

SUBVERSIVE EXPOSURE: REALISM AND MASQUERADE IN SONG BYEOK'S ART
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ABSTRACT

At age 24, Song Byeok became an official state propaganda artist under the totalitarian Kim regime of North Korea. After famine, family death, torture and prison camp, Song escaped from North Korea in 2002 and continued to create art in South Korea. Song Byeok now embraces his artistic freedom by subverting the ideals and indoctrinations of his former upbringing. Creating parodical imagery, he pairs North Korean *Juche* Realism with elements of Pop, mocking the ideology and former figurehead Kim Jong Il. His satirical painting *Take off Your Clothes* (2010) juxtaposes the head of Kim Jong Il with the body of pop icon, Marilyn Monroe subverting the ideal image of the dictator by feminizing it.

Song Byeok's hybridization of Kim Jong Il's image recalls similar parodic representations of Chairman Mao and Monroe created by the Chinese Political Pop artists of the late 1980s. These artists confronted Mao's Socialist Realism by utilizing it in combination with Western Pop iconography, subverting its ideal. Song Byeok's work is comparable as it transforms the visual language used by the Kim regime to weaken it. These artists employed the device of the feminine masquerade to ridicule their leaders, exposing the dualistic nature of their subject by challenging the past ideal to divulge a new message. Similarly, Song Byeok creates his Kim/Monroe figure to offer the viewer an alternative, formulating an invented pop icon that alters the perception of their controlled political system.

Song Byeok moreover relies on the tools of the North Korean spectacle to expose the artificiality of its propagandistic imagery and his work can be analyzed along side Guy Debord's theses *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Debord's commentary of the spectacularized system endures as a critical analysis of the North Korean state and correlates with the subversive artwork Song Byeok produces. By using the language of the North Korean spectacle, Song Byeok also contradicts it, going beyond its limits to shed light on its false representations. Inventing a subversive contemporary pop icon within an alternative reality, Song Byeok challenges the spectacuarlized masquerade in North Korea and offers a unique example of the importance of artistic freedom.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “SUBERSIVE EXPOSURE: REALISM and MASQUERADE in SONG BYEOK’S ART PRACTICE,” presented by Johanna Perry, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion is worthy of acceptance.

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INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1980s, at the age of 24, Song Byeok became an official state propaganda artist under the totalitarian Kim regime of North Korea. Then after years of producing state art, surviving famine, family death, torture and prison camp, Song Byeok escaped from North Korea in 2002. Since that time, he has been creating his own art, providing unique observations of what life was like inside isolationist North Korea. Now living in Seoul, South Korea, Song Byeok embraces his artistic freedom by subverting the ideals and indoctrinations of his former life through satirical imagery. He does this by pairing North Korean *Juche* Realism with Pop imagery. Song Byeok also mocks the former figurehead of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Kim Jong Il, who is known affectionately as the 'Dear Leader' throughout the country. Song Byeok's critical work *Take off Your Clothes* (Illustration 5) juxtaposes the head of Kim Jong Il with the body of the sexualized pop icon, Marilyn Monroe, subverting the ideal image of the former leader by feminizing it. Representing Kim Jong Il in a womanly masquerade or drag-like costume, Song Byeok suggests the former leader may have been hiding something, disguising and concealing the truth of his identity while advancing the fallacy of the 'cult of personality' present within North Korea which surrounds the Kim regime. Song Byeok's work illuminates this masquerade through the very use of it; deceiving the viewer by exposing an alternative identity of Kim Jong Il, upsetting the ideal and challenging the traditions of the DPRK's indoctrinations.

By exploring the origin, style, and ideal of North Korean *Juche* Realism, Song Byeok's official training will be understood, shedding light on his individual artistic identity.

Now challenging his past state's tradition and indoctrination, Song Byeok follows in the footsteps of the officially trained artists coming before him out of Mao's Post-Cultural Revolutionary China in the late 1980s. Artists like Yu Youhan and Li Shan confronted Mao's Socialist Realism style by hybridizing it with Western Pop iconography, creating a new kind of propagandist image. Challenging the past formula, these Chinese Political Pop artists of the 1980s and 1990s also subverted the significance of their former leader Chairman Mao Tse Tung by satirically feminizing his ideal image. Through the masquerade of Mao in a womanly disguise, Chinese Political Pop artists undermined the 'cult of personality' surrounding their past leader, and revealed an alternative identity through a deceptive feminine guise. Like Song Byeok, these artists used the paradox of the masquerade as a tool to deconstruct the perceived identity of their former political leader and state and reveal the ambiguity of their authority and leadership.

The masquerade is a deceptive tool used to disguise the identity and true nature of an individual or thing. Masks or costumes were used to authenticate a masqueraded individual or to exaggerate certain features of the wearer. In this way, the masquerade may be looked at as a critical tool used to expose the duality and ambiguous nature of the subject, concealing one side of an individual while at the same time revealing another, exposing something even less commendable. The strategic use of the masquerade, specifically utilizing 'womanliness as masquerade', is significant to both Song Byeok and the Chinese Political Pop artists as they were able to challenge their past ideals to divulge a new message.¹ By employing womanliness to masquerade the images of their past leaders, these artists have exposed a new

¹Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade", in *Female Sexuality: Contemporary Engagements*, ed. Donna Basin (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999), 127.

reality within their work, presenting the viewer with an alternative perception of their controlled society.

Song Byeok mirrors the use of the masquerade within the works of the Chinese Political Pop artists while concomitantly perpetuating a specific feminine-gender bias rooted within the music, literature and art of the North Korean *Juche* repertoire. A pure or child-like naïveté, characteristics most commonly linked to North Korean feminine qualities, are the most virtuous among the North Korean people's defining attributes. A strong emphasis is placed upon Korea as the Motherland, as opposed to the Fatherland, using the feminine gender specific when referring to the nation and her 'children.' In late 1947, the donning of the North Korean state, the propagandist machine used the feminine masquerade present within *Juche* ideology to manipulate the opinions and thoughts of the people. They were taught to love the state as a child would love its mother, a very different sort of love a child would have for its Father, the male parental figure posing more of an authoritative threat. *Juche* ideology used 'womanliness as masquerade' to manipulate the perception of the Kim regime and of the state. Song Byeok perpetuates this notion through his use of the feminine masquerade to further challenge the identity of Kim Jong Il and the deception behind the façade of the DPRK.

Song Byeok uses pop imagery to expose and subvert the image of Kim Jong Il. The hybridized Kim/Monroe figure Song Byeok creates is affiliated with the pop art tendency characterized by the use of popular culture imagery that is easily recognizable. Just as Pop artists incorporated in their works visual representation from mass-media; Song Byeok uses propagandist visual tropes. However, he does not focus only on reproducing them since he is intent on exposing the masquerade characteristic of the concentrated "Society of the

Spectacle” within North Korea. Song Byeok subverts the propagandist images by merging them with American popular icons, exploiting and submitting to the very thing he is attempting to undermine. Song Byeok uses the masquerade and Pop to subvert and expose the deceptions and indoctrinations from his past and challenge the artistic system in which he was trained.

Song Byeok’s pivotal work *Take off your Clothes* (Illustration 5) will be examined in comparison to other works representing or subverting the image of Kim Jong Il, and will be explored through the lens of the masquerade. A further examination of Song Byeok’s work will ground his art practice within a greater theoretical context when it is analyzed in conjunction with Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*. Debord’s critique of the 1960s consumerist society, what he referred to as ‘the spectacle’, is also applicable to the political machine in place within North Korea. Song Byeok’s images exist as a critique of the ‘concentrated spectacle’², which in this case is the mass-media propaganda machine dominated by the state sponsored visual traditions of the DPRK. His work holds relevance as a unique response to the ‘society of the spectacle’ present within North Korea as it challenges his visual past and offers an alternative spectacular figurehead, the subversive gender-hybridized pop icon of Kim/Monroe.

The ‘concentrated spectacle’ in place within North Korea and the cultural environment in which Song Byeok was indoctrinated developed out of a tumultuous historic chain of events beginning with the Japanese, and later Russian, occupations of Korea from 1910-1947. After an armistice was reached in 1953 ending the Korean War conflict, the 38th

² Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI Black & Red and Oakland, CA: AK Press, 1983), thesis #4.

parallel was set as the border between North and South Korea. At that time Soviet-backed Kim Il Sung shut the nation down to any outside imperialist influences and was able to create a new national ideology and ‘cult of personality’ surrounding his leadership. In a 1955 speech, Kim Il Sung explained to the masses that the socialist DPRK would not base its foundation on a Soviet or Maoist political ideology, but would instead take firm roots in the traditions of the Korean culture clinging tightly to the Korean language ‘Hangul’ and adhering to Korean customs only. Kim Il Sung shaped the new Korean nation under his ideal rule, officially declaring *Juche* as the supreme principle of the ideological platform for the DPRK.

The word *Juche* means “main body” and also takes on other meanings, stressing an “independent stand” or “spirit of self reliance”.³ The word was used for the first time in 1930 by Kim Il Sung to describe and encompass his own socialist political agenda, but was more popularized after the Korean War. *Juche* ideology is meant to be the collective focus for all citizens within North Korea, its concentration based on a three tiered principle stating that North Korea should: rely only on Korean national resources; be independent from a great power, like the United States; and hold a strong military posture. This *Juche* principle saturates all life in North Korea, inspiring propagandist artists to import ideas of the Korean culture within all aspects of media and arts to invoke a revolutionary spirit among the people. Kim Il Sung advised that *Juche* be the absolute guiding principle for the visual arts stressing the importance of their means to indoctrinate the people with socialist ideology.⁴

³Jane Portal, *Art Under Control in North Korea* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 77.

⁴*Ibid.*, 124.

North Korea began reaching economic success in the 1960s, and saw roughly thirty years of growth and prosperity for the socialist country. However in 1991, their ally and financial backer, the Soviet Union, collapsed, and soon after came the death of the ‘Great Leader’, Kim Il Sung, in 1994. Kim Jong Il, son and successor of the dictator, began his regime at the beginning of the DPRK’s internal industrial decline. The country saw even further devastation in 1996 when North Korea suffered a severe famine and flooding, which the party labeled ‘The Arduous March’. The famine reached its peak in 1997, killing millions from starvation and hunger related illness. In 2002 Kim Jong Il stubbornly requested that all foreign humanitarian aid and food supplies no longer be delivered to North Korea. Firmly grasping onto the *Juche* principle of self-reliance and independence from great power, Kim Jong Il was determined that North Koreans would rely only on food grown inside the country for the answer to their economic and agricultural traumas.

