

ARTREVIEW

Toy story

A French photographer saddles up his metal horse for a journey through Korea

By Steven Pettifor

On first glimpse, the photos in "Transkoreana" at Tang Gallery look like a glossy essay spread intended for a global heavyweight publication like *National Geographic* or *Time*. Crisp close-ups of soldiers wielding polished automatic weapons, armored police on the prowl for disturbances and a political demonstrator wearing a George W Bush mask brandishing his toy M-16 are among the pieces on display.

But upon zooming in on the diastrophic snapshots of 36-year-old French photographer and journalist Marc Lathillière, one notices the presence of a small toy motorcycle in every frame. Whether a miniature invader in a sweeping vista, an insignificant blimp upon an austere monu-

ment, or a playful toy in a stranger's palm, the minute motorbike manages to both unify as well as subvert the assumed intention of the lens man's postcard-style travelog.

The tiny toy bike is a humorous sidekick carried by Lathillière on his 1,000km journey through the Southern Korean peninsula. A light-hearted metaphor for his road trip from Seoul to Busan undertaken on a 125cc scooter, the toy cycle also acted as an invaluable ice-breaker for thawing the frosty Korean demeanor.

Perhaps due to political tensions with its northern neighbor, Korea isn't an immediate port-of-call for the in-

ternational jet set. Seeing far fewer foreign faces, Koreans tend to be effacing or unwilling to communicate in anything other than their native tongue. While Lathillière is capable of communicating in pigeon Korean, the toy



bike functioned as an interactive device that allowed him a means of access to a variety of strangers, helping him skirt formalities and social constraints in these brief liaisons.

"I was discovered too," explains Lathillière in his catalog essay. "On many occasions, the vision of a foreigner taking pictures of a toy was strange enough to attract people. It invited often shy or gruff Koreans to acknowledge a foreign presence on their very doorstep. To accept the possibility of an exchange despite the language gap. Proposing 'myself' to their hands, which could be clumsy or brutal, was a risk."

Much like the rest of the world, posing for a souvenir portrait in front of any given tourist attraction is com-



Foreign presence: Lathillière's toy bike appears in every frame of his 'Transkoreana' exhibition.

monplace in Asia. Lathillière satirizes such behavior by using the toy bike as his "doppelgänger." By posing the Liliputian toy cycle within broad panoramas, Lathillière also plays with scale and infuses a narrative to what would otherwise be standard travel photographs. The minuscule toy also highlights the insignificance of a lone traveler traversing strange lands.

Less static than the landscape shots, Lathillière focuses primarily on portraits depicting a broad cross-section of the Korean populace. Taken in the fall, many of the fleeting encounters are set against cloudless blue skies, with a cast of characters that include a businessman, a nun, a trendy teen, exuberant kids, a street vendor, and a traditional dancer. Piercing beneath their on-camera persona, the differing reactions to the toy offer a glimpse into the subject's personality.

In an effort to infuse greater concep-

tual depth, Lathillière includes recorded snippets of conversational encounters which visitors listen to on headphones. Intended to be an amusing example of miscomprehension and misunderstanding, the recording is in Korean only, offering little other than curious aural stimulation.

While Korea provides an entry point for this exhibition, ultimately Lathillière's

photos explore the complexities of overseas tourism in general; of communication, acceptance, and cultural understanding in a foreign land. Planning to embark on a similar travel documentation journey through Thailand in the near future, Lathillière also looks at perceptions of identity, reality and subjectivity when presenting a particular face of any familiar or unfamiliar territory.

Whether the somewhat gimmicky act of utilizing a toy to chip away at communicative barriers and the resulting photographic compositions provide enough layering to elevate Lathillière's works above the genre of exoticised travel photography is a lingering question that his next series will hopefully solidify.

Steven Pettifor is the Thailand Contributing Editor for Asian Art News and World Sculpture News.

"Transkoreana"

Through May 9

Tang Gallery, unit B-2B
Silom Galleria, 919/1 Silom Road
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