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Special to the Star

With its reputation for Stalinist repression, North Korea's image in the West tends to be an ugly one. But a current Toronto exhibition is offering a rare look at this mysterious nation's more beautiful and artistic side.

"North Korean Images at Utopia's Edge," on display at the University of Toronto Art Centre, is the first exhibition of North Korean art in Canada. Its 24 linocut prints are drawn from the collection of Nicholas Bonner, a U.K.-born, Beijing-based architect, tour operator and filmmaker who's visited North Korea monthly since 1992.

"The problem in the West is we have our own preconceptions of what North Korea is like," Bonner says over the phone from his Beijing home. "I know how strongly the North Korean public wants to have exposure to the West, and it's just as important for us to get a sense of where they're coming from. That's what drives me."

"Utopia's Edge" is just the latest instance of Bonner's aim to bridge cultural gaps between North Korea and the rest of the world. *Bend it Like Beckham* He's created award-winning documentaries on North Korea's soccer teams and U.S.-military defectors, and amassed more than 1,000 pieces of North Korean art in demand for exhibitions overseas.

"Many people think there's no such thing as art in North Korea, there's only propaganda," says U of T assistant professor Janet Poole, who, with colleagues in the university's Centre for the Study of Korea, brought this exhibition, originally organized by New York's Korea Society, to Toronto.

"This exhibition forces some kind of questioning of that, I think."

The prints in "Utopia's Edge" often reflect official North Korean values of industrial productivity, state benevolence, military pride, self-sufficiency and rural living. The mood is unrelentingly positive, such as children rejoicing over a parent's hard work on the railway.

As a result, these images may seem exactly like propaganda to some viewers. Yet at the same time, Bonner argues, there's a dedication to craft that has an "art for art's sake" quality.

"There can be this blast of propaganda," he says, "But it's very accessible and you can see sensitive parts where normal life is going on too," like a couple getting married.

Poole also points out that every nation, ours included, has its own form of utopian art imagery.

She notes that the Group of Seven's paintings glorify landscape too — even if those landscapes are boreal forest rather than rice-paddy farmland.

Granted, both Bonner and Poole admit there are limits on what North Korean artists can produce. "They wouldn't produce something that's openly critical of the regime," Poole says, while Bonner explains that the area where he sees the most boundary-pushing in Korean art isn't in content but in form, towards abstraction — a genre disallowed by Kim Jong-Il, who stated all art must be readily recognizable.

Ultimately, Poole says, the aim of the exhibition is to shed some light on life in North Korea — a life which is difficult even for experts like herself to ascertain.

To this end, a related symposium Feb. 3 will feature two renowned researchers on the subject: curator Jane Portal, who built the British Museum's North Korean art collection, and Dutch academic Koen de Ceuster, who has met with many North Korean artists.

"There's a tendency to think that everything from North Korea is totally exotic, totally incomprehensible. Maybe totally evil," Poole says. "But these prints, which are gorgeous, can really challenge that.

"I think that any artist has some loyalty to art as well as to their own state."

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