Enduring the ‘The Arduous March’ and the tumultuous Kim Jong Il regime, Song Byeok has survived bringing his artistic work to a global audience. As a child, he regularly sketched and in one instance grabbed the attention of a party member who would ask him to become an official artist for the DPRK. Becoming an official artist at age 24, Song Byeok became registered as a member of the Korean Artist Federation and received a small monthly salary. He was never trained, but was only given strict instructions to copy any sketch given to him to the exact detail. He created propaganda posters that helped boost the Kim regime and was expected to produce a certain number of these works every month. Formulaic brightly colored posters of marching soldiers or factory workers paired with inspirational Kim slogans were replicated rapidly and if a monthly quota were not met, the artist would be

sent to prison. Artists like Song Byeok were not expected to use their creativity, only their skill and talents for the good of the nation and to please the 'Dear Leader', Kim Jong Il.

Due to the famine and the rapidly weakening economy, Song Byeok left the Korean Artist Federation to concentrate on helping his family find food to survive. This difficult time reached its peak when Song Byeok and his father journeyed north toward the Tumen River, the border between North Korea and China, in hopes of finding food. While crossing the river into China, Song Byeok's father was pulled under and carried away in the strong current. North Korean border guards saw this happen and ran toward Song Byeok and his father, he thought, to help him rescue his father from the swift river. The guards, instead, pulled Song Byeok from the water, severely beat him, interrogated him and sent him to a labor camp for trying to escape to China.

While in prison, Song Byeok was fed only minimal rations of corn meal and worked in harsh weather conditions, later losing a finger to frostbite. He began to wonder why the soldiers did not help him the day his father was washed away and why the 'Dear Leader', Kim Jong Il, would allow his people to be treated in such a way. While imprisoned, Song Byeok became disillusioned with the North Korean government and began to question the indoctrinations ingrained within him and his nation. If he were to survive the prison camp, Song Byeok knew he would need to leave the country in order to find freedom. After some time, nearing death and of no use as a laborer, Song Byeok was released from the prison camp; starving and weak. Miraculously he reached a relatives house after surviving the

elements of the ravaged North Korean woodlands. While resting and recuperating Song Byeok cautiously bought time for two years until he could escape into China.⁵

Now living in Seoul, South Korea, Song Byeok dedicated his artistic practice to calling attention to the lack of human rights and freedom within North Korea. His goal is to engage the audience with images influenced by the North Korean visual culture while emotionally connecting them to the despair felt by the North Korea people. He also seeks to make contradictory or absurd imagery that would have shocked Kim Jong Il if he had seen them.

Song Byeok satirizes the former leaders as a means to obliterate the ideology forced upon the nation by the totalitarian Kim regime. Creating an alternative perspective upon the ‘concentrated spectacle’ in place within North Korea, Song Byeok builds upon the images of his past to deconstruct them, challenging the controlled set of imagery from his upbringing. Like the Chinese Political Pop artists, he utilizes the likeness of Western Pop-icon Marilyn Monroe to subvert the image of the beloved former leader, in this instance, Kim Jong Il. His painting *Take off Your Clothes* (Illustration 5) represents the visually absurd or contradictory image of the former leader by utilizing the masquerade and merging elements of the *Juche* Realist style with Pop to expose the weakness of the visual language. The controlled ‘concentrated spectacle’ is revealed, exploited, and ridiculed, as Song Byeok uses his artistic freedom to create *Juche* Pop and confront the past while creating an alternative satirical reality that masquerades Kim Jong Il as a feminine pop icon.

⁵ Greg Pence, “The Art of Song Byeok”, available online at: <http://www.songbyeok.com> on 01/04/2013.

CHAPTER 1

THE UNMASKING OF *JUCHE* REALISM AND THE PARENT LEADER IDEAL

Song Byeok's art practice, rooted in the legacy of *Juche* Realism, depicts parodical representations of a gender-hybridized Kim Jong Il. Creating a part male, part female figure, Song Byeok subverts the image of the former leader of North Korea by assigning to him a transgender identity. Questioning the perceived gender identity of Kim Jong Il represented within North Korea and challenging the 'cult of personality' surrounding the ideology and visual culture, Song Byeok creates an alternative identity for the leader. His artistic style has been shaped by his past and the *Juche* Realist tradition, which he successfully undermines by infusing propaganda-like images with new meaning to expose the weaknesses behind the presumed transparency of the regime. Song Byeok draws attention to the masquerade present within North Korea, an ideological deception perpetuated by images rooted in the *Juche* Realist tradition and the false representations of leadership. By imposing this style, former leader Kim Il Sung forced artists to deify him, thus constructing a 'cult of personality'. This turned the mass media into a propaganda machine by using a controlled visual culture to display and appropriate a deceptive heroic, idealized, and paternal public image of the leader. The culture of propaganda developed by Kim Il Sung has been refined and adapted by his successors: son Kim Jong Il and grandson, Kim Jong Un who have perpetuated the legends of their divinity and familial love for their 'child-nation'.

Seen as the ideal North Koreans and rendered as softened rosy cheeked leaders, the Kims are attributed with more feminized features within *Juche* Realist paintings. The leaders' identities are mythologized into gender-ambiguous, hermaphroditic public figures. Song Byeok propagates this ideal gender-hybrid figure in his work by using *Juche* ideology and imagery to expose its construction and reveal the misleading identity of the former leader. Comparing two officially painted *Juche* Realist portraits of the former leader with two of Song Byeok's recent depictions, I argue that by expropriating this visual and cultural ideologue, Song Byeok exploits the images once dominating every aspect of his social realm. While propagating this visual cultural tradition, Song Byeok also subverts and exaggerates this past ideal, calling attention to its weaknesses and exposing the false representations of his former nation's figureheads.

After his death in 1994, Kim Il Sung was named the "Eternal President" of North Korea. Many other names were to follow immortalizing his leadership. Other such titles include; "Guiding Star of the 21st Century", "Glorious General who Descended from Heaven" or "Supreme Leader." All of these titles help to mythologize Kim Il Sung's life, proclaiming his divinity among men. More interesting is another title bestowed upon the leader, which seems to be more a term of endearment than a title, as Kim Il Sung is lovingly referred to as the "Eternal Father" and "Fatherly Leader." With these titles, the identity of the leader becomes connected to a paternal role, generating a strong familial nationalistic ideal within the 'cult of personality.' Images of an authoritative male father-figure and notions of the "Fatherland" have promoted nationalism under the strong leadership of many charismatic leaders in the past, and the same may be said for Kim Il Sung. Interestingly, a neutral familial symbolism is seen more prevalently within the text of the Korean Worker's

Party, or the official handbook of the DPRK, frequently referring to Kim Il Sung as the “Parent Leader.”¹ This title deemphasizes a male Fatherly role and rather emphasizes the neutrality and androgyny of the title, as the “Parent Leader” is to be perceived as a divine parental leader that encompasses personality attributes of both sexes. The leader is then considered as both the Mother and Father, both female and male.

In popular slogans, songs and poetry, Kim Il Sung is often praised as a leader who affectionately holds his people to his ‘bosom’, close within his parental embrace.² Depictions of the Kims as “Parent Leader” illustrate them nurturing and embracing children, tucking them into bed, or giving them sweets and presents. These scenes draw attention to the parental qualities of the leaders, and highlight their more maternal nature by depicting them in tender, less authoritative, scenes. Even within their facial features, the Kims are rendered in art femininely, their appearance resembling that of the North Korean feminine ideal. Shown with rounded, healthy, pink cheeks, and youthful reddish-lipped dimply smiles, softer more feminine featured Kims aid in facilitating the visual for the “Parent Leader” ideal. The youthfulness of the Kims depiction, coupled with an affectionate and tender rendering of his character connects the leader to a maternal-like parental love. The majority of the population is still fully convinced of the Kim regime’s greatness, benevolence and goodness, all qualities that embody both motherly and fatherly ideal features. But the North Korean nation looks toward their “Parent Leader(s)” to receive the loving care that a maternal parent would bestow upon their children.

¹B.R. Meyers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See themselves and Why it Matters* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2011), 101.

²Ibid., 106.

The “Parent Leader” ideal is a tool used within the North Korean propaganda machine to deceive the people into a state sponsored infantilism. With a child-like naïveté, the nation is encouraged to love the state as they would a parent, sacrificing everything with the undying devotion they would bestow upon their family. The masquerading within North Korea begins with the duality of the identity of their leaders. When visually represented the Kim leaders are rendered more femininely, disguised as a means to conceal and downplay their ultimate power.

Delving into the *Juche* Realist tradition and looking at representations of “womanliness as masquerade” present within them, the North Korean “Parent Leader” ideal will be revealed and compared to Song Byeok’s expropriation of it within his artwork. Donning femininity as a disguise or using “womanliness as masquerade” was a subject explored by psychoanalyst Joan Riviere in 1929 to discuss the issue of feminine gender performance. Riviere suggested that using womanliness to masquerade is a defense mechanism used to hide one’s masculinity, diminishing one’s full intellectual power. *Juche* Realism masquerades the Kims in a womanly disguise in an attempt to conceal their authoritative masculinity and diminish the totality of their reign. Song Byeok uses these elements of the *Juche* Realist style to expose the feminine masquerading of the DPRK’s past leaders and call attention to the contradictions within the “Parent Leader” ideal.

North Korean art lends itself to the lack of influence or exposure from any outside sources of inspiration or innovation, and presents a sixty-year ban on artistic freedom. Abstract art is not a known concept within North Korea, and the current style of *Juche* Realism is the same now as it was when it was adapted from Soviet Socialist Realism paintings of the 1950s. It is almost as if time stopped in North Korea, or perhaps it is in a

constant time-loop in which the art and visual culture of generations has not changed since 1953. Portraits of North Korean leaders are formulaic and dramatizing, being often set in idealized contexts. Depictions of the “Parent Leader” portray a magical and epic fallacy of a past that never was. *Juche* Realism has led to the further establishment of the Kim ‘cult of personality’ which has grown in popularity not only within North Korean culture, but also within the contemporary global, political, and popular culture arena.

Stylistically, *Juche* art comes out of the Soviet Socialist Realism style that was also later adopted and popularized in the People’s Republic of China. (Illustration 1 & 2) The Socialist Realism style in North Korean art takes precedence over all other styles because it is considered the only proper approach to artistic expression.³ What Western art historians would call “Socialist Realism” in North Korea, the North Korean’s now call “*Juche* Realism”. By limiting subjects and themes within art to the construction of the socialist national character, the relationship of the military and the people, and most importantly, portraying the “Great Leader”, an invented hierarchy of subject matter was constructed within *Juche* Realism. The image of the “Great Leader” would become the most popular subject in *Juche* art after the Sino-Soviet dispute in 1967 when Kim Il Sung declared self-reliance from the Soviet Union.⁴

The style is reminiscent of depictions of Mao Tse-tung in the public sculptures of the People’s Republic of China, or the totalitarian art of Italy and Germany, as well as the Soviet art of the Stalinist Regime of the 1930s. The standardized features of the “Great Leader” within *Juche* Realism are always plump. Unlike Stalin and Mao, Kim Il Sung is depicted as

³David Heather, *North Korean Posters: The David Heather Collection* (Munich, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel Publishing, 2008), 10.

