

ALL THAT IS **BANNED** IS DESIRED

Background articles related to the first World Conference on Artistic Freedom of Expression



Sun Mu – the faceless painter

Sun Mu is not his actual name. It's a *nom de plume* that uses a combination of two Korean words that translate to 'The Absence of Borders'. It not only represents what he feels is the transcendence of art but also the literal military demarcation line that keeps the Korean people separated.

BY JASON STROTHER • OCTOBER 2012

THE RAIN had just stopped falling when I arrived at Sun Mu's small art studio atop an old industrial building in one of Seoul's western districts. His wife, Jeong and their two daughters, ages 5 and 2, had dropped by and stayed awhile longer to avoid the unpleasant weather.

Standing inside the studio, we're surrounded by stacks of vividly colored paintings: some depicting smiling schoolchildren, another the silhouettes of dancers colored in blood-red and hanging on the back wall. a portrait of the late North Korean ruler Kim Jong-il.

Some of these images, while out of place if not illegal in democratic South Korea, reflect Sun Mu's life story. It's a complicated history that stretches back to his childhood in North Korea.

"When I saw Kim Il Sung on TV being pleased with the writings and paintings of little kids, I was really impressed. I wanted him to pat me on the back. I wanted his praise," Sun Mu said. "I wanted him to like me too."

Sun Mu has not seen his family since late 1990s. Even though his hometown would be just a few hours drive from where he lives now, it might as well be on another planet. As a defector from one of the world's most repressive nations, Sun Mu can never go back.

Separated by the landmine filled DMZ since the end of the fratricidal Korean War in 1953, travel between the two nations is all but forbidden. There is no phone or postal service. And given the state of tensions now on the peninsula, there appears to be no change on the horizon.

Sun Mu's story is not of a man whose questioning of the system led him to seek freedom. Unlike in George Orwell's novel 1984, Sun Mu did not come to a revelation that what he had grown up believing was all a lie. Instead he like most of the other 23,000 North Koreans that now call South Korea home, never actually intended to leave his family for good.

When Sun Mu arrived in Seoul in 2002, he only knew one thing: how to paint. He had been trained as a propaganda artist back in the North and didn't want to give up his trade, even though he was unsure how he could make this style relevant in his new surroundings. After time, he realised that same motif he once used to glorify North Korea's leaders on banners and posters back home could be used to create an ironic critique of the same men he once worshiped like gods.

"In North Korea art exists to promote political propaganda. And North Koreans exist to promote the regime. Now my mission is to describe how life is for North Koreans, how painful it is through art."

Since his first exhibition in 2007, Sun Mu has gained international recognition. He's been invited to present his work at galleries in Germany and Australia. Of all his works, the portraits of his former ruler Kim Jong-il, dressed in colorful track suits, have brought him perhaps the most attention.

Making something like that would have been unthinkable back home.

"You don't even need to go to a court, you are executed right away," Sun Mu said while gliding his hand across his throat. "If you play with the face of the leader, you are done."



'The Faceless Painter'

Sun Mu is not his actual name. It's a *nom de plume* that uses a combination of two Korean words that translate to 'The Absence of Borders'. It not only represents what he feels is the transcendence of art but also the literal military

demarcation line that keeps the Korean people separated. But it's not only for artistic effect that he goes by this handle: it's to protect the people he left behind.

South Korean media dubbed Sun Mu 'The Faceless Painter'. That's because he refuses to have pictures taken of him straight on. He's worried that if his real name and image gets back to the North Korean authorities, his family will be punished for his crimes. And whenever showing his artwork at galleries, Sun Mu pulls a brimmed cotton hat down over his face.

"It covers my face just enough. I've been wearing it since my first exhibition. I do it out of concern for my family in North Korea," he said.

Sun Mu's fear for the safety of his loved ones is not without reason. For decades North Korea has implemented a three-generations rule that punishes a law-breakers' entire family if the crime is seen as an affront to the state. Defection alone is punishable by death. Sun Mu's new career as a critic of the regime would without doubt be regarded as one of the most treacherous of offenses.

Although he goes to great lengths to conceal his face, Sun Mu is a handsome man in his late 30s. Sun Mu can look very stern one moment, but when a smile begins to form his face illuminates. His wide smile reveals a boyish charm, which considering what he's been through, might seem amazing.

But as Sun Mu explains, no matter what the circumstance, all North Koreans know how to smile.



