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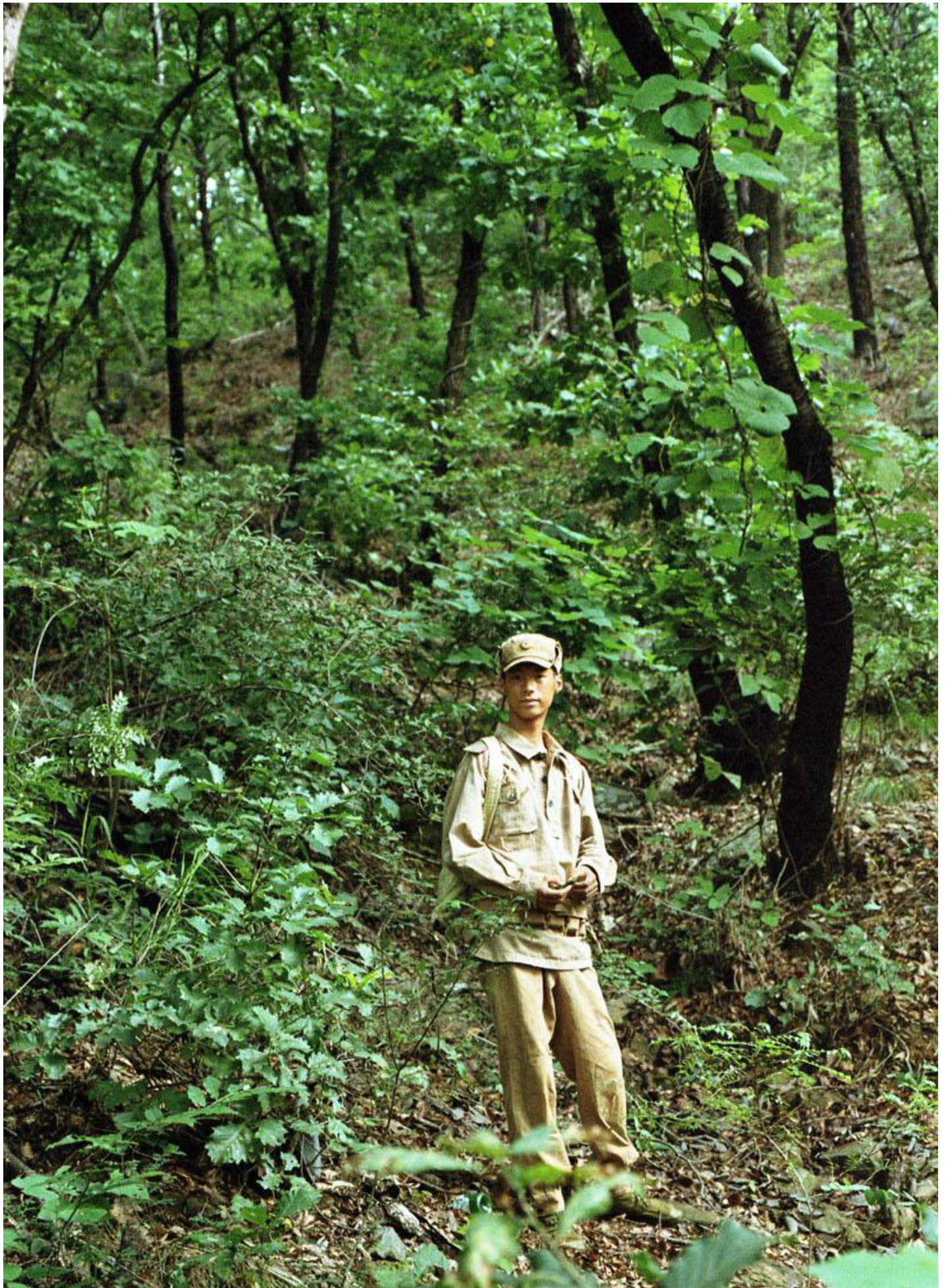
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*NOVEMBER 2018 - "THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"*

TWO FROM KOREA By ROBERT C. MORGAN, Sept, 2018

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*Park Chan-kyong (b.1965), Child Soldier, 2017-2018, Digitalized 35mm Photography, Projection (single channel), color sound 16:09 minutes, Dimensions variable Edition 2/5, 2AP*

## Park Chan-Kyong: Citizen's Forest

Tina Kim Gallery (<http://www.tinakimgallery.com>) (13 September – 13 October 2018)

This was my first occasion to experience the work of the Korean artist Park Chan-Kyong (born 1965) who some consider a leading artist as well as a controversial figure. I had heard about Park largely through unofficial reports emanating from Seoul that the previous Korean President (and daughter of the former military dictator Park Chung-Hee) had blacklisted the artist's work. But since her impeachment in 2017, a more enlightened leadership has been installed and the situation has become less tense, not only for Park, but for artists in general.

