

Press release

Kyungah Ham | *Abstract, Poetry Weapon / Soccer Painting by soccer ball bouncing over Crocodile River*

21.06.-27.07.2019

Opening: Thursday, 20 June, 2019, 6-9 pm

carlier | gebauer, Madrid, is pleased to present a solo exhibition by South Korean artist Kyungah Ham. This exhibition will include works from the artist's SMS series as well as a video installation, *Soccer Painting by the Soccer Ball Bouncing Over Crocodile River*.

The SMS series is part of an ongoing embroidery project by Kyungah Ham. The series involves a process in which a message to anonymous North Korean embroidery workers, camouflaged with a digitally manipulated image, gets sent to North Korea. Followed by an unforeseeable period of waiting determined by various external factors including censorship, loss, and travel across the border, the embroiderers' response, interweaved stitch by stitch in the form of an embroidery, returns to the artist's care. The camouflaged images reflect the process of deconstruction Ham has undertaken to disguise the original image she has collected and the details they contain consist of visual messages in a highly abstracted form.

Soccer Painting by the Soccer Ball Bouncing Over Crocodile River was first shown as part of the project for Korea Artist Prize at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea in 2016. Produced in collaboration with a young football player who has escaped North Korea by crossing the Crocodile River in Laos, the work visualizes many invisible vestiges of his experience as a defector seeking asylum, including his movement, energy, emotions, and fleeting time. In this project, the experience that remains indecipherable and undefinable yet is very much part of the young boy's existence is ultimately visualized through the materiality of the paint.

The most ambitious artistic experiment by Ham for Korea Artist Prize was to envision how to convert the production fund awarded by SBS Foundation, the co-organizer and sponsor of the exhibition, to the biggest value possible. For Unrealized the Real: 29,543+1 person, 909,084 km, 15,000 US dollar, Ham has donated the entire production subsidy to the cause of supporting North Korean refugees' escape across the border, while simultaneously attempting to video document the moment of condensed tension and extrasensory experience throughout the process. The project unfortunately failed to realize due to the political tension and subsequent sense of terror and unrest it stirred among the participants. In the end, only the voice recording that charted a secretive dialogue between the refugee brokers was exhibited in a screen monitor behind a firmly closed shutter door installed in the exhibition space. The reality as evidenced by the predicted failure of the project and the visual spectacle created by the movement of the young boy's soccer ball who has crossed over from death to life exist together like two sides of a coin. The paradoxical outcome of the project echoes Ham's embroidery works in that both projects visualize a façade of reality that is part of our presence but remains invisible.

One major aspect that persists throughout Ham's work is an element of danger—just like the Crocodile River that must be crossed for life—that exists between the artist's attempt to reveal the hidden reality and the failure to do so. Ham's other previous projects have unfolded with conscious awareness of these dangers. As Ham has often noted, if the role of a visual artist is to bring the invisible reality to the surface, the reality as observed by the artist and the reality of her works must be inevitably linked and interweaved with one another, and so is the ambivalent relationship between the microscopic and the macroscopic and an individual and the system he or she belongs to. In such ways, the fragments of camouflaged details in the SMS series and the layers of colorful splashes of paint left by a bouncing soccer ball create a collective whisper that tells a story of a time spent in struggle with each stroke as an evidence of its existence.

Kyungah Ham (b. 1966, Seoul) received her BFA from the Seoul National University and MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York. She has participated in exhibitions in South Korea and internationally, including at the Kunstmuseum Bonn; Kunsthalle Düsseldorf; Charlottenborg Exhibition Hall, Copenhagen, Denmark; and the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Austria. Her work can be found in numerous public collections, among them, Victoria & Albert Museum; Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul; MMCA, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea; and the Seoul Museum of Art.