

## **With *Graphic Novel: A (North) Korean Story*, Song Byeok's Bombastic Paintings Are on Full Display**

*The exhibition concludes this weekend at Lost Origins Gallery.*

BY KRISTON CAPPS — FEB 19, 2020 8 AM



**Song Byeok**  
*CHARLES YOOK*

**Song Byeok's** work isn't subtle. The artist's bombastic paintings skewer world leaders, nationalism, and demagoguery with blunt images that read like political cartoons. He depicts **Kim Jong-un**, the dictator of North Korea, dancing with other world leaders in dresses, including U.S. President **Donald Trump** and South Korean President **Moon Jae-in**, as if Kim were **Fred Astaire** and those other leaders were different versions of **Ginger Rogers**.

Today, the artist's medium is satire. But for years, he produced propaganda in North Korea, his native home. Song learned the visual language that he now uses to lambast Kim's regime by making paintings that lionized the Kim family. Nearly a decade ago, when I first met Song, I showed him a book of North Korean propaganda posters that I happened to own. He thumbed through the book, dog-eared the pages with designs that belonged to him.

*Graphic Novel: A (North) Korean Story*, a show of Song's latest paintings and drawings on view in Mount Pleasant's Lost Origins Gallery, underscores the artist's new mission: embarrassing Kim Jong-un and exposing the awful conditions that North Koreans suffer under his rule. The work, like the message, is blunt. Yet there is also a sensitive subcurrent to *Graphic Novel*, an exhibition that showcases an artist whose life has been framed by art and all its possibilities, from subjugation to liberation.

"For the past 70 years, a whole nation of people has been suffering," Song says, through a translator. "And they continue to suffer because of Kim Jong-un now."

The artist was born in Hwanghae-do, North Korea, where he worked for the state as an official propaganda artist. Song would receive instructions each morning for the message that officials wanted him to convey or reproduce. Images on view at Lost Origins sometimes play directly on the propaganda that he produced in North Korea. "Unforgivable" (2019) revisits a design that Song first made for the DPRK that showed the enemies of North Korea smashed under the fist of a soldier. In "Unforgivable," it's Kim Jong-un who's being crushed under fist.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, North Korea experienced a prolonged and brutal famine. Song says that his family made long treks into the mountains for food, surviving by foraging, even resorting to eating tree bark, and that he watched his mother and a sister die from starvation. He attempted his first escape, across a river with his father at the Chinese border, in 2000; his father drowned and Song was captured.

For four months, the artist was detained in the Hoeryong concentration camp. From 5 a.m. to 10 p.m., he was enslaved, he says, and his captors severed the index finger on his dominant right hand. "They let me leave [the concentration camp]," Song says. "At that point, I was a skeleton." (After he recuperated, Song says he made his second attempt on the river and escaped in 2001; he went on to receive his formal education in South Korea, and the artist now lives in Frankfurt, Germany.)

Sometimes the work that Song produced in North Korea points to the closed-off worldview he was responsible for constructing as an artist. One image from the dog-eared poster book depicts a young man in a suit and tie holding up a banner on a flagpole and a book about the state's central religious and ideological text ("Juche"). Text on the banner reads "Invincible! Our-Style Socialism," a reference to the way that North Korea branded its post-Soviet future—even as famine swept the country, taking millions of lives.

Two spare drawings at Lost Origins, “Escape” and “A Hard Life” (both 2019), point to the years of famine and struggle. With his new work, Song is examining this subject matter directly. “Northern Life” (2017) is an aching book of drawings on paper pages, folded accordion style. Pages depict an intercontinental ballistic missile test as well as Kim addressing an unseen crowd alongside quiet landscape scenes of the countryside. Bright acrylics used for the missile draw a sharp contrast with the overcast tones of the mountains and people going about simple chores.

The dream of unifying the Koreas is a persistent theme in the show. “Wish” (2016) shows two children ducking under a broad fig leaf to stay out of the rain. Both the grinning kids are missing a tooth—on opposite sides of their smiles—suggesting that they are a complimentary pair. Another drawing in acrylic called “Division” (2017) depicts two pairs of feet under a blanket. A curving line divides the blanket (and the couple) in the same pattern as the red-and-blue Taegeuk at the center of the South Korean flag.

“This was a nation that was divided against their will,” says **Christina Young**, a D.C.–based curator who assembled *Graphic Novel* with co-curator **Charles Yook**. Young, whose mother was born in North Korea before the war and partition, says that young Koreans and Korean Americans don’t feel the urgent plight of unification. “It feels so far away.”

Artists in Korea and the District may grow closer than ever this year. D.C. arts incubator Transformer is sending four artists to Seoul in late May, through a grant from the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities. The Sister Cities program will facilitate an exchange with Art Space Pool, a nonprofit contemporary arts program based in Seoul. Transformer’s director, **Victoria Reis**, notes that the gallery has taken 10 trips to cities abroad, visits that have helped artists establish fruitful relationships with other galleries around the world.

Another local arts nonprofit, International Arts & Artists, is also sending artists from the District on a mission to Korea. Through the organization’s gallery program, Hillyer, two local artists will travel to Seoul and teach workshops at Korea National University of Arts in March. The group will be joined by **Virginia Moon**, assistant curator of Korean art at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and **Adriel Luis**, a curator with the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, plus other dignitaries.

Then, early this summer, Hillyer is partnering with the Korean Cultural Center and the National Museum of Asian Art’s Korean Film Festival on an exhibit of video art from Korea. “We are still in the development phase of most of the programs, but one will be a look at Korean immigrants and first-generation Korean Americans’ influence on the D.C. arts and culture scene,” says **Allison Nance**, director for IA&A at Hillyer.

Disclosure: This writer has a separate-but-related program in the works. I’m curating an exhibit for the Korean Cultural Center, which is the cultural attache for the Korean Embassy, this June.

Song has more things planned for D.C., too. Lost Origins founder **Jason Hamacher** and the curators behind *Graphic Novel* are working to arrange a speaking opportunity for the artist at the Asian Reading Room at the Library of Congress. And the curators hope to show pastoral landscape from the artist’s home—works that have never been seen before.

Mournful paintings of the mountainside might seem like a bracing juxtaposition with Song's clever pop artifacts. Consider the wooden chopsticks with Kim's face painted over the part that diners have to split in half, for example. Bitter humor and sorrow, Song says, are both ways to communicate han, an untranslatable word related to grief and an essential concept in Korean identity.

In a sense, Song is still producing propaganda. Instead of communicating one leader's ideas to a captive audience of millions, the artist is turning the lens around, in an effort to show Kim Jong-un what the world thinks of him. The sharper jabs in Song's satire are meant for just one viewer.

"He's going to see this," Song says, referring to Kim. "I want to show him: You're not a god. You're just you."

*Graphic Novel: A (North) Korean Story is on view to Feb. 23 at Lost Origins Gallery, 3110 Mount Pleasant St. NW.*