⁴Portal, *Art Under Control in North Korea*, 82.

over-weight to present an “on-the-spot” indulgence in the innocent instincts of freedom.⁵

Visually his plumpness and jovial depiction calls attention to his impulsiveness and child-like innocence, a quality highly cherished within the *Juche* tradition.

Unlike Socialist Realist artists, *Juche* Realist artists never depict the leader-figure within propaganda posters, which only portray the nation as workers, soldiers, or students within a composition, accompanied by official slogans spoken by their leaders. The posters are widely circulated and are meant to be daily reminders of how an ideal Party member obeys the instructions of their “Parent Leader.” The Kims are never shown as actual ‘figures’ within these highly circulated instructional posters, but are most commonly seen as the central figure within what may be considered ‘high-art’ in North Korea. Within the practice of *Juche* Realism artists are instructed to elevate the depiction of the leaders within an invented subjective hierarchy. This includes the official portrait of the leaders, the leaders depicted within a large-scale monumental landscape, or the leaders within an “on-the-spot” guidance scene, a kind of genre scene where leaders give instruction or insight to workers on a farm or a factory.

Official portraits of the Kim leaders most often display them in army uniform, reinforcing their headship of the armed forces and their role as protectors of the nation. Instilling this notion further within the minds of the people, the Kim propaganda organizations began issuing badges featuring the portraits of their leaders, similar to the Mao badges of China’s Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976. These portrait badges are to be worn at all times over the left breast and failure to do so is considered “anti-Kim” behavior. In addition to the distribution of the portrait badge, state issued portrait paintings and

⁵Meyers, *The Cleanest Race*, 101.

photographs of the Kims hang on every wall in each home.⁶ These portraits usually sit high on an empty wall meant to seem as if the “Parent Leader(s)” are looking down over every home. These same portraits hang in all local businesses, hospitals, classrooms, libraries, offices, and factories.

The Kims are often portrayed within idealized or ‘real’, larger than life, inspirational, monumental landscape paintings. The monumental landscape is meant to invoke a nationalistic pride for the beauty of “Motherland Korea”, and many include dramatic scenes of the Kim leaders overlooking natural sacred locations within the country.

Scenes of “on-the-spot” guidance are instructional and are meant to imply the paternal nature of the leader who checks in on his nation while they work and produce for the good of the state. Entrance halls of many government buildings, libraries, subway tunnels and museums hold “on-the-spot” guidance paintings of the Kims. Within this imagery, loyal subjects from the national party attend to the leaders; there are officials taking notes, factory workers or soldiers appreciating an “on-the-spot” lesson, or young adoring students or children crowding around. The idealized ‘public’ always looks upon their “Parent Leader(s)” with admiration and love, grateful for the concern and interest bestowed upon them and the state. These scenes portray the Kims occasionally with a spade or some other agricultural or working tool, indicating their participation in projects within various regions, factories, or famous places within the country. Kim Il Sung’s official biography states: “For all his many duties, the leader found time to visit factories and farms, solving their problems at lightening speed while touching the hearts of the workers with his parental concern for their welfare.”⁷

⁶Portal, *Art Under Control in North Korea*, 87.

⁷Meyers, *The Cleanest Race*, 96.

“On-the-spot” guidance paintings are meant to reinforce the idea within the viewer that the “Parent Leader” always shows great care and attention to his people and state of the country like a mother would to her children.

Song Byeok mocks this invented hierarchy in his work by seemingly replicating some of the formulas of *Juche* Realism while insidiously unveiling their formulaic character. In many paintings he highlights the strength, spirit of self-reliance, and the child-like naïveté of the workers, soldiers and children of the North Korean state. He builds upon the *Juche* ideal and presents an alternative reality within the controlled set of imagery. He lifts up the people of the nation while also deconstructing the ideal figurehead as well. He follows the guidelines of presenting the leader, this time by updating state sponsored portraiture and ‘on-the-spot’ guidance genre paintings. He mocks these formulaic productions associated with propaganda and disrupts the hierarchy enforced by the *Juche* Realist tradition.

North Korean *Juche* Realist renderings show Kim Il Sung as the embodiment of ethnic Korean virtues. He is represented as the “most naïve, spontaneous, loving, and pure Korean—the most Korean Korean—who ever lived.”⁸ Kim Il Sung may be looked at as a symbolic image of a maternal figure, or great “Parent Leader,” who is both mother and father and whom the children need not rebel against. Further reinforcing the ideal image of himself as a “Parent Leader,” Kim Il Sung is often accompanied in large paintings by children (Illustration 1). The “on-the-spot” guidance painting *Untitled (Kim Il Sung Visits a Kindergarten)* depicts the “Parent Leader” suddenly popping into a kindergarten classroom. The brightly lit kindergarten room welcomes Kim Il Sung during his “on-the-spot” visit, and it seems he has caught the children by surprise as they are eating a snack. The sweetly

⁸Ibid., 110.

rendered kindergarten teacher, located in the right background of the painting, looks toward the “Parent Leader” admiringly. She clutches her Party published teaching book and watches from afar proudly as the “Parent Leader” interacts with the children as if they were a part of his own family. His softly molded skin and cheerful comforting expression reassures the children that he will show them the utmost love and protection. The children rush upon the “Parent Leader” with great enthusiasm, and excited wonderment, like a child greeting their parent when they first walk through the door after their day of work. These twelve adorable children, all seeming to be the same height, having similar haircuts and dress, quickly hurry up to the “Parent Leader” as if it were a race to see who can get into his arms first. One little girl wins this race and is picked up into the arms of Kim Il Sung, who is shown with the little girl resting on his left side.

Notably, the schoolgirl nestled in the embrace of the “Parent Leader,” is the only child in this painting wearing the Korean national costume called *Hanbok*. Inserting a symbol of a firmly held Korean tradition, like *Hanbok*, is a commonly used tool within propaganda posters, and *Juche* Realist paintings in the DPRK. This tactic reinforces a national symbol, this time an emblem of traditional “Koreanness”, an ideal for all citizens within the DPRK. *Juche* ideology instills the notion of clinging tightly to tradition because that is what sets the North Korean people apart from the rest of the world.

The painting of Kim in the classroom is very colorful and bright, recreating the exuberance and happiness of what the innocence of childhood is and the unconditional love children have for their biological parents. It must be noted that the kindergarten teacher almost seems like the perfect addition for another kind of ideal, one that propagates the

patriarchal family.⁹ The teacher may be almost looked at as the “Mother” of the specific nuclear family represented in this piece. Kim Il Sung seems to be the symbolical father, or the nucleus, of this family, to which all the children cling. But the image is meant to instill within the nation the idea that Kim Il Sung should be looked upon as a male mother figure, playing both the roles of mother and father, both sexes in one.¹⁰ According to B.R. Meyers, author of *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves—And Why it Matters*, the representation of Kim Il Sung as a “male mother figure” is supported by Freud’s studies of the child’s yearning for a phallic mother, an omnipotent parent who is both sexes in one. Legends of the maternal nature of Kim Il Sung tell of him rescuing orphan children from Japanese imperialists. They depict him as a figure “abounding in the love that a mother has for her children,” further instilling a “family state” ideologue within the North Korean state.¹¹

Most stories are mythical in nature when relating to the nation the origins of Kim Il Sung, and often only a slight truth may be told, historically speaking. In one such Party published tale called *Father*, Kim Il Sung neither exercises authority nor imparts wisdom upon his “children,” as was carried out in the tale of Stalinist Soviet Union but instead the leader shows a maternal instinct when interacting with children. The official encyclopedia praises the story in maternal terms describing Kim Il Sung as, “the great Parent Leader who holds and nurtures all Korean children at his breast.”¹² The first verse of state sponsored song *The Leader came to the Sentry Post* stands as a perfect example for the kind of rhetoric that surrounds Kim Il Sung as the ultimate maternal father figure:

⁹Linda Jenness, *Feminism and Socialism* (New York, N.Y: Pathfinder Press, Inc., 1973), 73.

¹⁰Meyers, *The Cleanest Race*, 110.

¹¹Meyers, *The Cleanest Race*, 80.

¹²*Ibid.*, 105.

*The leader came all the way to the sentry post,
And held us affectionately to his bosom,
So happy about the warm love he bestowed on us,
We buried our faces in his bosom,
Ah! He is our Parent!
Ah! A son in his embrace,
Is happy always, everywhere*

His son Kim Jong Il, also trained within this dogma, described his father's care to be like that of a sensitive and meticulous mother who could make anyone feel better with just one word.¹³

The text within the official encyclopedia contains much more of an emphasis on the female parent and exceeds the use of the word "Motherland". It is said that when propaganda for domestic consumption compares the country to one of the two parents it is always to a mother. The best-known poem in North Korea entitled *Mother (Omoni)* displays the typical language used by the state and its workers to propagate the gender bias toward the nation as the Mother. North Korean poet Kim Cho Ol wrote:

*Ah, Korean workers' party
At whose best only my life begins and ends;
Be I buried in the ground or strewn to the wind,
I remain your son,
And again return to your breast!
Entrusting my body to your affectionate gaze,
Your loving outstretched hand,
I will forever cry out in the voice of a child, Mother!
I can't live without Mother*

In correlation to the poem, Kim Jong Il stated, "the homeland is everyone's mother ... [from whose] bosom all true life and happiness springs".¹⁴

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Meyers, *The Cleanest Race*, 73.

This concept lies in the structure of the North Korean ideal that the nation of Korea is made up of one pure race created out of Motherland Korea. Therefore, figures of Mothers in propaganda posters or *Juche* realist paintings are read as symbols of the purity and chastity of the Korean race and its virtues. The young female figures within North Korean society and propaganda posters are not considered fully equal or superior to men. Rather, because they are women, they assume the traditional responsibilities in the home, upholding a symbol of the chastity and purity within the entire race. Both deemed important virtues contained within the ideals of pure Koreanness, chastity and purity also may link to an idea of child-like naïveté that is applied to the blind dedication and obedience a North Korean should have for the nation and their “Parent Leader.” The female also becomes the model subject for the obedience and total submission of tradition or the idea of the woman nurturing tradition. Like the little girl depicted in the kindergarten scene, females in North Korea often wear a variation of the traditional Korean costume within propaganda posters. This notion emphasizes the ‘Maternal Homeland’s’ uniqueness of untainted traditions and customs of the Korean people, upheld in North Korean society.