Smiling for the Great Leader

"She is smiling too much. It's an organised and fake smile."

For six decades, the Kim family has ruled North Korea with an iron fist. At the end of World War II the Soviets, who ceded control of the northern half of the peninsula, chose the guerilla fighter Kim Il Sung to lead the newly formed Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the nation's official name. Kim would go on to launch the

surprise attack in June 1950 that ignited the 3-year long Korean War. Millions of Koreans from both sides lost their lives and tens of thousands of families are still divided today. Combat only ended in a cease-fire agreement.

A personality cult was formed around Kim. He was credited with single handedly driving away the Japanese in 1945 after their 35-year colonisation of Korea as well as successfully keeping the imperialist Americans at bay with their puppets in South Korea. Kim became known as the Great Leader and father of the Korean race. The same cult of personality has been inherited by his son Kim Jong-il and grandson, North Korea's new leader Kim Jong-un. Sun Mu was not unlike any other child growing up in the DPRK.

Sun Mu recalls drawing pictures of flowers and bamboo trees as a child. His family and teachers noticed he had a knack for painting. By age 12, Sun Mu was chosen to receive special guidance from his elementary school's art teacher, who he lived with for six months at the school.

"The teacher said that observation is the most important skill for an artist. You have to look at the subject and find its interesting characteristics," Sun Mu recalls. "You see an object for a moment, you have to take as much from it as you can and then draw it as accurately as possible."

Throughout his teen years, Sun Mu used those lessons to improve his skills. He'd climb to the top of hills overlooking his town and draw landscapes. He recalls dropping by train stations and sketching the passengers waiting to board. Sun Mu credits this teacher with giving him the foundation for his artwork.

"I had a part time job while I was in university here in Seoul. My friends and I had to paint murals on the sides of some walls, pictures like birds and trees. But while my friends painted imaginary looking trees, I painted really realistic ones, like pine trees. The owner of the wall was impressed with my attention to detail. He let the other guys go and hired me to finish the mural all on my own."

Painting realistic images might have been the only practical lesson Sun Mu received from his education. He says he thought he knew a lot about the outside world, but acknowledges that at the time he was only taught countries' names and nothing about their people or history, let alone their art. No one knew that beyond North Korea's borders, other Communist regimes were falling and that South Koreans were wealthier, better educated and ate three meals a day.

Sun Mu doesn't get upset about his lost childhood. He and every other North Korean child had no idea what they were missing. But he tries to convey this hollow happiness in his work today.

Sun Mu's paintings of children are some of his most striking pieces of art. They are portrayed with wide-open eyes and ear-to-ear smiles, often dressed in North Korean school uniforms or traditional costumes. At first glance they look happy, but look closer and they seem miserable.

"I was educated to smile like this when I was a child too. I thought I was happy. But after I came to South Korea, I realised it wasn't real happiness."



Intuition artist

Sun Mu hands me a book, a collection of some of the paintings he's done since coming to South Korea. There are portraits of accordion playing soldiers, a little girl holding a bouquet of flowers, a pudgy baby boy in blue suspenders: all with that same unbelievably eerie smile. These pictures are a far cry from the images Sun Mu painted back in the North.

“One of the paintings I made that hung on the walls in some schools there was of a North Korean student in his school uniform. He was stabbing a pencil through an American soldier. That pencil then went through the body of a Japanese soldier standing behind him,” Sun Mu recalls with a smug laugh. “On the painting was the slogan ‘Let’s Study As If We Are Stabbing Americans’.”

That is a typical example of the kind of propaganda art that is found all over North Korea. From an early age, children are indoctrinated to hate the United States, which Pyongyang blames for keeping the peninsula divided. These banners and murals are violent and bloody and were what Sun Mu did best.

But he didn't receive any special training on how to create these types of paintings. He was never shown examples of propaganda from the USSR, Cuba or East Germany to serve as a model. As he explained, artistic education in North Korea is a matter of copying what has already been done.

“The government holds a contest amongst professional propaganda artists. They spread the art around the country. All we did was copy that kind of style. Of course the outcome is different, but we just copied what we saw.”

Artistic inspiration was also taken from one's surroundings. After high school, Sun Mu was accepted into a specialised school for iron welding. He also was the head of an extracurricular art club where he and classmates drew more propaganda posters. The floor of the school's foundry became the backdrop for many of Sun Mu's works at this time.