But this is never entirely true. What media transmits is not exactly concurrent with what artists wish to communicate. There are often underlying truths that are left out of the picture. On one level, the major issue from a mediated perspective tends to focus on the shift of events between the Republic of Korea in the south and the People's Republic of Korea in the north. Even so, Park is keenly aware that the story between north and south is being told in a way that conforms to the powerful engines that delimit references to past history and culture. This is a major focus that Park learned from the semi-radical Minjung movement that preceded him in the Korean art world and which he still attempts to reconcile in his own work today.

South Korea is a relatively small country where news travels fast through daily exchanges between ordinary people, which some would say is competitive in speed to the Internet. Park is deeply involved in the traditions and political history of his homeland. This is reflected in his research and in the manner he brings recent history into a comprehensive living mythology represented in his photographs and highly creative video films. One of these films is *Citizen's Forest*, which is also the title of his current exhibition. In fact, this is an actual place in Seoul set aside for recreational use, which from a Korean point of view is given primarily to hiking.

The presence of wilderness nature connected within an urban environment is an important asset in everyday life, a tradition that goes back to the beginning of the practice of shamanism five thousand years ago. Throughout Korean history, long before the first dynasties were established in the first century AD, the practice of Shamanism has been indigenous to the Korean way of life. Park attributes much of what he knows regarding this practice to his way of thinking as an artist. This is the non-ideological substratum we see in his remarkable three-channel video installation, *Citizen's Forest* (2016).

The technical artistry in this work moves seamlessly between a continuous black and white horizontal view of a forest landscape occasionally interspliced with two and three-part scenarios. In the center is a young woman who portrays the role of a shaman. She is seen at various intervals while performers dressed mostly in white garments or partially nude stand waving white clothes. One of the most effective is a line of people marching through the forest wearing skulls and playing drums, cymbals, and brass instruments. These actions refer to various traumatic events in Korean history that include the lasting impact of the Korean War (1950-53) the Gwangju Uprising (1980), and the Sewol ferry disaster (2014). References are made to a painting titled *The Lemures* (1984) by the artist Oh Yoon depicting atrocities during the Korean War.



*Citizen's Forest, 2016, Black and white video, directional sound 3 channel video, 26 minutes 32 seconds*  
*Dimensions variable Edition 5/5, 2AP*

In addition to the masterful installation of *Citizen's Forest*, which is worth watching for the entire 26-minute duration, the color video photographs, titled *Child Soldier* (2017-2018), in the opening gallery addresses the role of a soldier presumably from North Korea engaging in normal everyday activities removed from the mythic fierceness contrary to what media often suggests.

The third part of the exhibition, includes a second film video, titled *Believe It or Not*, which is a collaboration with the artist's brother, Park Chan-Wook, also a filmmaker. This film concerns the role of spying and deception among double agents working both in North and South Korea. Here again Park Chan-Kyong raises the question as to what is real in comparison with what is merely simulation and mediation, which presumes a dangerous discord. The brilliance of this film is that nothing is certain on either side. Their activity is a quandary that attests to the ambiguity of motives that goes untold. This exhibition fully captures and captivates

how an artist thinks when given the task of developing mythic content when history falls short. It offers a new light to see where we are today.



