

North Korean Art Debuts at U of T Arts Centre

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*The exhibition hall, at the University of Toronto Arts Centre, where *At Utopia's Edge* will be on display until March 19. Photo by Nick Kozak/Torontoist.*

North Korea's art, like everything else about that country, is rarely seen by outsiders. But Toronto gallery-goers now have an opportunity to check out a small sample of the isolated state's creative output.

The exhibition, called *At Utopia's Edge*, is taking place at the [University of Toronto Arts Centre](#). It consists of twenty-four prints taken from the collection of Nicholas Bonner, an English expat who frequently leads tour groups into North Korea. Bonner's print collection has been shown in other cities—most recently, New York City—but to the best of our knowledge, this is the first organized exhibition of North Korean artwork ever to come to Canada.

The works are, for the most part, linoleum prints, and they're all pleasant to look at. But even from a distance, it's easy to see the extent to which the North Korean state exerts its control over this type of expression. The resemblance between the styles used in the various pieces is far more than familial: even though many different artists are represented, on casual inspection the exhibition might appear to be a solo show.

The subject matter is restricted to scenes involving working people, in settings as diverse as farms, mines, and even, in one remarkable instance, under the sea, with everyone in bulky diving suits.

One print called "My Workplace," by artist Rim Yong, shows a young female dairy worker amidst her cattle. She's leaning up against a wooden fence and reading a book. Her right arm dangles casually, and her face is radiant with joy. It's a well-executed piece, but the troubling thing about it is that it portrays a lifestyle that isn't prevalent in North Korea, where material scarcity is a fact of daily life.

U of T Arts Centre program coordinator Carmen Victor has lately been puzzling through the complexities of interpreting art executed in accordance with a state agenda.



May Day Stadium Construction, by Kim Dal-Hyon (1988). Image courtesy of the University of Toronto Arts Centre.

“You can read them as artwork, which is what I’m used to doing and what I’m trained to do,” she says. “However, when you’re looking at North Korean prints, you have to look at the society and the circumstances in which the prints were made.” North Korean artists train at universities, the most prominent being the Pyongyang University of Fine Arts. Those who graduate might find employment at any of a handful of state-controlled studios. They receive monthly salaries, and are expected to produce a continual stream of work consistent with Kim Il-Sung’s political philosophy, “**Juche**.” Only artwork that implicitly praises life under North Korea’s brand of socialism is tolerated, but not all artwork produced in North Korea is overt propaganda.

“Some of [the prints’] content refers to specific campaigns of the government, or events, or themes that we might think of as explicitly political,” says Janet Poole, an assistant professor at U of T’s Centre for the Study of Korea, which co-organized the exhibition. “But I don’t think their overall meaning is completely subsumed into that political message.”

“I think it is possible... to look at them and appreciate them for their technique, for their colour, to appreciate them as works of art. And to also possibly imagine some kind of irony, to imagine the possibility that North Korean images, too, might not be completely subordinated to a political message.”

The imaginary exercise Poole suggests is an unexpectedly easy one to perform; it’s tempting to try to search out irony in the prints, because irony is prevalent in contemporary art, and it’s what we’re used to. It’s hard to imagine an artist, living under such a repressive regime, producing portraits of happy dairy-farm workers with total seriousness of purpose. A mind trained to seek out hidden meanings instinctively rejects such blandness.

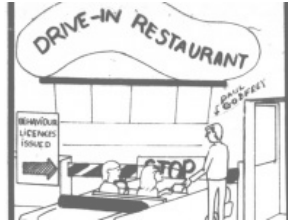
Victor, the U of T Arts Centre education program coordinator, points out one particular work from the collection that she suspected of containing irony when she first saw it. It’s a print depicting a controlled explosion at a construction site, with little black figures celebrating in the foreground, waving red flags. The explosion is huge and chaotic, and it seems possible, if only just barely, that the artist might have intended somehow to undercut the enthusiasm of the celebrants.

But after studying the situation in North Korea in more detail, Victor no longer considers it likely that the artist had any subversive motive. Since the explosion takes up most of the frame, the print is mostly brown and black. “They might just have had an ink shortage,” Victor says.

At Utopia’s Edge continues until March 19. U of T Arts Centre will be holding a symposium, featuring North Korean art scholar Jane Portal, on February 3. See [their website](#) for more details.



A Farewell From Vandalist



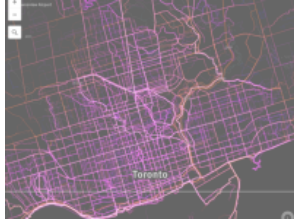
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