

Art review: Photographer Watanabe Finds Cracks in N. Korean Facade

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Hiroshi Watanabe's "Ideology in Paradise" show at Newspace Center for Photography

How apt that North Korea has its own version of time, one that began on the birth date of its late "Great Leader," Kim Il Sung, 96 years ago.

Apt, because there may be poorer, more volatile places in this world, but none is as strangely tyrannized, locked in a foggy, fixed bubble as this Hermit Kingdom.

That trapped-in-time perspective offers a dramatic springboard from which to experience [Hiroshi Watanabe's](#) photos of North Korea, "Ideology in Paradise," which just opened at the [Newspace Center for Photography](#). These striking photographs by the Los Angeles-based Watanabe unearth pearls nearly crushed by Communist drab: the colorful, even humorous humanity embedded in this eternally gray landscape of shabby, Neo-Constructivist buildings, where men, women and children often seem no more than uniformed marionettes.

Many journalists have tried to pull away the thought-control curtain veiling North Korea from the rest of the world. In this regard, Watanabe's photos aren't unique. But what sumptuous visual food they are, a penetrating stare behind this Cold War curio created after the United States and Russia divided, in two, the Korean peninsula at the end of World War II.

That division was preceded by 35 years of often vicious Japanese occupation, a fact not lost on Watanabe, who was born in Japan and holds both American and Japanese citizenship. But Watanabe's two trips to photograph North Korea weren't politically or historically oriented.



Hiroshi WatanabeFrom Hiroshi Watanabe's "Ideology in Paradise"

After reading reports of North Koreans kidnapping foreigners and turning them into spies, as well as stories of the country's starving population, Watanabe was simply curious -- he wanted to know more about this isolated, undernourished "axis of evil."

"I try to find something that I don't understand," Watanabe says about how he chooses his projects. "That's what drives me."

Like many outsiders who travel to North Korea, Watanabe used intermediaries in China to arrange his visa and North Korean tour guides. Virtually every minute of his visits -- to the nation's capital of Pyongyang, the port city of Wonsan, the Demilitarized Zone that separates North Korea and South Korea, and other locations -- was scripted by North Korean officials, overseen by two government travel guides and a driver.

"Once, I left my hotel room, but then someone came out and followed me," Watanabe says. "So they were watching me all the time."

The North Koreans, Watanabe says, wanted to counter media stories of epic famine, nuclear threats and human rights abuses. So, on his two visits, he glimpsed state-run hospitals, schools, subways and more. This was the ideal of order where everyone achieves a common good and praise is always reserved for the Great Leader, Kim Il Sung, whose omnipresent visage looms on posters like a subversive camera tuned to 24 hour-a-day surveillance. This despite the fact that Kim died in 1994 and was succeeded by his son, Kim Jong Il.

It's a puzzling utopia of regularity that embodies what philosopher Immanuel Kant famously wrote: "Perfection is the greatest enemy of good."

An almost Victorian-esque image of a group of students, for instance, captures the cult of uniformity that directs this lost kingdom. Walking against a landscape of dreary clouds and midcentury architectural ugliness, everyone seems to wear the same dark suit, with the only shards of individuality being their respective gaits and postures and the varying degrees to which a glinty white shirt cuff inches past the sleeves of dark jackets.

Easy as it might be, Watanabe doesn't want to capture a one-dimensional North Korea. Gentleness and, literally, a humanity defined by color saturates these images. The show's numerous pictures of children taken at government schools and camps, for example, revel in the vividness of traditional Korean dress, or pocketless hanboks. As much to contrast the surveillance-themed proceedings of daily life, these bursts and dashes of color radiate a kind of existential hope: Beneath the sculpted, dour expressions of the people is something resembling human emotion.

That connection, or desire for connection, is what prevails in Watanabe's pictures. A young boy wearing a uniform salutes and squeaks out a goofy smile while a fly perches on his stiff, saluting hand. Two utterly adorable young schoolgirls standing at attention in a line pout as restless young girls might anywhere in the world.

It might be tempting to blink away such pictures as Kodak Moments. But don't. Though he visited North Korea out of curiosity, Watanabe ultimately has drafted his own critique of this Orwellian state so warped that its people breathe the air of neither the past nor the present but an ether world in between.



Hiroshi WatanabeFrom

Hiroshi Watanabe's "Ideology in Paradise"

It's a theory summed up in one of the exhibit's standout photos, a gorgeous image of a schoolgirl posed next to a gigantic, tattered structure that looks like a map of the world composed out of tiles.

Rendered miniature and seemingly helpless, the young girl stands tentatively, bearing unknowingly the full weight of a wall that seems on the verge of collapse.

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