“These kind of paintings are called intuition art, because you draw what is in your immediate sight.”

Key to all North Korean propaganda is the slogans. Sun Mu would attach grandiose phrases to his art like “We Can Go Our On Way,” a reference to the state’s political ideology of self-reliance, called *juche*. He says he was never worried that the pieces he created wouldn’t be good enough.

“Your teachers give you the phrases, you can’t modify them. Basically you just take what you have seen from another poster and apply the phrases. So you really couldn’t do it a wrong way.”

Sun Mu decided to leave the welding school and complete four-years mandatory military service. His unit was in need of it’s own propagandist and once his senior officers learned of his talents, Sun Mu was conscripted to become their official painter. This was the point when his art took on a darker tone.

“I had to add some more violent imagery, scenes of destruction, more power and energy to the type of art that I had already been making.”

It was by now that Sun Mu knew he had what it takes to become a nationally recognised propaganda artist. He aspired to join the government commissioned troupe that made the regime’s official art, the Mansudae Art Studio. After finishing his military duty he was accepted into an art school and was on his way to achieving his dream.

Sun Mu says there wasn’t much left for him to learn about making intuition art. The school was more of a chance for him to network and make connections for what he planned would be his career. There were classes on the role of the artist in North Korean society- to serve the promotion of *juche* and honor the nation’s leaders. Sun Mu also took a course in Western Art History, but says in hindsight, he didn’t really get much out of it.

“We learned about Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, the Last Supper and the Renaissance, but we never actually saw any of these paintings.”

Any Western ideals of romantic art were lost on Sun Mu. But that didn’t matter to him. He was getting praise from his teachers for his work. In fact, that was about all the feedback he received. Students did not talk to one another about their projects or ideas. There were no critiquing sessions or opportunities for students to learn new techniques to improve their craft.

Like the manufactured smiles in Sun Mu’s paintings of children, art was an emotionless expression. The militant top down nature of North Korea did not encourage students to experiment with new concepts or designs. And according to Sun Mu, fear was a major factor in preventing artists from exercising creativity. “In North Korea, becoming it’s impossible to be an outlier. If you try something beyond the frame of what you have learned from your teachers you will go to jail. Everyone knows that. There are very specific guidelines to follow and if you don’t, you are removed, no matter how good you are. That’s how the system has worked for over half a century. People are used to it. So you don’t even think about doing something different.”

Under these conditions, censorship was not an issue. Sun Mu and his classmates had a clear understanding of what was expected of them in order to please Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-il. Ironically, it wouldn’t be until a decade later, in South Korea, when Sun Mu was painting portraits of the two North Korean rulers that he would be confronted with outright censorship.



No regrets

“In front of the river there are bushes and trees. I was waiting there to cross the river at the right moment. When I was waiting, even the sound of insects was loud to me. What would’ve happened if I had stepped on a branch and made a noise? Soldiers would have probably come and killed me.”

When I asked Sun Mu what he missed most about North Korea, he leaned back and took a few moments to respond.

“There are a lot of things I miss,” he said. “My family, my friends.”

But soon that boyish grin returned to his face as he recalled a memory from his childhood.

“My friends and I would go fishing in the river in my hometown. We’d make porridge out of the fish we caught.”

Sun Mu then went into another story, at a rapid pace, laughing as he recounted it.

“One time my friends and I wanted to throw a barbecue party for some other guys who were coming back home from the army. We wanted to grill four dogs, but needed 50kg of corn to barter for them. We didn’t have enough so I stole a bag of rice from a warehouse that I was working at and we were able to get the meat.”

The fact that food accounts for some of Sun Mu’s favorite memories about life back in the North is not surprising. By the time Sun Mu was finishing up art school, North Korea had plunged into famine. There is no reliable data on how many people actually died during this time in the mid to late 1990s, but aid groups’ estimates range anywhere from 800-thousand to 2-million.

The loss of support from the Soviet Union, consecutive years of bad weather and the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994 broke down North Korea’s food distribution system. The signs of mass starvation could be seen all over Sun Mu’s town. He remembers spotting an old woman lying on the dirt outside the town market waiting to die. Beggars at the local train station were too hungry and weak to even move. Many people in his town did not survive.

“I didn’t blame the government for what was happening. I just didn’t understand what was going on. I asked a professor at my university and all he told me was that I had better watch what I was saying.”