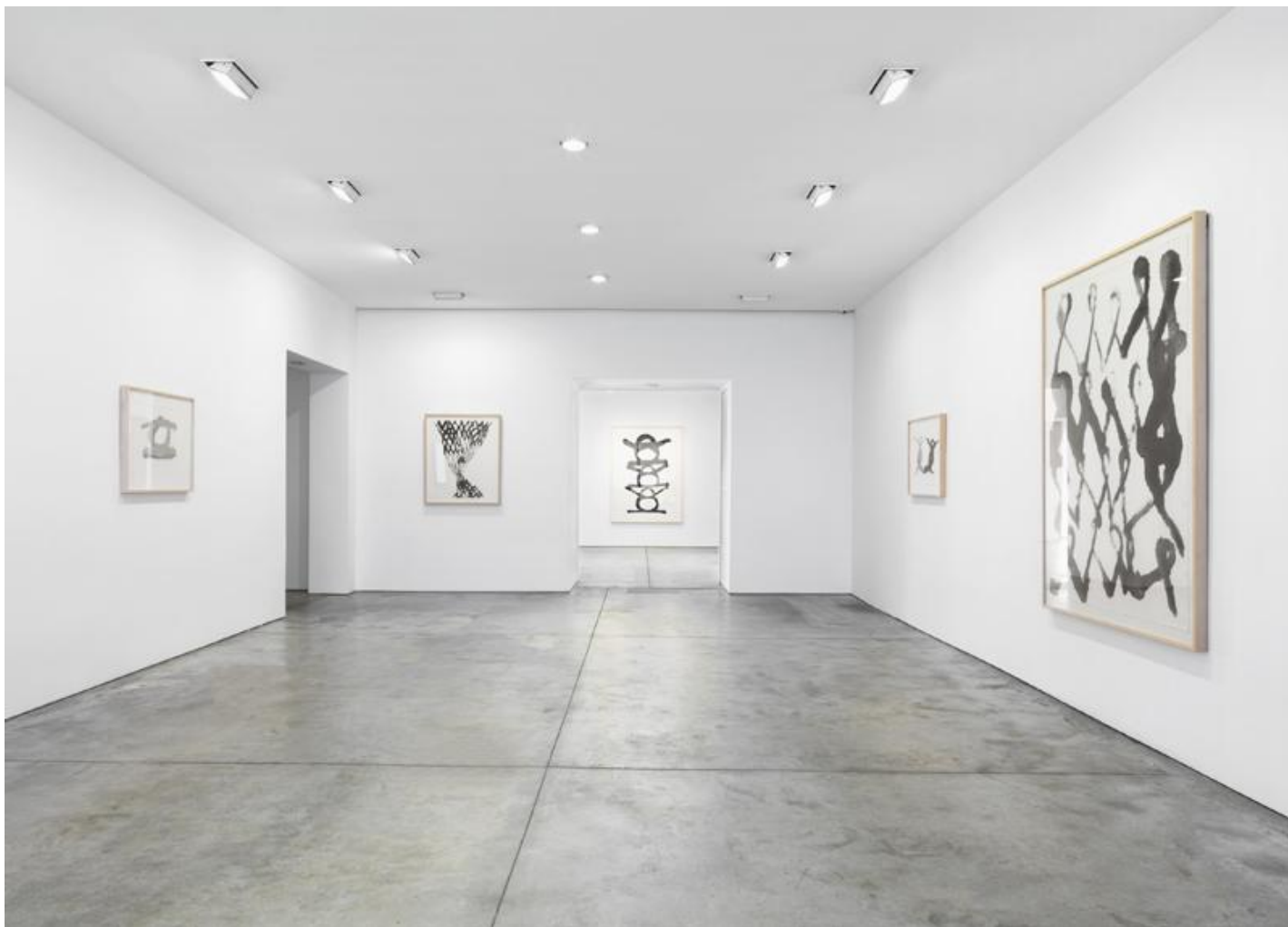
*SUH SE OK, Two People, 2000, ink on mulberry paper, 10.94 x 16.81 inches 27.8 x 42.7 cm © Suh Se Ok. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul.*

## **Suh Se Ok**

Lehmann Maupin (<https://www.lehmannmaupin.com>) (September 8 – October 27, 2018)

The major South Korean brush painter, Suh Se Ok, is having his first exhibition in New York at the age of 89. This is clearly a celebratory occasion for those impassioned by his paintings and for those who have vindicated their importance over decades of time. Suh's work instills a cool elegance combined with a propensity to experiment with abstract forms in ways considered outside the

standard practices of brush painting. In doing so, Suh captures the literati tradition at its height and in all its magnitude. His method is recognized among elite counterparts as *Muninhwa*, or painting in the manner of noble scholars. Suh Se Ok is a master of his craft.



