

Pio Abad interviewed by
Ellen Mara De Wachter on
27 March 2013



Ellen Mara De Wachter:
Your work brings historical events and personal histories together to tell a story about a particular moment, but also to draw attention to recurring cycles of history and culture. In this sense, it feels like it is a combination of analysis with serendipity, or chance discoveries. Can you say a little bit about the process of development for this show?

Pio Abad: The starting point for this show is a series of photographs my father took of mass games during his trip to Pyongyang. I found them when I was rummaging through his stuff in 2010, but these are actually photos he took in 1989. I've always been interested in the idea of mass games, but particularly so since seeing the Beijing Olympics in 2008. They are like an act of reducing people to pixels, or the ultimate form of ornamentation as ideology

and there's an implicit violence in employing individuals as ornamentation. They're seductive but at the same time unsettling. I was going through these photographs and I was surprised to find that these personal mementos addressed a larger thing that I was interested in. I started researching why my dad went to North Korea at that time, and I guess when you talk about this notion of serendipity or chance encounters, it's less about chance but more about the fact that the deeper you go into events, the more you realise they are not autonomous but they are part of a larger network of histories, people and characters. And maybe that's what serendipity means; it's realising that as you zoom into things you're thrown back out, realising that you're dealing with a larger web.

I looked into the event, which is a quasi-Olympic event called the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students. It's a spectacle that celebrates the ideologies of Socialism and the ceremonies associated with it. I thought it was interesting that this particular ceremony occurred in Pyongyang in 1989, which, when you look at the larger context of warring ideologies, is a crucial moment. Digging deeper, I found out that the event took place a month before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and then suddenly questions arose about whether this elaborate act was a kind of grand denial, a monumental delusion that all the people who subscribed to this ideology were subject to. And then 30 days later, everything fell to pieces.

EMDW: Your work shows a clear interest in historical events, the study of history and notions of commemoration and revisionism. The way you incorporate particular moments and objects in your work also raises the issue of the ethics of re-presenting historical events in an art context, as well as a number of other questions, among which: What is the role of the individual in the context of history? Does history

always boil down to individual subjectivities? And, can art act as a metonym for a historical moment?

PA: These are questions that swirl around my head. I don't think I've answered them; I think I'll be in the process of answering them for the rest of my practice. There are two relevant texts I have been referring to recently. One is a quote from Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in which he defines history as "that which transforms documents into monuments", which means that it's always going to be an individual's interpretation of things, but it just so happens that these individuals have become privileged enough to become the official representatives of certain events. Another text, by Paul Ricoeur, is *History, Memory and Forgetting*, in which he asks why some events are more remembered than others; why some histories are overly commemorated, whereas others are pushed aside and made mute. He talks about how it's the historian's responsibility to restore this imbalance and fill in the gaps. I thought that was a really beautiful way of looking at someone's practice.

At that time, I was also thinking of my own practice, and I found myself asking why I would want to add to the material history of the world. That kind of question has been a guiding principle in trying to justify making objects. The objects I make are like speculative artefacts but they are very real in terms of trying to address minor histories, and we've talked before about my practice as a way of "mining the minor". The objects I show are either little bits of paraphernalia from the actual event, or my way of making objects based on people's accounts of the events, and filling the material gap of these under-told histories.

EMDW: Over the past two years, you have made several silk scarves, based on Hermès designs, but incorporating drawings of historical objects connected to the narratives

that have inspired your works. In an earlier conversation, you mentioned that you saw these scarves as "carriers of historical narratives". Could you talk about the imagery you've incorporated in the scarf you've made for this show and the significance it carries for you?

PA: The scarves evolved from a drawing practice, which is at the heart of what I do, but there was a point at which I felt that their existence as drawings wasn't sufficient to address the reasons I make art. I don't know whether it was studying at the Royal Academy and being exposed to Bond Street, but I would walk past Hermès and see beautiful silk scarves, and these morning walks helped me realised that the scarves could be a way for me to address the act of drawing, which is the main way I transcribe information. But also, by transforming my drawings into silk scarves, they are suddenly imbued with a history. The silk scarf has its own history and social baggage, so being able to transfer this into my own practice made sense as a strategy for presenting information. Hermès scarves typically depict historical anecdotes, whether through inventorying objects or commemorating events. It started as a saddle and bridle company, so its earlier scarves discuss that, and then they move on to the military exploits of France, the colonial exploits of France, so suddenly you go from a luxury company's history to an expansive history of colonialism or imperialism, through the scarves, and I thought that was really strange.