Sun Mu says he wasn’t doing well himself. At school, students were only fed ground corn mixed with plants. At night, he and his classmates would take cabbages from nearby farms.

“If you don’t steal, you don’t survive in North Korea.”

Left with no other option, Sun Mu told his parents that he would travel several hours north to the Tumen River. There he would contact relatives in China and ask them to bring food and money across the border for him to take back home. Sun Mu says he had every intention of coming back.

“I even told one of my friends that when I return that I would buy him lunch.”

But that would never happen. When Sun Mu arrived at the Tumen River, his relatives refused to come to him. Instead they insisted that he cross the river himself and stay with them.

This would be no easy task. Armed guards are stationed along the riverbank with orders to shoot anyone they see trying to escape. Sun Mu staked out the river crossing, hiding in bushes, waiting for the best time to sneak past the soldiers. After 15 days he made his break and stepped onto Chinese soil.

Tens of thousands of North Koreans are thought to have taken the same path as Sun Mu. They come to China in search of food, money and work with the intention to eventually return home. Many do go back, while others crisscross back and forth. China’s northeast is home to an ethnic Korean minority, so the escapees blend in. But Beijing does not recognise them as refugees, instead sees them as economic migrants that must be repatriated. North Koreans in China live in constant fear of detection: if they are sent back home they face months of hard labor in prison camps, torture or public execution.

It took a few months before the reality of it all sank in for Sun Mu. His relatives helped him find work on a tobacco farm. He was earning money and all the while planning to get back to his hometown in time for a national election in the late 1990s. But time was running out. Sun Mu says that if he didn’t get back to vote the authorities would realise he had gone away without permission and some form of punishment would follow. He decided to stay.

“I began to see a lot of things that made me realise something was wrong with my homeland. All I did was cross one river and it was a different world. It confused me. In China people were well fed, while North Koreans were starving. At restaurants people wouldn’t even finish eating. Their leftovers would be given to the pigs. In North Korea, our dream was to eat rice and meat soup, which it was everywhere in China.”

Sun Mu was on the move, he had to be, to avoid capture by the Chinese police. He went from location to location working odd jobs; he picked tree bark for a paper company, he even joined a gang for several months and was paid to rough-up unruly clients in karaoke bars. But on one job loading sacks of flour onto trains, he met a young woman, an ethnic Korean-Chinese, named Jeong.

“At first I didn’t think about marrying her, she was too young. But I thought if someday I ever got to South Korea I would try to help her come there.”

Sun Mu was tired of being on the run. He felt unsafe and craved stability. While in China, many North Koreans receive their first exposure to South Korean culture. Media that is banned back in the North is widely available. The escapees see that the South isn't the third world hellhole they thought it to be. Sun Mu realised that if he wanted real freedom he would have to make it there.

Sun Mu bought a map of China and plotted his flight. He would have to make it to Southeast Asia, where he could safely reach a South Korean embassy and be granted asylum. At the time of his journey south, most North Koreans relied on a network of safe houses run by Christian missionaries, known as the underground-railroad. But Sun Mu says he along with one other man did it on their own.

They reached Laos, but were arrested by local authorities. The other man, who Sun Mu thought was a refugee like him, turned out to be a Korean-Chinese and was sent back home. After two weeks in jail, Sun Mu was released to Thailand. Finally, he was able to get help and was soon put on a plane bound for Seoul.

"I don't regret leaving North Korea," he said. "I still cannot understand how the government could let its people starve to death. But, I feel bad that I didn't have a plan back then, I didn't know I was going to end up here. If I had known that, I would have brought my family with me. I would like them to come here, but I know they can't. Its just too dangerous."



Stranger in a strange land

Like all North Korean defectors, he was automatically granted South Korean citizenship. He spent three months at a government-run facility where refugees are taught the basics of living in the capitalist world, such as how to use computers, bank machines and cell phones. But all the counseling and preparation could not prepare Sun Mu for his first day at university in Seoul.

"I asked myself why I ever came here," he said.

After sixty years of division, the two Koreas have gone separate ways. Many North Koreans suffer a culture shock upon arrival. Sun Mu thought the transition into life in the South would be easier, but what he found perplexed him.

He had been accepted into Honggik University, the nation's top arts school with a very liberal student body. Sun Mu says he wanted to finally finish his degree and make friends while studying. But he could not figure out how to interact with his new classmates.

