



Opposite: the opening ceremony of the PyeongChang Biennale, February 2017. Artistic director Seong-Youn Kim at far right; Garry Currin third from right. Photo: Koert dan den Beukel



Above: Mioon (Min Kim and Moon Choi), Auditorium (Template A-Z), 2014, LED lightbox towers, animated with moving parts and electronics, at PyeongChang Biennale, 2017. Photo: Garry Currin

Yang Yongliang, The Night of Perpetual Day, 2012, four-channel HD video, at PyeongChang Biennale, 2017. Photo: Garry Currin

Over the five moons

Barbara Cope travelled with her partner, painter Garry Currin, to South Korea in February for the PyeongChang Biennale 2017. Arts, snow and politics were a feature of the journey.

It had snowed heavily the week before we arrived in Korea. After an initial day in Seoul, we took the bus to Gangneung through a snow-covered, frozen landscape, past high-rise suburbs stretching for miles. Everything appeared raw, inaccessible and shutdown, with large tracts of icy farming land just waiting for spring. There was barely a human being or animal in sight, just the land and the dwellings in an odd village setting. The sole route in to geographically isolated Gangneung is via an ancient track through the Taebaek Mountains, now updated to a 21st-century expressway. The city looked wonderful viewed from the bus window, glistening on the coastline below. But driving through the streets to 'The Lovely Motel', it felt strangely empty for a population of over two million people.

We were in Gangneung because of the moon. After applying to an open call for artists last September, Garry was invited to participate in the PyeongChang Biennale and Gangneung Folk Art Festival with his large painting *Conversation with the Moon*. The biennale and festival

were held in Gangneung, Gangwon Province, South Korea, two and a half hours east of Seoul on the East Sea. Out of 190 applicants from 51 countries, 49 Korean and international artists were selected for the biennale's main exhibition, called *Five Moons*. According to a well-known traditional saying in the historic Gyeongpodae area, the five moons represent "a moon in the sky, on the lake, on the sea, on the wine glass and in your lover's eyes".

After the crowded city of Seoul, we enjoyed the relative peace of Gangneung. We had some downtime on the first afternoon, so we wandered through the deserted streets to Gyeongpo Beach, where the snow was almost down to the tideline and the East Sea was pounding in. A popular weekend destination from Seoul, Gyeongpo apparently hums in the summer but the long line of seafood restaurants along the beachfront, with 'dinner' swimming in full fish tanks outside, stood empty.

Opening day for the biennale was stunning – a clear blue sky with magnificent views of the surrounding

mountains. It was all go: curiosity and anticipation, press interviews, encounters, constant movement, pointing cameras, bumping into other artists, snatches of music and a buzz of organisation, all culminating in the opening reception where 200 invited guests watched the ribbon-cutting moment that officially opened the doors. Garry was asked to represent the artists, amongst 15 other guests: white scarves, white gloves and golden scissors were de rigueur for the ceremony.

In several speeches the biennale was explained as a "cultural Olympics, a harmony of sports and culture... a legacy of support for the young generation". The International Winter Olympics are being held in nearby PyeongChang in February 2018, and the biennale was one of the first events in conjunction with the promotion for the upcoming Olympics. Biennale and Olympics – perhaps those are two versions of a creative life. But in this economically depressed area, we also heard much public dissent about the huge amounts of money spent on Olympic facilities.

We had all day before the reception to wander through *Five Moons*, installed over three gallery floors at Gangneung Green City Experience Center. There was a separate 'World Wide Video' selection, and another smaller showcase for revered 'veteran' artists from the Gangwon province. On site in close proximity were large tented areas for the Gangneung Folk Art Festival, from which Thai drums or traditional Korean singing at full volume added another layer of aural texture and energy.

The installation, video, painting and sculpture works chosen by artistic director Seoung-youn Kim appeared eclectic: an elegantly restrained selection with a strong contemporary edge balanced against the traditional. There were many initial eye-grabbing, stand-out moments.

The shadow-box installation *Auditorium (Template A-Z)* by Korean artist-duo Mioon was extraordinary: multi-faceted, complex and compelling. Through a curtain into a space filled with soft light stood five-shelved LED lightbox towers, animated with storybook like remembrances... From behind, you could observe the moving parts and electronics; and the front-view shadow-box sequence was phased so the silhouettes, cast shadows and observations were constantly changing.





Garry Currin and curator Myungji Chu in front of Currin's painting *Conversation with the Moon* (2016) at PyeongChang Biennale, 2017. Photo: Barbara Cope



Olafur Eliasson, *Gravity Stairs*, 2014, aluminium, brass, stainless steel, LED lights, mirror foil, colour filter foil, transformer. Collection of Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul

The coal-and-mixed-media-on-canvas painting *Black Crying* by Hwang Jai-Hyoung of Korea also took our attention. It was hanging in the second-floor gallery next to Garry's work and its impact was immediate – especially as we had just travelled through a hard, remote landscape to be here. Cézanne came to mind. The two forces of rock and coal were clear in the work, thick and sweaty and sooty. Despite speaking to harsh living, despair and failure, it held a clear truth and beauty in the paint.

There were also impressive video works. *LARGO*, a video installation by Karel van Laere from the Netherlands, featured an unwilling man on the move. "The action of the powerless body being dragged through various landscapes is staged," van Laere says of it. "The bystanders' reactions are not." *The Night of Perpetual Day* (in four-channel HD video) by Yang Yongliang of China also resonated strongly with us after our journey. Contemporary worlds were captured in an ancient landscape.

Chief curator Myungji Chu spoke to us about the small scale of the biennale on the world stage, but you could see that an enormous amount of work had gone into transforming the conference centre into an impressive, contemporary art gallery. Over the three-week run, 150,000 people visited the biennale and music festival combined.

Time absolutely flew. A great deal of Korean culture revolves around food, and that evening at the artists' dinner at one of the seafood restaurants on the beachfront strip – now full of warmth and wonderful aromas – everyone felt they had been part of a special experience.

Then it was back to Seoul. The powerful installation exhibition *The Parliament of Possibilities* by Olafur Eliasson on at the remarkable Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art was

a highlight; the gallery was full of Korean families with their young children.

We also met Gyu-Joon Yang, a friend and fellow artist who also shows at Whitespace back home. He and his wife Ock-gyu lived in Auckland for 15 years before returning to Seoul five years ago. Joon introduced Garry to two main dealer galleries in Seoul – a great insight into gallery practice there. The gallery that represents Joon, Insa Art Center, is over six floors high and was showing a full retrospective, *Then and Now*, of one of South Korea's revered senior artists, Youn MyeungRo.

The political activity on the streets and in the news was tangible. We'd initially arrived in Seoul at night, and one of the first things we noted were two of the tallest buildings emblazoned with *TRUMP WORLD!* The Korean government was in turmoil with corruption charges; and American and local politics became a subtext to the trip. The buses all had video screens, so even while we were travelling through that landscape of ancient mountains, everything seemed to be playing out to images of Trump and the parallel universe of Korean politics (with the odd Korean game show thrown in). The weekend before we left, 450,000 people gathered in the main square in front of the Gyeongbokgung Palace in freezing temperatures for a peaceful candlelit protest against the government.

In spite of the initial impressions we'd had of a bleak, high-rise cityscape, we really came to appreciate Seoul; the character of winter had its own language. Our English-speaking guide at the palace described the historic philosophy of the Korean way of life as a "deep feeling of harmony in nature, remaining connected to the natural world". We need to go back in spring.