The mythologized version of the history of ‘Mother Korea’ is at the heart of the propaganda machine in the DPRK. Official party text refers to the mono-ethnicity of the ‘Mother’ Korean race and describes the people as speaking from the same ‘blood language.’¹⁵ Koreans are said to be born pure and selfless. They have also been referred to in official Party text as ‘The Child Race,’ implicating their innate moral superiority to all other nations. Kim Il Sung stated, “Korea’s citizens are homogenous; therefore they have strong brotherly love” and while his son and leader in succession Kim Jong Il said, “our

¹⁵Ibid., 74.

people...the purest and cleanest in the world.”¹⁶ After numerous invasions of Chinese tribes, Japanese samurai, and American war ships the North Koreans pride themselves in being able to preserve the unique integrity of the race, and the 100% purity of their people by embracing the idea of them being the uncontaminated child of ‘Mother Korea’. Kim Il Sung ascribed the race’s historical vulnerability to attack in the absence of a great leader who could turn its purity into a source of unity and strength.¹⁷ By isolating the population, Kim further perpetuated this uncontaminated ideology by calling the nation the purest “Child Race” under his parental care. This belief instilled within the nation the idea that the people are the children that serve and obey their parent and the masses are given no choice but to infer that they are born pure and virtuous above any other race.

In another “on-the-spot” guidance painting, *Worrying about a Warrior’s Health* (Illustration 2), Kim Il Sung visits a military school and the “Parent Leader” is seen smiling kindly, lovingly, and encouragingly while holding a young soldier close to his expansive maternal bosom in an embrace. Forever smiling, the appearance of Kim Il Sung seems again to embody North Korean feminine virtues and features; a rounded face looking soft to the touch, rosy cheeks and dimples enhance the likeness to an adoring mother. The setting is more formal than the kindergarten scene, and is presumably a classroom where the young soldiers learn about war tactics and geography with the use of maps, as we see the indoctrinating tools spread out on long tables or hanging up on walls. In, *Worrying about a Warrior’s Health*, the “Parent Leader” wears a white military costume emphasizing the virtue and purity of his “Koreanness.” The soldier looks timid and unsure of himself as he

¹⁶Meyers, *The Cleanest Race*, 79.

¹⁷Portal, *Art Under Control in North Korea*, 78.

presses his pink-cheeked face up against the white tunic of the “Parent Leader,” who welcomes him into his loving arms. Two other Army personnel accompany the youthful soldier and look lovingly toward the seemingly ‘parent/child’ embrace. The soldiers within the painting wear a different colored military costume separating them from the “Parent Leader” and also note a certain rank and position held within the Army. Kim holding a high rank militarily wears white, further emphasizing his ethnic purity elevating him to a higher level of virtue.

One of the soldiers represented in *Worrying about a Warrior’s Health* is a woman. Women are accepted into the North Korean army, but are not treated equally to men within the armed forces, and are therefore not qualified to receive certain kinds of revolutionary teachings or training. The young woman is perhaps included within this composition to enhance the idea of the family unit. The “Parent Leader” lovingly shows the deep care he has for his children and represents the “Father/Mother” with “Son(s)” and “Daughter”; again a nuclear family is depicted. This representation may also be further understood to mean the “Parent Leader” embraces his Sons and Daughters of the revolution; the leader ushering in the future of his “Motherland.”

These are just two examples of the thousands of propagandist images and *Juche* Realist paintings produced within North Korea with depictions of the “Parent Leader(s)” with their children. By looking at these early renditions produced by state sponsored propaganda artists, one may gain an understanding of the kinds of images produced within the cult of personality surrounding the Kim family. One may also begin to see the resemblance of this style of artwork in the paintings created by Song Byeok who propagates the idea of the “Parent Leader” within his renderings of Kim Jong Il. The former images display a slight

gender bias/ambiguity of the former leader and present an understated female portrayal of the Kim leaders from the *Juche* Realist tradition. These figures are shrouded in a feminine masquerade due to state sponsored propaganda used to manipulate the people. Song Byeok appropriates this masquerade in the following images by creating a subversive representation of the “Parent Leader” ideal by displaying his own version of the maternal father figure.

In Song Byeok’s painting *A Loving Father and his Children* (Illustration 3) Kim Jong Il is represented embracing a group of children shabbily dressed. These children are known in North Korea as ‘fluttering swallows’¹⁸, a delicate name for homeless street children. The “Parent Leader” has a large mask-like face, which grins brightly with a content and self-assured expression. Not much of Kim’s body is shown, as if the lower part of his torso is immobile. The loving embrace of the parental Kim evolves into a heavy leaning as he is actually represented using the huddle of children to prop himself up as he is being carried through the composition. The children are all represented with toothy grins, some of them sporting a ‘thumbs-up’ signifying their excitement and assurance of the leader, who leans on them for support. The children are dressed in shabby multicolored t-shirts and shorts with patches, as their Parent, Kim Jong Il, wears his typical austere, olive-colored leisure suit. Contrary to their circumstances these children look as if they do not have a care in the world. Their existence is apparently dedicated to supporting the Kim regime, as the painting parodically suggests. The children seem happy to be in the presence of their “Parent Leader” even though they are the victims of an oppressive regime. Starting from *Juche* Realism, Song Byeok recreates the ideal parental figure within the grouping and represents the ‘new’

¹⁸Greg Pence, “The Art of Song Byeok”, available online at: <http://www.songbyeok.com> on 01/04/2013.

nuclear family, one that is broken and needs to be propped up. He is exposing the deception behind the “Parent Leader” ideal. Song Byeok reveals the masquerading of the leader as a loving, caring, paternal figure who nurtures and embraces the nation and presents a more realistic facet of Kim Jong Il’s identity. The leader appears weak and vulnerable, manipulative, and exploitative, completely dependent upon the nation.

The Parent Leader and children are central within the work and inhabit a surreal environment; a large white semicircle bisects the top and middle of the composition. It is outlined with a blue scalloping pattern that resembles the petals of a flower. The blue extends to the edges and corners of the top right and lower half of the composition, perfectly surrounding the figures within a protected and enclosed dreamlike space. Inside the white circle, to the upper left, is the silhouette of a pinkish-red flower, the *Kimjongilhua*, North Korea’s national flower. The *Kimjongilhua* is a specifically grown strain of Begonia named after Kim Jong Il. Enclosed within the paper-like pink flower silhouette is the white shadow of a butterfly, wings outstretched in flight. The butterfly motif also appears in the lower right corner of the work, an almost cut-out shape in white, set free from the dark-blue boundary surrounding it. The freedom of the butterfly motif sharply contrasts with the constraints faced by the children, who candidly smile although the weight of their leader rests upon their shoulders.

A Loving Father and his Children is similar to the *Juche* Realist painting discussed earlier, *Untitled (Kim Il Sung Visits a Kindergarten)*. Both works reflect upon the same ideology and style, yet the message is strikingly different despite the everlasting love and appreciation expressed by the children upon meeting their leader. Song Byeok expropriates this traditional “Parent Leader” ideal within his image by revealing the truth behind the

masquerade. The children do not jump into the arms of Kim Jong Il, rather his foundation is built atop the backs of the nation. The children do not know freedom and are unaware that there is liberty and autonomy outside of the environment they exist. The leaders' smiles in both works perpetuate the myth of the nuclear family representative of the whole nation, but Song Byeok's mask-like rendering of Kim Jong Il exposes the counterfeit ideology behind the parental façade.

Song confronts the "Parent Leader" ideal once more in another work depicting Kim Jong Il's encounter with the people. *Untitled* (Illustration 4) also portrays Kim Jong Il in a seemingly *Juche* Realist manner as he is leading an indigenous tribe of people. Six female members of the tribe are shown, breasts exposed, wearing white neckpieces, waist wraps, bracelets and anklets. The women also wear a type of grass-skirt or loincloth tied around the lower half of their waist. Some of them wear a small crown-like headpiece. In his olive-green leisure suit and trademark-mirrored sunglasses, Kim greets the female tribeswomen by holding up his right arm, as a king addressing his loyal subjects. The leader's left arm is tucked casually behind his back, a common pose donned by the leader when greeting large crowds of people. The tribeswomen do not rush up to the Leader, nor do they embrace him; instead the villagers depict a nonplussed curiosity as the "Parent Leader" approaches them. Some embrace each other while others clasp their hands in wonder. Their attitude sharply contrasts with that of the leader who appears unmoved by their presence.

Song Byeok breaks the *Juche* Realist codes. He does not depict Kim Jong Il as a larger than life character, instead his austere dress and mechanical gesture make him seem lifeless and ordinary. Kim is also shown the same height as the villagers, matching their stature and status against the stark white background. Kim Jong Il is also not suited in a

white military costume like his Father in the *Juche* Realist work discussed earlier, thus lacking the symbolical motifs of virtuousness. Included amongst the villagers are two small toddlers. Both naked and bald, these children represent the new revolutionary generation Kim attempts to lead. One child stands to Kim Jong Il's left staring at the leader, with his naked back facing the audience. The other stands directly in front of Kim, leading him by a long string, which has been woven by the shadow of the leader. This work is similar to *Worrying about a Warrior's Health* because it can be read as Song Byeok's attempt to relay the message that Kim Jong Il fails to embody the ideal guise of the "Parent Leader". He was shown in 'on-the-spot' guidance paintings as troubled by the concerns of the nation and ushering in a future generation for the Motherland. Song Byeok portrays Kim, not as the parent who embraces his children, but as a robotic caricature of the past leader, empty and ineffectual. Song Byeok displays a nuclear family amongst the grouping of the villagers, and places Kim outside the realm of their family unit. He is not embraced or accepted as their parental figure and therefore is not manipulating them with his past "Parent Leader" masquerade.

Song Byeok's *Untitled* painting displays an uninfluenced crowd of people who are unaware of the mythologized ideals and indoctrinations of the Kim regime. They inhabit a void space signifying their freedom from the boundaries of the North Korean System. This painting may be look at as a commentary about imperialism and the imprudence of colonial domination as it seems Kim Jong Il attempts to lead a group of people that do not fall under the blanket of the "Motherland" or his "Child Race". Song Byeok mocks the very notion of a "Child Race" and diminishes the importance of Kim Jong Il's leadership by placing him

within an “on-the-spot” guidance scene, which constitutes an alternative reality to the one that actually existed.

Song Byeok used the *Juche* Realist influences of his past to inform his artistic style and to unveil the deceit he withstood while living under the totalitarian Kim regime. He challenges the past visual system of the state sponsored ‘cult-of personality’ and the gender-ambiguity of the “Parent Leader” ideal by expropriating and exploiting it, shedding light on the masquerade present within North Korea. Song Byeok took the *Juche* Realist style as a foundation to build upon and upset it in order to expose the invented hierarchy of images and subject matter and present an alternative view of the masquerade. As a result the “Parent Leader” ideal surrounding the Kim regime is turned upside down. Song Byeok successfully disrupts the *Juche* Realist system of visual symbols and power and aggressively exposes the ideological constructions that perpetuate the rule of the Kim regime.

CHAPTER 2

THE FEMININE MASQUERADE OF KIM JONG IL

In the prior chapter I have shown that Song Byeok subversively appropriates *Juche* Realist compositions and symbolical motifs. In what follows, I will focus on analyzing his parodical representations of Kim Jong Il as a hyper-sexualized maternal figure. By hybridizing the figure of the former North Korean leader with that of a seductive woman, Song Byeok undermines the paternal attributes of his former figurehead, Kim Jong Il.