"I couldn't understand how these students behaved. I thought they were crazy. Should they see a doctor? We were all speaking Korean, but I couldn't really understand what they were saying."

A language barrier is perhaps the most surprising difference that North Koreans discover in their new home. Many English words have seeped into daily usage and many Korean expressions don't have quite the same meanings here as they do in the North.

"I was really thinking about quitting school."

But Sun Mu stuck with it. In his coursework, he began to introduce elements of the style of art he was accustomed to. The easily identifiable North Korean propaganda style set off alarm bells within the university's faculty.

"My professors asked me, why are you painting this kind of stuff? My classmates didn't know what to think about my art. No one encouraged me. I began to think there was nothing for me here in South Korea."

But Sun Mu's fortunes picked up when he met art collector Ryu Byeong-hak, a Korean national who had been living in Germany for the past two decades.

"My first impression of Sun Mu's paintings was that they were very vivid. I thought you couldn't find this type of work in South Korea, Germany or anywhere," Ryu said.

In 2007, Ryu used his contacts in Seoul to get Sun Mu's work hung up in a gallery. His art would be shown along with photographs from Pyongyang. It was perhaps the first time that pictures of Kim Il Sung and North Korean flags were publically displayed in South Korea. Even though they knew the show would be provocative, neither Sun Mu nor Ryu expected the kind of reaction that followed.

"People called the police and said someone was trying to display real North Korean propaganda. The police showed up on the opening day, but once I explained who I was and what my art is, everything turned out ok," Sun Mu said.

"Well, it didn't help that the gallery was located right behind the President's house," Ryu added.

Faced with real censorship, Sun Mu had to re-think his initial impressions about South Korean society.

"I thought South Koreans had freedom of expression, but its not completely true. They are still ideologically divided and not as open as I expected when I first arrived."

Sun Mu continues to have trouble getting his work into galleries here because of the controversy it causes. Likewise, he has been passed over for grants or other endowments given to help support artists.

"Art of course should not be restricted. Censorship of art is in my opinion barbaric. But even when there is official censorship, real art does find a way to exist."

Despite this resistance to his art, Sun Mu says he is doing just fine. Some of his work has fetched up to \$20,000 and he finds many international buyers who are interested in his work. His wife, Jeong, helps the family out with a part time job too.

“Well, all I can say is at least we are not starving,” he says modestly.



Peace through art

“I want North and South Korean children to connect with each other. We can’t deny each other’s existence anymore.”

This past June, Sun Mu came the closest to his hometown in almost a decade. He was on South Korea’s Baengnyeong Island in the Yellow Sea, four hours by boat to Incheon, only 10 minutes to the North Korean coast.

“I felt frustrated, more so than ever before. Why should we live like this? I could see some of the scenery from my hometown through the fog.”

Over the years, Sun Mu’s art has become less about Kim Jong-il and more about symbols of hope. He believes he has a role to play in bringing the two Koreas closer together. There is much mistrust between the two nations, but he wants his art to help lay the groundwork to show that peace is possible.

“The role that art can play is not very obvious. But I still think I can reach out to ordinary people, effect their thinking, I want to change the mindset of these people.”

Sun Mu does not define himself as an artist. He doesn’t have a name for his particular style either. But whatever it is he creates, he wants it to reflect the division of the two countries he both calls home.

“I’ll find a way to bring Korea into a painting. Even if I am painting a zebra, I will put the Korean situation into the piece. I am North Korean, my family is there, the two Koreas are divided and it’s still an international problem. I am still thinking how I can help solve these problems.”

Solving the problems of an entire peninsula is one challenge, trying to explain his past to his own young children is another.

“I tell them your grandmother and your cousins are in North Korea and we have to go there someday.”

But he knows the chances of that actually happening are slim to none.

Sun Mu says his eldest daughter has told some of her friends about her North Korean father and the family there she has yet to meet. The children told her that North Korea is a dangerous place and that if she ever goes there, she will die.

“All I can tell my daughter is that there are people living there.”

Ten years into his new life in South Korea, Sun Mu has started to reflect on the one he gave up. He figures that if he hadn't made it as a government propagandist, he'd at least be teaching art to upcoming students. And perhaps it's the stress of living in a fast paced city like Seoul as well as the pressure to support a family that sometimes makes Sun Mu nostalgic.

“What makes me sad is that I will never have that chance to be with my friends, catch fish and make that porridge together again.”

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Photos: Courtesy of the artist.

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