



WENDE MUSEUM
OF THE COLD WAR

**UPSIDE-DOWN
PROPAGANDA:
THE ART OF NORTH
KOREAN DEFECTOR
SUN MU**

**February 10 to
June 2, 2019**



INTRODUCTION

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the number of communist regimes worldwide has been rapidly shrinking. The People's Republic of China has veered toward a mixture of communism and capitalism since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, while countries like Cuba and Vietnam have lost much of their former ideological orthodoxy. The striking exception is North Korea, where the Kim dynasty – Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un – has kept the country in an iron Stalinist grip.

The North Korean artist Sun Mu – a pseudonym, meaning “no borders” – fled his country in 1998 during a period of severe famine, and traveled through China, Laos, and Thailand before finally settling in South Korea. Trained as a propaganda-poster artist, he continues to work in the style in which he once glorified the North Korean army and state leaders, ironically turning propagandistic messages on their heads.

Sun Mu's first exhibition in Seoul was met with confused responses, as some of the viewers felt they were being confronted with North Korean state propaganda, and the authorities were called. In 2014, a planned exhibition of Sun Mu's works in Beijing was canceled at the last minute, following North Korean protests. As part of this exhibition, visitors would have walked over a canvas laid on the floor, on which the names of the North Korean leaders were written in calligraphy.

In the 2015 documentary *I Am Sun Mu*, on view in the gallery, director Adam Sjöberg follows and interviews Sun Mu in his studio and at home with his wife and two daughters during the preparations for the Beijing exhibition. Sun Mu's face remains invisible, as the artist does not want to be identified, fearing repercussions to his parents and siblings in North Korea.

The Wende Museum is dedicated to highlighting political and cultural continuities and ruptures, including both dominant and dissident voices of the past and the present.

Special thanks to the Archive of Modern Conflict, Fiona Chalom, Blaine Vess, and Liberty in North Korea (LiNK). This exhibition is made possible by a gift from Esther and Blaine Vess.



Sun Mu, *South and North*, 2011, oil on canvas

1

The hibiscus syriacus, the symbol of South Korea, and the magnolia sieboldii, the national flower of North Korea, blossom together in this painting, which expresses the hope for a future reunification.

2

One live and one dead rose in a vase filled with a blood-red fluid provokes the question: who survived and who succumbed to the regime in North Korea?



Sun Mu, *Flower*, 2015, oil on canvas



Sun Mu, *A Letter I Cannot Send*, 2011, oil on canvas

3

Liang Xiao Me, Sun Mu's daughter, writes letters to her grandmother in North Korea that cannot be delivered because of the political situation. She does not understand why.

4

Flowers and birds meet at the border, indicated by barbed wire. "When I meet you, I will shed tears of happiness," Sun Mu comments.



Sun Mu, *Teardrop*, 2017, oil on canvas



Sun Mu, *Craving*, 2011, oil on canvas

5

A chicken is being targeted by arrows above a serrated blood-red fence but strives to cross the border anyway. "Dangerous, but I want to cross that line," the artist writes.

6

A South Korean boy and a North Korean girl in spacesuits share the same hula hoop, a utopian vision of future reunification.



Sun Mu, *We Want Peace*, 2013, oil on canvas



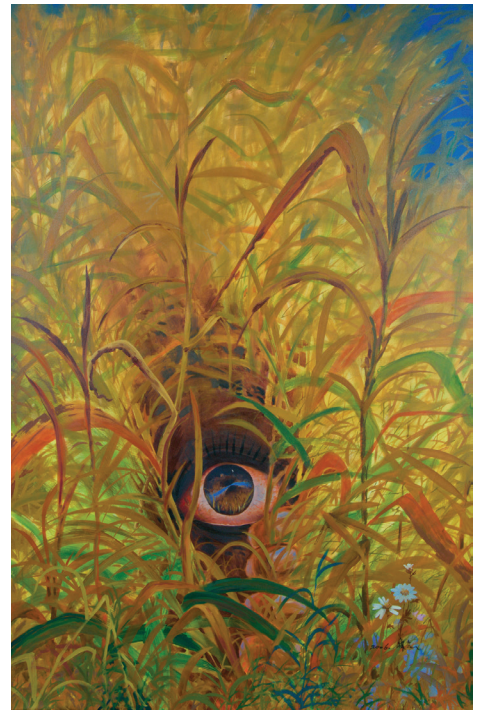
Sun Mu, *The Sun of Korea*, 2011, oil on canvas

7

A portrait of a smiling Kim Il Sung is accompanied by a hybrid orchid called Kimilsungia. Since 1998, Kim Il Sung's birthday, April 15, has been celebrated in North Korea as the Day of the Sun, featuring a Kimilsungia flower festival. The painting ridicules the idolatry around the first North Korean communist leader.

8

A fearful eye, hidden beneath riverbed vegetation, lies in wait for the right moment to cross the Tumen River, the border between North Korea and China, in search of freedom



Sun Mu, *Border Line*, 2007, oil on canvas



Sun Mu, *We Together*, 2012, oil on canvas

9

Merry South Korean boys and North Korean girls run through a meadow, no longer separated by barbed wire.

10

An imposing Kim Jong Un is holding a nuclear missile in his left hand while grasping an American flag with his right. At the bottom, two tiny figures are trying to escape.



Sun Mu, *Power*, 2013, oil on canvas



Sun Mu, *In the Square*, 2015, oil on canvas

11

A North Korean tank in front of the government building on Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang is stopped by a schoolboy, reminiscent of the Chinese man who single-handedly stopped a tank on its way to Tiananmen Square in Beijing on June 5, 1989

12

A row of boys from the Korean Children's Union, the North Korean youth movement, make the pioneer salute; with their identical gestures and looks, they underline the pressure to conform unconditionally in North Korea.



Sun Mu, *Scenery*, 2010, oil on canvas



Sun Mu, *Do You Know?*, 2012, oil on canvas

13

A vulnerable yet defiant-looking girl sits nude on a North Korean flag, with stars alluding to the Chinese flag floating above her head. Many women who flee North Korea are sold in China as brides or prostitutes.

14

A combative, self-willed girl in a uniform of the Korean Children's Union, the North Korean youth movement, suggests individual power and agency even under the most suffocating authoritarian circumstances.



Sun Mu, *Life*, 2011 I, oil on canvas



Sun Mu, *She*, 2016, oil on canvas

15

A half-naked woman lies face-down on a bed, Chinese bills swirling around her. Many women who flee North Korea have to sell their bodies in China to earn the money they need to travel to Thailand or Mongolia, where they can apply for asylum at the South Korean embassy. North Korean refugees who are caught in China are sent back to North Korea and put in prison camps.

In July of 2014, Sun Mu was offered an historic, though potentially dangerous, opportunity—a solo exhibition in Beijing. As he prepared his show undercover, an unexpected turn of events put Sun Mu and his friends and family in danger. Adam Sjöberg's documentary follows Sun Mu and his family through the preparations and up to the opening of the exhibition.



Adam Sjöberg, *I Am Sun Mu*, 2015, documentary

Upside-Down Propaganda: The Art of North Korean Defector Sun Mu was organized by Chief Curator and Director of Programming Joes Segal and Exhibition and Programming Associate Anna Rose Canzano, with support from Claremont Graduate University Curatorial Intern Abigail Beck. Special thanks to the Archive of Modern Conflict, Fiona Chalom, David Guttenfelder, Sun Mu, Molly Peters, Carl Schmitz, Hannah Song, Casper van der Veen, Marc Voss, Michelle Wilson, and Chris Wyrick. This exhibition is made possible by a gift from Blaine and Esther Vess.



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