

An exhibition at Haverford College.

Views of Korea from five artists

By Victoria Donohoe
FOR THE INQUIRER

The display "In and With: Contemporary Korean Art" at Haverford is up-to-date, has tonic quality, and doesn't genuflect before tradition. Yet technical process is never so assertive it intrudes upon the personal expression of these five artists. Two are active in Korea, while the other three have long resided outside their native land; much of their artwork reflects this.

In Oh Su Fan's paintings, a single twisting, spiky abstract shape hangs in the air like a dark splash against a flat plane of bright contrasting hue. Are these merely clever abstract-expressionist look-alikes? Hardly. The work of this calligrapher's son captures the sparseness and economy of a Korean/Western style rooted in shamanistic spiritualism and Zen Buddhism.

Suh Yong Sun's visually compelling paintings offer a bold vision of recent history, colonialism, wartime occupation, and tensions between North and South Korea. The power of his work derives from his synthesis of drawing, painting and folk-art influences. Color loses itself in the figures or places represented, which draws us into examining

each rugged painting carefully. Otherwise, the chief attraction is nonchalance, an informality that draws us in still further.

Juri Kim follows cultural practices, using a Korean tool to dip her paint. And her clear, crisp abstract style is the result of careful and delicate manipulation. Everything is accounted for down to the last detail, yet it isn't predictable. Kim is a master of an achingly exact technique.

But so is Yoo Bong Sang. This "nail artist" makes Korean landscape photos, turns them into digital prints, then creates an image on each, using thousands of carpenter's nails. Sang's broadly patterned, luminous, flat vacancies become "sculptural planes" and "flat sculptures" in a direct way without losing the mood to decorative detail. Is such a repertory of imagining his rediscovered links to the natural environment too limited to sustain itself?

Hee Sook Kim, the show's curator, displays big paper lithographic prints that movingly evoke a Korean way of life. Autobiography drives very little of her art, which, like an article of faith in the continuing vitality of Korea's rich traditions, resonates with veiled illusions, messages, and ancient memories.



Suh Yong Sun's bold depictions of recent history, as in his 2008 "The Year Gyeju," appear in Haverford's exhibition of contemporary Korean art.

A most memorable show.

Haverford College's Cantor Fitzgerald

Gallery, Haverford. To Dec. 12.
Mon-Fri 11-5, Sat-Sun noon-5. Free.
610-896-1287.