The ethics of representing history through a silk scarf is another question to ponder on. So is the idea of everything being co-opted by luxury or capital and every image, whether historical or ethnographic, being available for consumption. I was also interested in the scarf being about the body, so to talk about a grand historical narrative is also to talk about the potential of it being wrapped around a neck. And while I never want

my scarves to be worn, I do like that they suggest they may have been used, so it's not just a drawing – it's an artefact at the same time. The imagery comes from various flyers and posters for the festival my father went to in 1989, things like Korean girls in traditional dress, or an image of Chollima, a mythical Pegasus-like creature.

EMDW: The central sculpture in your installation references the Ryugyong Hotel in Pyongyang, which is scheduled to open this summer after decades of construction and interruption. The sculpture associates architecture and its political significance with furniture and commercial functionalism. Can you explain how you arrived at this particular form and material?

PA: One of the things I have been drawn to is actually the title of two books called *The Edifice Complex*. One is a book by Gerard Lico, a Filipino architect, discussing the Marcos state architecture, and the other is a book by Deyan Sudjic. Both discuss the idea that monumental architecture is hubristic, and the product of psychological flaws, which is something I find really interesting. As I was researching the World Festival, I realised that this building I've always known about, "the hotel of doom", an unfinished monstrosity in the heart of Pyongyang, was built for this festival but never completed. And even the promise of it being completed this year is up in the air because of what's happening now in North Korea. I wanted it to exist in the space to create a sense of landscape and draw people into the narrative. But at the same time, scaling it down comes from an intention to address people's relationship to history by making it ergonomic and human-sized, allowing people to deal with its flawed humanity: de-scaling it, as a way of being able to confront it as a thing.

The design of the sculpture evolved and it has become an elaborate plinth for a fragment

of the Berlin Wall. The piece becomes a dialogue about two monumentalities; two failures. The hotel was built in 1989 as a monument to the achievements of Socialism, but when it does open, if it does, it will be run by a luxury hotel company from Berlin. The sculpture has a tombstone-like quality, but even the stone is fake, because it's Formica. So it's a series of falsenesses, and because it's not decorated in any way, it has a kind of muteness and abstraction, so it stands for this kind of architectural default for failed ambition, which you see in the Transamerica building in San Francisco or even in the Shard in London.

EMDW: There is a specific sound track playing in the gallery; where did it come from and what made you include it in the show?

PA: It's from a two-hour video I found on YouTube, which is a kind of travelogue for the 13th World Festival. It starts by setting the scene and then the delegates arrive in Pyongyang, and as you go through the film, you realise how odd this festival was because it had ice skating, circuses, a printmaking exhibition, a film festival but also talks about nuclear disarmament. The soundtrack was narrated in French and there's a kind of romantic link between the French language and a very dated conception of Socialism, and I thought of having this obsolescence as an enveloping sound in the space. Obsolescence as a theme in my work is not about nostalgia, but more the dangers that obsolescence can pose. As I was finishing work on the show, I felt overtaken by certain events, from Dennis Rodman's diplomatic tour of Pyongyang to the possibility of nuclear war. This goes back to the question of whether ideologies ever really die or whether they just find ways of reincarnation.

Artist's presentation

Pio Abad: Sunday 21 April, 3pm
Abad will present a screening of *Imelda*, a documentary examining the personal and political life of Imelda Marcos, directed by Ramona Diaz.

Zabludowicz Collection Invites is dedicated to presenting UK-based artists who do not currently have representation by a commercial gallery. Taking the form of solo presentations, exhibitions will result from an open-ended invitation to exhibit new work.

Reverse: Pio Abad
A photograph of the 13th World Festival for Youth and Students taken by my father, 1989
Pio Abad wishes to thank James Laycock and Ken Kirton for help with the exhibition

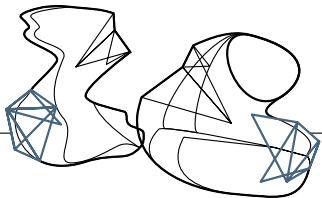
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