In the painting *Take off your Clothes* (Illustration 5), Song Byeok pairs the head of Kim Jong Il with the body of Marilyn Monroe, combining an iconic symbol for oppression with the iconic symbol of an uninhibited, American movie star. Song Byeok hybridizes Eastern and Western iconography, *Juche* Realism and Pop art. Thus, providing invaluable observations from a complex geopolitical situation, Song Byeok exposes the masquerade present within North Korea.

In his most well-known painting, *Take off Your Clothes*, Song Byeok satirically represents Kim Jong Il as a gender-ambiguous figure. By dressing up the former leader as a woman, Song Byeok reveals another side of Kim's identity. The costume he wears is easily recognizable as the famous white dress worn by Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch*, a movie directed by Billy Wilder in 1955. Imitating the famous scene in which Monroe's dress flies up over a strong gust from a subway grate, Song Byeok represents Kim Jong Il smiling and posing coyly as his dress floats in the air. While pushing down

the white skirt of his dress, exposing slender looking thighs, knees, and calves, Kim Jong Il manages to keep his private areas covered, hidden from the viewer. But, as the title imperatively suggests, *Take off Your Clothes* wants the former leader to expose himself and liberate what is hidden from the audience. Like a pin-up girl or centerfold, this Kim/Monroe figure plays on the promise of nudity.

Upon first glancing at *Take off Your Clothes*, the viewer recognizes the head of the main figure to belong to political-icon, Kim Jong Il. His signature mirrored sunglasses, chubby cheeks, wooden smile, and 1950s haircut are all too conspicuous. The arms of the figure are slender with soft looking skin. Wearing the signature Marilyn Monroe white dress and mimicking the evocative pose of the actress, the figure floats between genders. Though the feminine pose is over-sexualized there are no over-exaggerated female features. The breasts of the hybridized Kim/Monroe are covered tastefully and do not seem to have too much shape. The dress covers the rest of the form leaving only the legs exposed at the ankles.

Shown without feet, Kim seems to float in a blank void space as the left edge of his flowing white dress disappears like a ghost into the white background. Located at the bottom of the painting, where the feet and subway grate should be, is a carp pond. Thus, Song Byeok places a surrealist twist on *Juche* Realism. Seven carp swim up and out of the pond while three are jumping out toward the flowing skirt of the Kim/Monroe figure. Song Byeok references Korean folk tradition by utilizing the carp as a symbol of growth, metamorphosis, perseverance in adversity, strength of purpose, and good fortune. The fish is suggestive not only of the metamorphosis of the gender-hybridized leader, but also of the transformation underwent by individuals who manage to free themselves from

North Korea.¹ The fish leap out furiously and change colors, signifying the rise of individuals who have defected from the North to the South in the past years.²

Kim's image has been engrained in many minds as a familiar political icon, his facial features becoming a caricature of recognizable characteristics within *Take off your Clothes*. His likeness within the image may be interpreted in a number of ways as Song Byeok's representation of Kim is mask-like creating either an illusion of Marilyn Monroe wearing a Kim Jong Il Mask or Kim Jong Il embodying the feminine role of Monroe by dressing up. Either possibility is valid as Song Byeok's motivation is to emphasize the ambiguity of the figure and question its identity and very nature of existence. He uses the masquerade to criticize the leadership of the Kim regime, but he also chooses to disguise the political figure in a non-threatening femininity, suggesting he is utilizing it as a device to deflect attention away from the desire of power within the individual.³

As discussed in the previous chapter, psychoanalyst Joan Riviere suggested that masquerading oneself in a womanly or feminized disguise was a tactic used by an individual to diminish their intellect and mask their ability and aptitude, deemphasizing the actual need for power. This relates to past non-threatening images of the Kim leaders depicted as the "Parent Leader(s)" in *Juche* realist works, as the leaders donned a softer more feminine appearance, rather than a more masculine authoritative one, as a means to deflect the attention away from their ultimate power and rule.

¹Yeol-su Yoon, *Handbook of Korean Art: Folk Paintings* (Seoul, Korea: Yekyong Publishing Co., 2002), 362.

²Greg Pence, "The Art of Song Byeok", available online at <http://www.songbyeok.com> on 1/4/2013.

³Efrat Tseelon, *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality* (London and New York: Routledge-Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 11.

Moreover, the hybrid or hermaphroditic depiction of Kim Jong Il in *Take off Your Clothes* wittily bring forth the gender-ambiguous, motherly attributes of the parent leader in *Juche* Realist paintings. Song Byeok transforms this past ideal by exaggerating Kim's femininity. The former leader's head is depicted in the same manner as in *Juche* Realist paintings with rounded dimpled cheeks, a beaming smile, and smooth looking soft skin. The leader is also portrayed with a kind and inviting demeanor, not welcoming with open arms like the *Juche* portraits discussed earlier in Chapter 1, but instead greeting the viewer with a lively allure of flirtation. Song Byeok subverts the past ideal by representing Kim Jong Il either dressed in a feminine costume or with a woman's body, posing like the centerfold in a men's magazine. Song Byeok creates a new feminine identity for Kim Jong Il, one that exposes the artificial maternal qualities attributed to the male leaders. The leader is more openly portrayed as feminine in Song Byeok's work, than in *Juche* Realist representations of Kim Jong Il and his father. The feminine qualities associated with ideal motherhood are appropriated and subverted, being substituted with the seductive tactics of a movie icon embodying the notion of sexual liberation.

Song Byeok is not the first artist to have subverted the idealized image of an oppressive leader by hybridizing it with Monroe's portrait. Chinese Political Pop artists of the late 20th century challenged the visual codes and ideology of Socialist Realism by creating parodical representation. Just as the artists trained under the *Juche* realist style in North Korea, Chinese Red Guard artists under Chairman Mao Tse Tung were to follow a strict set of rules. Similar to *Juche* Realism, only three types of images were to be depicted: those that glorified history, Chairman Mao's leadership, and a happy idealized

proletarian society. In 1978, however, isolationist China opened its borders to Western influences and with time Chinese artists began re-inventing Socialist Realism, treating the style as an outlet to challenge the former visual formula. Once thought to be a negative aspect in Mao's China, individualism was embraced and used to depict the artist's emotion and newfound point-of view, while also attempting to reveal the constructed nature of their traditional past and oppressive reality.⁴

With the rise of a global consumer culture, Chinese artists began juxtaposing corporate logos to propaganda images as a means to display antagonistic ideological forces to which they were simultaneously exposed. In 1988, art described as 'Political Pop' began to emerge in China. By criticizing the propaganda of Mao's mass culture and the ideology of global mass consumer culture, Chinese Political Pop artists exploited and distorted both the political and commercial systems to criticize their current societal state. Political Pop unmasks these ideological systems by revealing their manipulative role.

These artists mocked the idea of authenticity, reducing political ideology to a mere commodity while also disclosing the deceiving qualities of the spectacle of corporate and commercial advertisements. Not only were Western logos like Coca-Cola and Kodak exploited within their work, but also Hollywood celebrities and recognizable pop-icons. Chairman Mao, already popularized in 1973 as a pop-icon due to Andy Warhol's portrait, became an object of ridicule when Political Pop artists Yu Youhan and Li Shan began to hybridize their former leader's ideal image with that of Marilyn Monroe. Mao's official portrait is satirically manipulated as he is depicted as

⁴Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, University at Buffalo Art Galleries; Beijing: Millennium Art Museum, 2005), 88.

masquerading in a feminine disguise. Undermining and subverting his legacy, the Chinese Political Pop artists concealed the identity of Chairman Mao by revealing another, creating a new pop-icon to replace the dominance of the old one.

Yu Youhan's works are reminiscent of Andy Warhol's portraits of Chairman Mao and Marilyn Monroe. In *Untitled (Mao/Monroe)*, the artist superimposes the images of the two well-known figures (Illustration 6). Yu subverts the ideal image of Chairman Mao and masquerades him within the womanly disguise of Marilyn Monroe. His lips are full and luscious, represented by a thick black outline and filled-in with bright, pinkish-orange lipstick. His eyes, like Marilyn's, are soft and inviting; his right eye painted with a wide brushstroke of yellow eye-shadow, his left with blue, and his slim femininely sculpted eyebrows form an awkwardly enticing gaze. In the center, Mao's nose is daintily placed, characterized only by a single elegant wave. The shape of Mao's face has been maintained, as well as his receding hairline and expansive forehead, defined by a halo-like shape of blue hair. His cheeks, not plump and rounded as seen before in his official portrait, are sculpted like a drag queen's, shaded darkly, creating the illusion of high cheekbones and a narrow jaw line. His wrinkles and pronounced mole beneath his lower left lip present within Warhol's *Chairman Mao* portrait are nonexistent, creating a smooth even tone to the orange skin of the figure. And last but not least, situated to the left of his elegant wave-like nose is the finishing touch of the feminine disguise, Monroe's signature beauty mark, completing the drag costuming of Chairman Mao.

The iconic figure sits in an environment saturated by a deep red/magenta; the juxtaposition of the composition's colors creating an explosive portrait of a new hybridized figure, the gender-ambiguous Mao/Monroe. Using garish colors like bright

orange, red, magenta, yellow and highlights of blue, Yu depicts Mao with almost clown-like make-up, creating a foolish drag portrait, which challenges the exhausted Mao portraits of his past. The viewer at first is deceived by the masqueraded figure, and is yet still able to understand that both Pop icons are represented, creating an updated hybridized gender-ambiguous cult image. The head seems to float in the offensively bright environment due to a white hazy outline highlighting the right edge of the Mao/Monroe figure. This effect seems to further substantiate the mask-like quality of the figure and creates a mythical hybrid pop icon.

Li Shan also depicts a gender-hybridized image of his former leader in the works included within his *Rouge Series* (Illustration 7). In Li Shan's paintings Mao seems to be imitating Marilyn Monroe, displaying more of a female drag impersonation of the Western female pop-icon by the former Chinese leader. Chairman Mao is placed within a sky blue void-like environment and is portrayed with a more youthful disposition. He wears a conservative black high collared suit and an olive-green army hat with a communist red star in the center. The shade created by the young leader's hat creates a rectangular shadow on his forehead, producing an interesting illusion. Either the femininely rendered Mao seems to be donning a bob-like feminine hair cut with severely cut angular bangs, or it looks as if the figure is wearing a mask. The skin is porcelain white and softly sculpted with make-up; a deep wine-colored rouging fashions high cheekbones, ruddy, dimpled cheeks, and a slender girlish jaw line. The lips are an intense red, blending in with the dark-pink wine color of his rouge, further enhancing the figure's mask-like or painted drag-like appearance. If not read as a figure wearing a mask, the young leader is heavily painted with make-up creating the illusion of Mao

posing as a woman. His eyes are dark and relaxed, giving the viewer a coy gaze emphasized by thick black outlines of eyeliner and delicately penciled on thin eyebrows. The signature mole on Mao's chin is not pronounced, as in Warhol's *Chairman Mao* portrait, but is more elegantly placed below his lower lip, mimicking the popularity of the American actress's 'beauty mark'. This gender ambiguous image of Mao carries a lotus flower in its mouth emphasizing the slight puckering of its red lips. The lotus, a symbol often seen in traditional Chinese painting, is a cultural folk tradition rooted within Buddhist iconography, signifying the birth of Buddha. Giving a deeper meaning to this gender-ambiguous figure, the lotus is commonly recognized as an auspicious symbol representing rebirth, pureness or holiness. This flower furthers the idea of the masquerade within this work, as the feminized Mao image is the leader reborn, the symbolic lotus further appropriates the conception of change, metamorphosis and rebirth, similar to the carp depicted by Song Byeok in his composition. Li Shan created an evolved figure that contradicts the visual traditions of his former upbringing. By inventing a new identity for the former leader, Li Shan questions the hypocrisy of his reality creating an alternate one as a means to expose and understand the indoctrinations of his past.

