet.

By then, she was a multimedia artist who had come to distrust much of the history she'd been taught, and she knew that South Koreans were sending leaflets of their own over the border. That got her wondering: Could she communicate directly with people who, through a geopolitical tragedy now 65 years old, she is forbidden to contact?

It was the birth of what may be the art world's most extraordinary, ongoing collaboration.

For a decade, Ms. Ham has been producing designs on her computer that are printed and smuggled into North Korea through intermediaries based in Russia or China. Then a group of anonymous artisans, whom she has never met or spoken to, are paid to convert them into embroideries, using exquisitely fine stitching. With bribes and subterfuge, the works are smuggled back out. Ultimately, they are shown and sold at galleries and exhibitions.

The most ambitious pieces are large-scale renderings of luminous, glittering chandeliers, some nearly 12 feet wide and nine feet high, that from a distance look like photographs set against black backdrops. Get closer, and a filigree of stitches appear. Both chandelier and backdrop were being painstakingly composed of silk thread.

On one level, her embroideries are an attempt to reunite through art people who were forcibly separated in 1953 through war. The work marries the strength of the South (technology) to the strength of the North (craftsmanship), and it is confected through a hazard-filled maze.

A lot of artists talk about taking risks, but few mean it as literally as Ms. Ham. International sanctions prohibit commerce with the Hermit Kingdom, so at least theoretically, she could face criminal prosecution for these cash-for-work transactions.

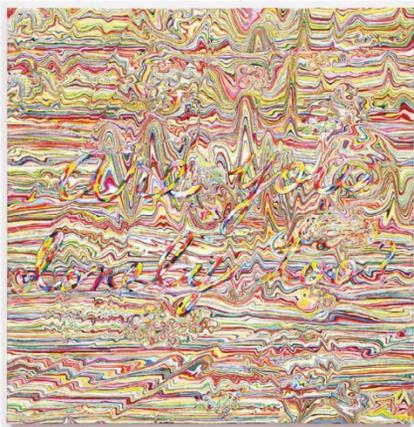
The potential penalties for her collaborators are far graver. If caught, these residents of the world's most repressive government could be imprisoned or executed. The dangers facing the North Koreans raise ethical issues that, intended or otherwise, become part of Ms. Ham's work.

"With Kyungah's work, it's difficult to separate the object from the process of making the object," said Rosalie Kim, at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which acquired one of Ms. Ham's embroideries in 2016. "The risk isn't the point, but the risk emphasizes the consequences of the separation of the peninsula and what is at stake in trying to overcome it."

Ms. Ham protects the covert network in her employ with a spymaster's care, and would not discuss the size of the lump sums that cover the cost of intermediaries, artisans and bribes. But she hides neither her artwork nor the basics of her methods. The Embroidery Project, as she calls it, has been part of museum group shows in London, Vienna and Singapore, and wall labels beside each piece succinctly explain how it was made.

"North Korean Hand Embroidery," reads one. "Silk threads on cotton, midsized, anxiety, censorship, ideology, wooden frame, approx. 2200 hours/2 persons."

On first meeting, Ms. Ham seems wildly miscast for the role she has created for her-



Top, Kyungah Ham in her storage room in Seoul, South Korea, where she displays the embroidery made by anonymous artisans in North Korea, following her designs. Middle row, from left, part of what Ms. Ham calls her "SMS Series in Camouflage," and a large-scale rendering of a luminous, glittering chandelier. Above, Ms. Ham in her storage facility.

self. She would be the first to admit that she is lousy at coping with stress, a permanent feature of her life. Once, on a flight to meet an intermediary, she collapsed with a stomach ailment so painful and severe that as soon as she landed, she was put on a plane back to Seoul and admitted to a hospital.

If her nerves are fragile, other parts are made of steel. During interviews in both Paris and Seoul in recent months, she was adamant and particular about nearly everything. Before dinner at a brasserie, she rejected three different tables offered by a host. (Her final choice, it must be said, was superior to the others.) She issued demands about virtually every aspect of this article, including who would photograph her.

And though an introvert by nature, once she overcomes her natural shyness, she is bursting with words.

"If we take it step by step," she said with a smile in our first meeting, preparing to describe her life, "this will take five hours."

As Ms. Ham explained, her chandeliers are a symbol of the foreign powers that divided Korea along the 38th Parallel after three years of fighting the Korean War. (The golden age of those powers passed, she said, which is why these chandeliers are either falling or already on the ground.) The border was largely imposed on the peninsula by non-Koreans; Ms. Ham's favorite word to describe this fact is "absurd." As she conceived her embroideries, she was inspired by a moment in a documentary about the Mass Games, Pyongyang's socialist-realist extravaganza of tightly choreographed music, dance and gymnastics.



