
Matjaž Tančič x 3DPRK: 3DPRK: Portraits From North Korea

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Press Release

Pékin Fine Arts is pleased to present 3DPRK, a collaborative project with Slovenian photographer Matjaž Tančič (b. 1982) and Beijing-based North Korean art specialists Koryo Studio, on exhibit in China for the first time.

Matjaž Tančič's portraits of local people from across North Korea were photographed using a 3D stereoscopic technique. This landmark collection shows not only the citizens of Pyongyang – North Korea's showcase capital – but also ordinary workers, farmers, educators, athletes and entertainers living in Hamhung, North Korea's second largest city, as well as from elsewhere across the country.

The team of five (photographer, producer, two North Korean guides, one driver) also photographed soldiers at the DMZ at the North-South Korean border, and visited schools, hospitals and leisure facilities considered the pride of the reclusive state. Officially invited to document North Korea in 3D, Slovenian photographer Matjaž Tančič aimed to portray something of the people who live there, stripped of rhetoric.

Choosing to take portraits of people in North Korea invites controversy, criticism and significant challenges. In the eyes of the Western world, North Korea is one of the few countries where photographic voyeurism is celebrated. Working within the rules of the North Korean regime invites accusations of being naïve – or, worse, a 'useful idiot' – of taking on the work of a complex and powerful propaganda machine.

North Korea is one of the world's most restrictive societies; all visitors must be invited, and all are required to travel with official guides. Foreign press and picture taking is restricted, and there is an inherent distrust of Western photographers. Capturing a 'rare glimpse' of a North Korean taps into a colonial desire to be the 'first', and thus captures the interest of a Western audience. But that 'rare glimpse' has become so oxymoronically common, we can now call it a trope of North Korean photography.

Forgotten, or dismissed, in this never-ending quest for unseen images, however, are the subjects of these 'rare glimpses' – the North Korean people whose images have been captured. These people are among those with the least personal agency on Earth, decision-making within their lives often governed by the politics and principles of The State. Hard enough in most circumstances, but more so in North Korea – how do you capture the authentic experience of a person in a photograph?

Tančič works in 3D, a technique that requires patience and understanding from the subject – standing motionless for minutes while multiple photographs are captured to cover the requisite perspectives. In a country where people are wary of the Western-wielded camera, persuading people not disposed to prolong the process of taking photographs in public spaces was no small task.

These are not reportage photographs, taken off the cuff with or without the subject's knowledge. These are posed and painstakingly explained images. Out of the frame of each picture is a supporting cast of producers, translators, advisors, bosses, managers and guides – describing the technique, explaining the intent, collecting information, cracking jokes and suggesting staging. These moments are recorded in a documentary video that accompanies the exhibition.

As with all portraits, these photographs depict living human beings, upon whose gaze audiences may project what they will. Each protagonist agreed to be photographed, and was well aware that their image would be exhibited to a wider world. Perhaps it is the individual in daily life that shines out the most from these photographs; each portrait has its own distinct personality, ranging from disdain to pride.

The unique and weird beauty of the 3D technique used for each photograph ultimately highlights the individual nature of the people posing for each shot, and the various layers that make up the surreal theatrical set that is the DPRK today.