Like Song Byeok, Chinese Political Pop artists, Yu Youhan and Li Shan, created a new subversive visual language to challenge the traditions and ideals of their previous training. Mocking the conventions of both socialist realism and the influx of Western Pop culture, these artists used the Pop style as a means to expose the repetitious phony character of Socialist Realism compositions. Masquerading the former leaders in a feminine disguise and hybridizing their official portraits with that of the legendary

Marilyn Monroe, these artists constructed a recognizable gender-ambiguous pop icon, exercising their artistic freedom to divulge past deceptions.

Chinese Political Pop paved the way for artists like Song Byeok to challenge their visual past and understand their new artistic freedom. These artists created a gender ambiguous image of Chairman Mao, subverting the ideal and thus creating a new pop icon. The same may be said for Song Byeok as he manipulates the “Parent Leader” ideal and turns the maternal father figure into a sex symbol. His feminized Kim continues to expropriate the *Juche* Realist convention, emphasizing the female traits of the former leader, but by over-sexualizing them he subverts the past ideal. By exploiting both the lasting image of Kim Jong Il and Marilyn Monroe, Song Byeok formulated a new popicon, creating alternative versions to the originals.

While the Kim/Monroe figure within *Take off your Clothes* confronts the audience with a flirtatious portrait of the former leader, Song Byeok perpetuates the image of his Kim/Monroe pop icon from a different viewpoint. In another work, *Untitled* (Illustration 8), the Kim/Monroe figure again obscures the frontal view of its gender by pushing down his/her skirt as he/she spins around, playfully revealing bright red undergarments. The figure is presented willfully exposing itself, leaning forward slightly to show off what was once hidden underneath the white flowing skirt. Kim’s female masquerade departs from the Chinese Political Pop depictions of Mao/Monroe, which depict the figure from the neck up donning drag-like make-up or facial features that morph with Monroe’s to create the impression of clown-like make-up. Instead, Song Byeok allows Kim Jong Il to keep his beaming smile and rounded cheeks in order to mock the *Juche* representations of the former “Parent Leader” ideal. Therefore, the

traditional North Korean practice of feminizing the facial features of the leader do not call for additional make-up or a clown-like garish treatment to emphasize the female gender subversion. As an alternative Song Byeok further expropriates this by exposing Kim's full body from the neck down, this time masquerading the figure in a sexy revealing costume, imitating Monroe's famous pose and white dress.

Song Byeok presents an alternative angle to the scene shown in *Take off Your Clothes* by representing Kim Jong Il's flirtatious backside. His/her left knee bends and extends up, exposing the full thighs, white sling-back high heels, and the bright red underwear hidden beneath the flowing fabric of the pleated skirt. Kim/Monroe is shown in action as varying colors of blue stagger behind him as if creating the illusion of motion. The figure looks coyly over his left shoulder as if fully aware of his seductive bodily pose. A blue silhouette of a bird in flight lingers above the right side of the figure representing the freedom to view the world from an alternate perspective. The wings are outstretched as it flies above Kim/Monroe, literally catching a bird's eye-view of the figure while floating through the void-like space without constraint. A single pale pink feather gently lies at the foot of the feminized leader, yet its symbol seems powerful enough to be the source of wind beneath the gown or the motive behind Kim/Monroe's animated movement. Song Byeok describes the feather as an emblem denoting the temporariness of the former leader.⁵ Once thought of as a divine eternal creature, Kim Jong Il is the same as the feather of a pigeon, inconsequential and as fleeting as an autumn leaf. The *Untitled* painting reveals an alternative view of the masqueraded feminized leader.

⁵Pence, <http://www.songbyeok.com> on 1/4/2013.

Song Byeok found the iconic image of Marilyn Monroe to be the ultimate symbol of liberation and saw her freedom and confidence as an expression of her true identity.⁶ With this in mind, he used Monroe's image to juxtapose an icon of Western liberation with that of North Korean totalitarianism, deliberately constructing a contradictory image of Kim Jong Il. As a leader Kim kept his true identity concealed and became a human caricature, masquerading himself in a costume of dark aviator sunglasses and austere jump suits. Song Byeok constructs an alternate identity for the former leader by hybridizing a political icon with a movie icon in order to create a new pop icon, offering an alternative identity for the enigmatic Kim Jong Il. Aware of Monroe's ties to Pop art imagery, Song Byeok also used her image as a means of reaching a wider audience responsive to easily recognizable images. Marilyn Monroe is an easily recognized pop symbol internationally, allowing Song Byeok to communicate his message through the immediate recognition of the actress and of the political leader.

Song Byeok furthers the feminine masquerading of Kim Jong Il in another work by tapping this time into recent popular culture. Gaining inspiration from celebrity dance shows like *Dancing with the Stars*, Song Byeok created *Fall Into My Arms* (Illustration 9), a painting representing Kim Jong Il as an over-sexualized figure absorbed in a swoon-like tango pose. The feminized Kim is seen in a low-backed slinky red dress with a high slit, exposing his right thigh. His two feet, in stylish strappy red dancing heels, barely touch the ground as he is guided into a back bend in a ball-room dance routine. His clean-cut male partner is the actual leader of the dance and bears all the weight of Kim who wraps his girlish left arm around his partner's neck. The partner holds Kim in a tight

⁶Ibid.

embrace, one arm leading the feminized leader into the backbend while the other holds Kim's right hand firmly, guiding his/her arm in a dramatic sweeping motion that draws the eye to the top of the composition. The partner, wearing black dance shoes, black trousers, a purple silky blouse and a silver chained necklace, nuzzles into the embrace of the feminized Kim and conceals his face from the viewer; but Kim is represented with his head turned to the right staring out at the viewer. His face, again mask-like, exhibits the same forced smile, dark shaded sunglasses and formulaic expression perpetuated by *Juche* Realist works. Yet, below the neck Kim becomes a hybrid gender figure, represented in a feminine over-sexualized pose and slinky clothing.

Song Byeok, and Chinese Political Pop artists Yu Youhan and Li Shan, chose to portray their past leaders shrouded in the masquerade of femininity as the ultimate form of ridicule. The masquerading of comedic actors or drag actors performing as fools or women are meant to draw attention to the latter figures as the definitive objects of ridicule.⁷ These artists similarly use femininity to humiliate their former leaders by portraying them as duplicitous beings, existing as one thing and its opposite at the same time, creating something both hideous and attractive.

Song Byeok's Kim/Monroe figure also plays on the Pop device to use portraits of the celebrity, actress and even drag queens as a means to further launch the critique of the figures' ambiguity. Kim/Monroe seems to be all of these things wrapped into one: he/she is part actress, part celebrity, and part drag queen, a phony production of images that exploits a phony reality. By doing this Song Byeok is adopting a critical posture toward

⁷Tseelon, *Masquerade and Identities*, 169.

that which he has actually surrendered.⁸ The “drag” or feminized images of Mao/Monroe and Kim/Monroe created by the Chinese Political Pop artists and Song Byeok reflect this idea as their original styles are linked to Socialist Realism and their newly produced pop icons ridicule, humiliate and criticize that to which they have ultimately surrendered. It is not a submissive surrendering but rather a deliberate construction of it, building upon its well-established visual motifs to exploit and expose ideological representations.

Song’s Kim/Monroe figure is not supposed to be thought of as phony or as an artificial version of the real thing, but as a parody of “the very notion of an original.”⁹ By representing the hybridized figure of Kim Jong Il and Marilyn Monroe, Song Byeok creates a new pop icon, not as a phony or artificial version of the real thing, but as a parody of the *Juche* “Parent Leader” ideal and the perceived persona taken on by the ‘real’ Kim Jong Il behind the façade of North Korea.

Song Byeok’s work represents a metaphor for a ‘phony’ cultural production; whether it be through producing a ‘phony’ image of both the pop icons Kim Jong Il and Marilyn Monroe or by using the stylistic influence of his upbringing to refer to the ‘phony’ cultural production of *Juche* Realist propaganda. Song Byeok’s work also seduces the audience with its resemblance to Pop art. It is meant to challenge the North Korean ideological system prompting *Juche* principles by portraying it under the guise of American popular culture.

⁸ Doyle, “Tricks of the Trade”, 49.

⁹ Ibid., 68.

CHAPTER 3

SONG BYEOK REVEALS THE NORTH KOREAN ‘SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE’

Song Byeok’s painting *Take off Your Clothes* (Illustration 5) mocks and ridicules the Kim regime and the ideological cultural production the North Korean totalitarian state commissions. Creating a sexualized hybrid figure of Kim Jong Il and Marilyn Monroe, Song Byeok challenges the political system that once controlled his existence. His entire body of work strategically targets the heart of the spectacular idealized institutions and images saturating the lives of people in North Korea. He uses elements of these to expose, confront, and break free from the spectacle in place within the North Korean state dominated by the Kim family.

Song Byeok paradoxically relies on the tools of the spectacle to unmask it. As Guy Debord rightly argued in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), spectacle is an instrument of capitalist societies, as well as left-wing dictatorial regimes. Criticizing the rise of mass-media domination and its effects on twentieth century society, Debord considered that all societies are becoming immersed in a false reality controlled by the producers of the spectacular system. Debord challenged the impact of spectacular systems by producing a disruptive film that subverts the flow and alluring quality of commercial imagery. In the same vein, Song Byeok relies on the most prominent symbols of *Juche* to expose the artificiality of propaganda imagery. Though Song Byeok may not be aware of Debord’s theories of *Society of the Spectacle*, the subversive imagery he produces confronts the

spectacular system. Song Byeok's satirical work is reminiscent of Debord's theses, written some forty-five years ago, because it offers a current visual example of how a controlled society should be challenged by art. This chapter will reveal similarities between Song Byeok's art practice and Guy Debord's criticisms presented in the *Society of the Spectacle*. A comparison of the two will facilitate a deeper understanding of Song Byeok's imagery and his attempt to unmask the false identity and the masquerading of his former leader and the concentrated spectacle dominating North Korean society.

