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ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

Im Heung-soon Explores the Horrors Women Endure in War

By **JASON FARAGO** JULY 30, 2015

“May God give me patience,” whimpers a chador-clad woman in “Reincarnation,” the newest video work from the South Korean artist and director Im Heung-soon. She is in wartime Iran, waiting for news of her son, whom she fears may be dead. She starts screaming in Farsi, then ululates at ear-piercing timbre. We see the door behind her: It’s been soundproofed.

On the other side of the Asian continent, a Vietnamese woman sits in shadow, tropical foliage beyond a barred window behind her. Something horrible has happened, though it’s unclear what. While the Iranian woman wails, this woman remains silent — but neither of them can brave the world outside.

“Reincarnation,” Mr. Im’s exquisitely filmed, if somewhat jumbled, two-screen video installation at MoMA PS1, is an elliptical study of women who have lived through war. One screen follows Vietnamese women depicted as having suffered at the hands of the South Korean Army; Korean forces have long been accused of wartime atrocities during the Vietnam War, despite official denials. The other looks at female survivors of the Iran-Iraq War, and their lives in contemporary Tehran.

The actual horrors of these two conflicts remain obscure, as do the connection points between them. (An earlier version of “Reincarnation,” seen at this year’s Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates, featured an additional component focusing on Korean immigrants to Iran before the 1979 revolution.) At times, Mr. Im’s pairing of distant and disparate tragedies can feel forced. Yet his subject here is not so much war, which is irreducibly specific; he cares more about the psychological harm wrought by war, which is grimly universal.

Instead of individual testimonies, Mr. Im offers a more oblique portrait of life in the face of trauma. We see graves in both countries, and old women trudging along the beach. Someone in Vietnam burns ghost money, in the form of counterfeit American currency. A woman is having nightmares: She trembles as she sleeps on the floor, her cane rattling beside her. It’s never entirely clear which women here are in fact survivors of these wars, and whether a given sequence has been staged. That ululating mother, for one, seems too young to have had a child in the 1980s, during the Iran-Iraq War. Is she recounting someone else’s misery, or have she and Mr. Im composed a fictional narrative? In the artist’s vision, the answer is moot; for him, fictional constructions and re-enactments have a central role to play in bringing the truth to light.

Mr. Im was born in 1969 and trained as a painter; that may inform the striking cinematography of his video works. He has become something of a biennial favorite, and these days you are as likely to encounter his ruminative films in the black box of an arts institution as in a cinema.

At this year’s contentious, politically strident Venice Biennale, Mr. Im won the Silver Lion for “Factory Complex,” a feature-length documentary that meditates on labor conditions of women in textile factories in South Korea and Southeast Asia. (Mr. Im’s mother worked as a seamstress.) South Korea’s rapid industrialization, he showed, came at the cost of brutal exploitation of female workers, who faced retaliation when they tried to organize. Amid interviews with union leaders and historical footage of strikes, he interwove more poetic, decontextualized scenes of women gazing

at birds overhead, or walking blindfolded through a bamboo forest. At one point, two women embraced with their heads veiled in fabric: a direct quotation of René Magritte's "The Lovers" and a bold recourse to Surrealism in a genre that usually avoids such flights.

If it lacks the focus and the specificity of his acclaimed "Factory Complex," this new installation nevertheless succeeds in evoking the traumas of life after war, through images both real and surreal. In Vietnam a group of women descends into a narrow hatch — a mass grave, perhaps? A ravishing sequence of rolling dunes culminates in a shot of a woman's hair peeking from the sand. A wig or a corpse: we cannot say.

His gift for sound editing, too, goes a long way to linking the otherwise unrelated stories from either side of the Asian continent. Plaintive strings from Iran give way to a charging medley of Vietnamese bells. The gurgle of waves may have been recorded on the Caspian or the South China Sea, while rainstorms bleed from one screen to the other.

Mr. Im is one of several artists and filmmakers today working along a blurred boundary between the documentary and the fictional. His practices of re-enactment, and his trust in performance to unearth historical memory, recalls the work of Jeremy Deller, who in 2001 staged a full-scale re-creation of a British miner's strike featuring hundreds of nonprofessionals, or of Artur Zmijewski, who re-enacted the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment with unemployed Poles. Yet while Mr. Deller and Mr. Zmijewski film their remade events with an intentional lack of polish, Mr. Im takes a more lyrical and discursive approach, mixing fictions of the past with wordless, often elegiac tableaux. His closest peer might be the British filmmaker John Akomfrah, whose "The Nine Muses" juxtaposes archival images of Caribbean and South Asian migrants with ravishing sequences of an African man lost in a polar expanse.

You could wish, at the end of "Reincarnation," that Mr. Im had let these women speak to the camera directly, and had interwoven testimony and poetry with the sensitivity he brought to "Factory Complex." But Mr.

Im has such a strong command of his images — of a fly alighting on a shoulder, or a billboard of the ayatollahs in the Tehran night — that his sympathy is convincing.

“Reincarnation” runs through Aug. 24 at MoMA PS 1, Long Island City, Queens; 718-784-2084, momaps1.org.

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