LEFT AND ABOVE, SOON TWUNG PARK

The production includes a crowd, thousands of people strong, holding flip books in front their faces with blocks of colors on each page. The pages are turned in uncanny timed unison, a vast human billboard of seamlessly changing words and images.

Ms. Ham watched and saw the face of a boy peeking over his color book. "He was like a pixel in a digital image," she said. "I wanted to bring this idea to my chandeliers. Behind them are highly skilled embroidery workers, whom you can't see, but they memorialize themselves, stitch by stitch."

Pieces typically come back folded up in black plastic bags, reeking of cigarette smoke. Her first move is to hang up the work and air it out. The round trip to and from North Korea can take as long as a year, a process she likens to shouting from a mountain top and hearing her voice 12 months later.

Ms. Ham is not idle while she waits, and the embroideries are just one facet of a varied career. Since earning an M.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts in New York, in 1995, she has been making videos, sculptures, photographs and an assortment of installations. One recurring impulse is to highlight the ways power is abused, and for whatever reason, she is drawn to methods that give her art a voice.

With an installation called "Museum Display," in 2010, theme and practice were combined. She has long been irked by the many Western museums filled with cultural treasures from other countries — think of the Elgin marbles, originally part of the Parthenon in Greece, which have spent the

**"I wanted to tell these artisans, 'I'm sorry about the situation.'"**

last 200 years in the British Museum. With wit and irony, Ms. Ham pilloried this tradition by stealing hundreds of mundane objects from museums around the world, including forks, saucers, knives, vases, salt and pepper shakers. She then displayed them in a huge glass case, under lights, labeling each item with the gravity befitting a looted masterpiece.

"Sign. These doors are alarmed; 10cm x 10 cm, the British Museum, 2009," reads one.

Her other great passion is connecting to strangers, and the Embroidery Project is an expression of that urge. Among the first images she conceived for her artisans were stylized words, rendered in both Korean and English, and set against abstract and colorful designs. One simply read "I'm sorry" in the two languages.

"I wanted to tell these artisans, 'I'm sorry about the situation,'" she said. "I am sorry

about what history has done to us."

Later, she began what she calls the "SMS Series in Camouflage," in which she weaves faint words, in script, into almost psychedelic oil slicks of color. One of these not-so-secret messages reads "Big Smile," an instruction for performers during the Mass Games. When a galleryist urged her to employ embroiderers in China, arguing it would be far quicker and easier, she felt misunderstood enough to create a new message: "Are you lonely, too?"

Many early works were confiscated by North Korean authorities, on the way in or out of the country. She has gone through several intermediaries, one of whom simply took her money, and has gradually found ways to work with standout artisans, using a code to convey her admiration for certain pieces. The result is a rarity — conceptual art in which the finished product is every bit as compelling as the concept itself.

"There are a lot of beautiful things you can buy at Art Basel, and there are a lot of clever conceptual strategies out there," said Roger Buegel, the German-born art director of the 2012 Busan Biennale, which featured work by Ms. Ham. "She unites these two poles in a singular way. The pieces themselves are spectacular."

Though she has given interviews in the past, she spent months wavering about whether to speak to *The New York Times*. Friends have told her, "Don't get too famous." Citing fatigue, she stopped answering texted questions a few weeks ago, including one about the summit between President Trump and Kim Jong-un in Singapore last month. Would a rapprochement change — or even end — her project?

After a long silence, she sent a text a few days ago that said that if North Korea joined the brotherhood of nations, her work would be reinterpreted in a new political context and, she wrote, "stay alive in history."

Today, her pieces sell for prices ranging from \$25,000 to \$300,000 in the Carlier Gebauer Gallery in Berlin and the Kukje Gallery in Seoul. But the largest collection of her work is in her storage facility outside Seoul. During a visit in February, Ms. Ham offered a tour of what is little more than a large and bare room, with embroideries neatly stacked against each other on the floor.

Ms. Ham roamed around the space beaming. She is somewhat ambivalent about parting with her chandeliers, especially if they are just going to hang on someone's wall. Her preference is to lend pieces to exhibitions, or sell them to museums, where the largest possible audience can consider their improbable journey and marvel at their virtuosity.

"I don't tell the galleries about everything I have," she said with a grin, "because they will sell it."