As a writer, filmmaker and theorist, Guy Debord saw the influx of the mass media and its consumption dominating French society in the 1960s depriving individuals of autonomy. As a member of the Letterist International, a Parisian protest group of artists and theorists, Debord aimed to expose the capitalistic phony visual production in an attempt to reveal its control. His theories suggested that the mass media contributed to the alienation of the working individual and the intensification of struggle between social classes. In his view, the capitalist system creates a false reality, a mere representation of life that is referred to as "the spectacle" or the social relation between people mediated by the imagery of the system in power.¹ Whether the mass media came from the capitalist 'diffuse' system of power or the Communist 'concentrate', Debord considered both structures as a construction of a manipulated society of non-individuals, where 'being' ultimately equated to merely 'appearing', or the appearance of an image, in-turn not living or truly existing within reality.²

Debord's 1967 manuscript *Society of the Spectacle* calls for the individual's emancipation from the spectacle by using it against itself. Debord and the Situationists

¹Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI Black & Red and Oakland, CA: AK Press, 1983), thesis #4.

²Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis #17.

sought to create a series of struggles meant to challenge and disrupt the spectacle, believing that situations unexpected or conflicting need to be staged to engage individuals and raise their social consciousness in order to achieve true existence outside of the represented society.³ Situations were meant to free the individual from the repetition and predictability of the spectacle, enabling him or her to reclaim autonomy. The text aided in spawning French student and labor revolts beginning in May of 1968, which succeeded in halting the capitalist structure in place for a short period of time.

The North Korean state provides a contemporary example of ‘concentrated’ spectacle, as it is a socialist run totalitarian society that heavily relies on propaganda imagery to consolidate its power. Debord’s opening theses describing what the spectacle is made up of can be directly linked to the controlled isolationist society within North Korea. Enforced by the spectacle, the *Juche* ideals and principles that dominate North Korean culture are considered the primary means of social unification.⁴ These ideals make up the largest part of society where all gazing and all consciousness is concentrated, as *Juche* ideology and *Juche* Realist art saturates and consumes all of the mass-media system within the controlled state. The North Korean state produced an official language and raised the Kim regime to an idealistic divine stature that rules over all citizens. *Juche* ideology and propaganda suppresses individuality and strengthens the sense of a uniform collectivity of workers and soldiers.⁵ Within North Korea, people are producers and consumers of *Juche*; the product

³Simon Ford, *The Situationist International: A User’s Guide* (London, United Kingdom: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 50.

⁴Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis #3.

⁵Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis #7.

produced is *Juche* and the product consumed is *Juche*, a self-perpetuating system of ideological control that endorses an attitude of passive-acceptance.⁶

Song Byeok unveils the saturation of the spectacle when he uses common *Juche* themes within his paintings. In *A Loving Father and His Children* (Illustration 3), Song Byeok highlights the increasingly weakened system by parodying the role of Kim Jong Il as the ‘Parental Leader’. Meant to be the supreme leader and loving parental figure, Kim Jong Il looks weak, as he props himself up on the backs of homeless children he has, in reality, neglected. The children all smile and give a ‘thumbs-up’, playfully patting the Parent Leader’s head, mimicking the joyful cherubic expression of greeting Kim Il Sung in *Juche* Realist works (Illustration 1 & 2). Though not pristinely dressed or idyllic the group of children in Song Byeok’s painting, convey their enthusiasm despite bearing the weight of the Parent Leader. They represent the struggle of the working class manipulated by the spectacular system, yet expressing its continued support for the power of Kim Jong Il. By using the once familiar official visual language of *Juche* Realism, Song Byeok also challenges this mode of North Korean mass-media by critiquing its ideology and exposing it for what it is, a false representation of reality.

Song Byeok strategically uses the *Juche* Realist visual language to show its artificiality and undermine its manipulative power. He exposes the deceitful image of Kim Jong Il by offering him another feminine disguise: a highly sexualized female body that conflicts both with the leader’s masculinity and with his perceived maternal inclinations. *Fall into my Arms* (Illustration 9) depicts the “Parent Leader” as a feminine figure fully immersed in a dancery embrace. Kim Jong Il’s dance partner, a faceless well-dressed

⁶Ibid., thesis # 12.

ballroom dancer, dips the leader into a tango-like back bend, putting him in a vulnerable position. Song Byeok subverts the *Juche* maternal ideal by presenting the “Parent Leader” as a diva that has abandoned herself in an embrace. All of her weight rests in the arms of her partner, as Song Byeok chooses to place the feminine Kim in a powerless position as he is depicted as a woman swept off her feet, willingly giving in to male seduction tactics.

The masquerade is intimately linked to the spectacle, described by Debord in terms of a false sense of reality, or a fraud. He eloquently remarked “in a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of false”.⁷ The masquerade is an instrument of the society of the spectacle. The masquerade implies a deliberate exaggeration of the existing features of an individual or group, usually meant to increase authority, seductive power, or ridicule. Song Byeok turns the masquerade of *Juche* Realism upside down by turning Kim Jong Il into a femme fatale figure who willingly chooses to abandon herself to an embrace.

Debord calls the spectacle an illusion and a “nightmare of imprisoned modern society”⁸, as it deceives individuals under the guise of an accessible appearance that strengthens the social bond. Song Byeok comments upon this deceitful guise as he interrogates the *Juche* ideal of masquerading Kim Jong Il as a kind and loving maternal parental leader that is the corner stone of the society of the spectacle of North Korea. Additionally, he substitutes one mask for another, creating a puzzling figure which wears more masks than one evoking the ambiguity of the figure.

Song Byeok uses the theme of the masquerade and the idea of deception to criticize and subvert *Juche* spectacular images and ideals. Analyzing the concentrated spectacle in

⁷Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis #9.

⁸Ibid., thesis #21.

place, Song Byeok uses its language in order to navigate through its methodology and break it down.⁹ His past experiences and current art practice offer his audience the unique experience of a contemporary artistic criticism of the society of the spectacle, in this instance the spectacular power system in place within North Korea. Song Byeok's visual history is dominated by the imagery of the North Korean mass-media spectacle, a controlled society where an individual's autonomy is minimized, and the dominance of the power system and its leaders are maximized. Surviving the false reality created within North Korea, Song Byeok escaped and was able to reclaim his autonomy from the system. His liberated artistic perspective challenges and disrupts the spectacle within North Korea, showing the contemporary relevance of Debord's theories.

By 1972 Debord's Situationist International had disbanded, but their theory ignited French society. Song Byeok's reliance on *Juche* conventions is reminiscent of the détournement strategy. Originating from the French term meaning 'to re-route' or 'highjack'; the Situationists' strategy of détournement implied the appropriation of propaganda imagery and the language of spectacle to undermine its power.¹⁰ Song Byeok's art practice can be described as similar to détournement, as his images highjack the *Juche* Realist style and its typical subject matter in order to disrupt and challenge it. Song Byeok's usage of Pop art elements further subverts the ideals of Kim Jong Il and of North Korean *Juche* principles. As he combines elements of Western consumer and mass-media Pop culture with *Juche* Realist elements, Song disrupts and challenges both societies of the

⁹Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis #11.

¹⁰Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, "A User's Guide to Détournement", *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Canada and Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 14.

spectacle by using the propagandist mass-media images from ‘diffuse’ and ‘concentrated’ spectacular systems of power, merging the two and exploiting both manipulative visual systems. His artwork entails a double appropriation, exploiting both spectacular systems’ assemblage of images to implode past representations from them, creating an alternate reality that confronts the spectacle at multiple levels.

When China opened its borders to the West in 1978, the Western Capitalist system of mass-consumer culture clashed with the mass-consumption of Maoist Socialist realism. This collision created the Political Pop movement, discussed earlier in Chapter 2, by mimicking, exploiting and undermining both the capitalist and communist sets of spectacular images. The rapidly transforming social and economic structure of late 1980s China generated “political kitsch”, mass-produced political icons, memorabilia, and objects for commercial appeal and mass-consumption.¹¹ These images and objects infiltrated the visual lexicon of popular culture, advancing toward “commercial kitsch”. The spectacular images and items once developed within the communist system were mass-produced as commodities within a system evolving into pseudo-capitalism and entering into the popular culture of the global spectacular system. This spectacular phenomenon created “Double Kitsch”, which combined the two mass-cultures of socialism and capitalism into one image or object.¹² Chinese Political Pop artists strategically used “Double Kitsch” within their works as a dual-détournement. Surrendering to both systems of propagandist imagery, both upsetting and aligning the two systems of mass-control, the Chinese Political Pop artists created the

¹¹Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, University at Buffalo Art Galleries; Beijing: Millennium Art Museum, 2005), 101.

¹²Minglu, *The Wall*, 101.

ultimate backlash against both visual systems. Their compositions hijacked both styles, creating a new language to disrupt the society of the spectacle. Song Byeok mimics and exploits his *Juche* Realist tradition, creating an appropriation of the style while also perpetuating the concept of “Double-Kitsch” to subvert and disrupt the images of both his controlled socialist past and the current system of global capitalist domination.

Both Chinese Political Pop, and Song Byeok’s *Juche* Pop further the use of “Double Kitsch” by employing images of the celebrity to comment upon the controlled systems of the spectacle. Debord called the entire spectacle “the self-portrait of power.”¹³ Building off a similar idea, these artists have created innovative “portraits of power” by subverting the conventions of the spectacular celebrity portrait, and challenging the integrity of idealized representations. Debord referred to the celebrity as a spectacular representation of a living human being, embodying the image of a possible role, specializing in the seemingly lived.¹⁴ The celebrity or star is the object of identification in the representation of life and is considered the surrogate for which society believes in the false reality. The celebrity embodies the inaccessible result of the social struggle by dramatizing the by products of the spectacle. In one case, state power personalizes itself as a pseudo-star; in another, a star of consumption gets elected as a pseudo-power over the lived.¹⁵ By using the celebrity, the spectacle is able to transfer its power of control to an individual designed specifically to enable further control and deceive society in believing the false reality is actually true.

In this sense the spectacular celebrity is used to further the masquerading of the spectacle by personifying the ‘individual’ within the spectacular system. Debord calls

¹³Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis #24.

¹⁴Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis #60.

¹⁵Ibid.

celebrities the opposite of the individual or the enemy of the individual as the “admirable people in whom the system personifies itself” which “are well known for not being what they are; they become great men by stooping below the reality of the smallest individual life”.¹⁶ Song Byeok’s hybridization of the state pseudo-star Kim Jong Il and the star of consumption Marilyn Monroe in *Take off Your Clothes* (Illustration 5), offers a new “portrait of power”. By inventing a false individual, which reflects the artificiality of the North Korean spectacle and the Western mass-media spectacle, Song Byeok is able to create a mockery of its idealized features. *Take off Your Clothes* undermines both systems of mass-media control and exploits the manufactured star created within the spectacular system. Song Byeok’s use of the inventive “Double Kitsch” subverted “portrait of power” perpetuates the motives of the spectacle by providing it with a new Pop-icon for the contemporary global spectacle. His *Juche* Pop icon is not an idealized one, but one that defies and undermines the very notion of an idealized popular culture icon.