*SUH SE OK, Installation view, Lehmann Maupin, New York, September 8 – October 27, 2018, © Suh Se Ok. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong*

Within this historical context, Suh was one of the first brush painters to reject the modernist enclave coming into Korea by way of Paris in the 1950s. Over the course of his career, he has retained the historical precedent of *Muninhwa* by pushing it toward another level, a more daring and potent level, where the brush becomes a rapid spiritual equivalent that signifies “emptiness” within space and time. He functions as a Zen artist given to meditation prior to the application of ink on paper, which is known as *hanji*.

Hanji is a unique form of Korean paper in which the pulp is made from the bark of indigenous mulberry trees. Some claim that *hanji* is capable of enduring for a millennium. In addition to its function as a surface for the painter's ink, it is also used to insulate houses made of wood, to wrap medications, and to keep vegetables fresh. In earlier times, hanji was used in making lightweight armor for soldiers in that it could resist the puncture of arrows.





*SUH SE OK, People, 1990s, ink on mulberry paper, 34.06 x 27.56 inches 86.5 x 70 cm © Suh Se Ok.  
Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul.*

One of Suh Se Ok's most consistent and important series of work refers to people, what he calls *geu-rim-ja* or, in translation, "shadows on the stage of life." His people are painted in an instant using what might be called a semi-ideographic abstract form that does not exactly show a recognizable person, but instead represents the gesture or position of a person or of people. The ink paintings that comprise this exhibition suggest themes, such as a singular person (seated), a dancing person, a duo of two, or a gathering of several. The current selection was taken from various periods in the artist's extensive career, ranging from 1978, through the 1990s, with several from the unspecified 2000s, which means the present.

In addition to his work as an ink painter, Suh Se Ok is an accomplished philosopher and poet. In many ways his interest in *Muninhwa* was a way to confront his relationship to Japanese *nihonga* painting. He was in search of a counterpart that offered a Korean point of view. This most likely began early on during the years following his graduation from Seoul National University.

By the 1960s, Suh's paintings begin to reveal his involvement in allowing the ink to spill and spiral across the paper. At the same time, he became interested in how to deal with the presence and absence of an image: "What is there and what is not there are in a constant cycle." This eventually led to Zen and to the beginning of his people series. Suh was fascinated with the idea that bodies are part of the universe at large, and that the human figure, no matter how far reduced, transcends time and culture.

Needless to say, Suh Se Ok is the recipient of several major awards and has been collected regularly over time in major museums and collections throughout Korea. The importance of this exhibition at this point in his career cannot be underestimated and I am not certain as to why a larger more comprehensive exhibition was not mounted for the occasion. Hopefully, in the near future we will see it happen **WM**



## ROBERT C. MORGAN

**Robert C. Morgan** is an artist, scholar, poet, teacher, and author. Considered an authority on early Conceptual Art, Dr. Morgan has lectured widely, written literally hundreds of critical essays (translated into twenty languages), published several books, and curated numerous exhibitions. In 1992, he was appointed as the first critic-in-residence at Art Omi International Artists Residency, where in 2016, he was honored as Critic Emeritus. In 1999, he was awarded the first ARCALE prize in International Art Criticism in Salamanca (Spain), and the same year served on the UNESCO jury at the 48<sup>th</sup> Biennale di Venezia. In 2002, he gave the keynote speech in the House of Commons, London on the occasion of Shane Cullen's exhibition celebrating the acceptance of "The Agreement" by the UK. In 2003, Dr. Morgan was appointed Professor Emeritus in art

history at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and, in 2005, became a Senior Fulbright Scholar in the Republic of Korea. In 2011, he was inducted into the European Academy of Sciences and Arts in Salzburg; and, in 2016, the Department of Special Collections at the Hesburgh Library, University of Notre Dame, purchased *The Robert C. Morgan Collection of Conceptual Art*. Much of his work since the late 1990s has focused on art outside the West in the Middle East and East Asia where his books have been translated and published into Farsi (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2010), Korean (Seoul: JRM, 2007), and Chinese (Beijing: Hebei, 2013). Dr. Morgan has worked extensively in China with contemporary ink artists and has authored many catalogs and monographs on Chinese artists. In addition to his scholarly, he continues a parallel involvement as an artist and abstract painter (since 1970) with a major survey exhibition at Proyectos Monclova in Mexico City (March 23 – April 29, 2017). His work has appeared in numerous exhibitions and is included in several important collections.

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