Debord calls for a critique of the spectacle by using its very language to contradict it. He called for a dialogue that was “not a negation of style, but the style of negation”¹⁷, which is the very strategy Song Byeok develops in his art practice. He has used the images existing within the spectacle to go beyond its limits. Song Byeok’s *Juche* Pop is a style of negation, which uses the visual language that once dominated his world to expose its weaknesses and subvert its ideals. Debord describes this ‘style of negation’ as a scandal and an abomination of the tastes of the dominant language used within the spectacle.¹⁸ Song Byeok’s Kim/Monroe figure in *Take off Your Clothes* (Illustration 5) embodies just that: ‘scandal and

¹⁶Ibid., thesis #61.

¹⁷Ibid., thesis #204.

¹⁸Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis #205.

abomination' exudes from this figure revealing contradictions and turning the language of the mass-media spectacular system upside down. His work takes of the clothes of the society of the spectacle in North Korea and sheds light on the false representations of the nation's leaders.

CONCLUSION

Song Byeok's experience as an artist begins with his former occupation as a North Korean propagandist artist and continues as a defected citizen from the isolationist state, finding freedom in the neighboring nation of South Korea. Once using his talents to further the ideals and indoctrinations of the despotic Kim regime, Song Byeok now uses his artistic freedom to unmask the deceptions of the North Korean state and present to the world the weaknesses of the Kims and the contradictory ideals in place within the North Korean totalitarian system. In this thesis, I examined how Song Byeok's art practice reveals the masquerade present within North Korea. His satirical paintings build upon the stylistic codes of *Juche* Realism while simultaneously purging them of ideological efficacy. *Juche* Realism, closely related to the Socialist Realist style imposed in the Soviet Union and Chairman Mao's People's Republic of China, follows a strict set of rules concerning subject matter, composition, and iconography, a set of rules Song Byeok still follows to an extent in order to subvert the integrity of the North Korean *Juche* style. Song Byeok was not the first artist to use the controlled set of imagery that once ruled his visual and artistic integrity to criticize and mock a totalitarian regime. Years after China opened its borders to the West in the late 1970s, Chinese artists started to merge Western styles and symbols with socialist Mao imagery, thus creating an entirely new genre: Political Pop. Free from the constraints of his North Korean past, Song Byeok appropriates the visual tropes of *Juche* Realism and blends

them with elements of Western Pop Art, revealing the layers of deception enforced by the society of the spectacle.

Song Byeok uses the style of the propagandist images from his past, and incorporates Pop art elements to subvert the realism of both. Within the North Korean *Juche* ideological system, the state funds visual propaganda meant to enhance national pride and ideological faith. Songs, poems, and large scale *Juche* Realist paintings emphasize the maternal qualities of the Kim leaders and refer to North Korean citizens as naive children who should cling to the bosom of the Motherland and their ‘Parent Leader(s)’. Song Byeok appropriates this maternal ideal and subverts it, by presenting his audience with an overtly sexualized female hybrid of Kim Jong Il. *Take off Your Clothes* (Illustration 5) the work for which Song Byeok is most well known, displays the feminized Kim figure, an overtly sexualized gender hybrid mixing the head of Kim Jong Il with the body of Pop-icon, Marilyn Monroe. *Juche* artists present an ambiguous feminine masquerade to North Korean citizens by attributing maternal qualities to Parent Leaders. Song Byeok exposes this masquerade by adding another spectacular mask, that of a female movie star as fascinated by fame as Kim Jong Il and other members of his family. By hybridizing genders and over sexualizing the depiction of Kim Jong Il, Song Byeok doubles the masquerade of the North Korean maternal feminine ideal thus disclosing its deceptive nature.

Mixing Pop art with Chinese Socialist Realism, the Chinese Political Pop artists also employed the feminizing of their former leader to undermine the legacy of its once revered image. Before Song Byeok satirized the North Korean maternal ‘Parent Leader’ ideal, artists like Yu Youhan and Li Shan masqueraded Chairman Mao within a feminine disguise to ridicule the supremacy of his leadership. Feminized Political Pop portraits of Chairman Mao

present him with mask-like or clownish make-up, rendering the former leader as an overly painted fool that is subject to ridicule. Using the pop icon Marilyn Monroe as the basis for their feminine subversion of Chairman Mao, Yu Youhan and Li Shan presented their former leader in a drag-like disguise, challenging the ideal leadership and integrity of the ideological system once in place. The utilization of Marilyn Monroe subsists between both the Chinese Political Pop artists and Song Byeok, who emphasize her role as an easily recognizable western Pop-icon, and as an objectified over-sexualized female figure. Hybridizing Monroe's identifiable over-sexualized female figure with the easily identifiable features of Chairman Mao or Kim Jong Il, these artists have created an updated version of the pop icon by subverting the ideal images of their past leaders.

Both the Chinese Political Pop artists and Song Byeok made stylistic choices to build upon the propagandistic modes of their past artistic practice as a means to expose their use as a manipulative tool. Their practices expose the spectacle manipulation implicit in the visual language dominating their controlled cultural system. Situationist theorist Guy Debord criticized the growth and dominance of the Capitalist controlled mass-media machine infiltrating 1960s French culture. Ideologies are enforced via spectacle, which leads to the proliferation of falseness and alienation. The only way to challenge it appears to be the use of the same set of propagandistic tools, now used to expose and destroy it. Debord's 1967 thesis *Society of the Spectacle* provided a sturdy theoretical basis for Song's satirical art practice, which exposes the weaknesses of the North Korean spectacle by using its very visual language to destroy it. Song Byeok shows the persistent relevance of Debord's text and places the "Spectacle" in a contemporary context by comparing it to the current social climate in North Korea. He furthers the notion of the 'society of the spectacle' by not only

using the visual language of the North Korean spectacle, but also by using Western Pop imagery, to expose the capitalist spectacle now present on a global scale. By confronting the spectacle and utilizing it within his art practice, Song Byeok undermines the idealized icons of both spectacular systems, creating a new global popular culture icon that highlights the masquerade tactics characteristic of societies of spectacle.

Song Byeok's work presents his audience with a unique look at what life was like inside North Korea, but also sheds light on his conflicting position as a former subject of *Juche* and a new subject of the South Korean neo-liberal society. A further study to find more contemporary North Korean propagandist artists who defected would be an important step to take for additional research. Artists like Sun Mu, who defected from North Korea in the 1990s, also uses the *Juche* Realist style to expose the rigid constraint imposed by his former state. Researching Song Byeok I became aware of Sun Mu's work and a comparison of their compositions would prove the importance of their art practices and provide us with unique examples of what life as former propagandist artist from North Korea would be like. An additional study to learn more about other artists who defected from North Korea would offer a more complex view upon their struggle and strategic endeavors. Unfortunately, because North Korea is an isolated society with strictly policed borders, information is not as readily available for research about North Korean art practices. Also, defectors have to be very careful to keep themselves protected from North Korean spies, so they frequently use pseudonyms once they reach South Korea. It may take time for a defected artist to begin producing art freely or to find an appropriate venue where to display his/her artworks. Moreover, a small amount of scholarly work has been published concerning North Korean *Juche* Realism and a deeper understanding of the style as a whole is needed.

Song Byeok survived myriad hardships within North Korea before he was finally able to escape in 2002. His remarkable experiences are an invaluable example of the strength of the human spirit and the power of artistic freedom and expression. As a free thinking individual and practicing artist, Song Byeok is now living the life of a contemporary global artist, being interviewed by numerous magazines and news stations around the world and exhibiting his work at various galleries within the United States, South Korea, and in the future, Europe. His work stands as a sharp commentary on the North Korean state's masquerade as his paintings raise viewers' awareness of the alienating effects of totalitarian regimes whose leaders have lost a sense of personal identity as they hide behind their masks of power, false parental love, and grandiose ideas of divine virtuousness. Most importantly, Song Byeok seeks to educate the world about the lack of respect for human rights in North Korea and the importance of individual freedom and autonomy from a controlled state.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1: Unknown North Korean state propaganda artist, *Untitled (Kim Il Sung Visits a Kindergarten)*, c. 1960, medium unknown, dimensions unknown.



Figure 2: Unknown North Korean state propaganda artist, *Worrying About A Warrior's Health*, c. 1960, medium unknown, dimensions unknown.



Figure 3: Song Byeok, *A Loving Father and His Children*, 2011, acrylic on hanji, 48" h x 79" w.



Figure 4: Song Byeok, *Untitled*, date unknown, acrylic on hanji, dimensions unknown.



Figure 5: Song Byeok, *Take off Your Clothes*, 2010, acrylic on hanji, 73" h x 37" w.



Figure 6: Yu Youhan, *Untitled (Mao/Monroe)*, 2005, medium unknown, dimensions unknown.



Figure 7: Li Shan, *Rouge Series*, 1994, medium unknown, dimensions unknown.



Figure 8: Song Byeok, *Untitled*, acrylic on hanji, date unknown, dimensions unknown.



Figure 9: Song Byeok, *Fall into My Arms*, 2011, acrylic on hanji, 42" h x 29 1/2" w.

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VITA

Johanna Leanne Perry was born on September 7th, 1983, in Anchorage, Alaska, where she was raised until the age of fourteen. At that time she moved to rural western Nebraska where she was educated both in local public and private schools and graduated from Saint Patrick's High School in North Platte, Nebraska, in 2001. She went on to attend the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Hixon Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts, where she majored in Art History and Criticism and minored in German. In 2003, she was accepted into a two-semester study abroad program in Berlin, Germany, where she also was awarded an internship through the gallery Haus am Lützowplatz Förderkreis Kultur Zentrum.

After graduating from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2006, Johanna was looked for a new adventure and challenge. She became certified to teach English as a Second Language through Oxford Seminars and traveled to Seoul, South Korea, in 2008, where she taught Kindergarten and Elementary school students. While living in Seoul, Ms. Perry was able to travel extensively through Asia, acquiring an interest in the study of contemporary Asian art.

After returning to the United States, Johanna pursued an MA program in Art History at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. She was awarded Graduate Teaching Assistantships three semesters in a row and worked within the Art History department as an undergraduate advisor and teacher assistant. She also was involved in the UMKC student

organization, the Graduate Art History Association (GAHA), where she held offices as Secretary (2011-2012) and later Vice President (2012-2013) of the group.

Johanna currently works as a Research and Appraisal Assistant at Madison Group Fine Art Appraisals and as an Executive Assistant for Rachael Cozad Fine Art Dealing. She hopes to continue researching contemporary Asian art with an emphasis on the influence of propagandist images and would like to pursue a PhD in Art History in the future. In the mean time she will be working on becoming a certified Fine Art Appraiser.