

Roughing it

The grainy paintings of Park Soo Keun display an appealingly stony demeanour, writes **Andrew Russeth**

Park Soo Keun: The Naked Tree Awaiting Spring

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As far as memorable marriage proposals go, it is hard to beat the one that the artist Park Soo Keun (1914–65) made to his future wife, Kim Boksun, more than 80 years ago. ‘If you agree to marry me, you will suffer materially,’ Park wrote. ‘But mentally, I am confident that I can make you happier than anyone else.’ Then in his mid twenties, he asked, ‘Will you become the wife of a great painter?’ The mixture of honesty and unbridled confidence worked. They wed in 1940 and he found work first as a clerk in Pyongyang, then as an art teacher in a part of his native Gangwon province that fell within North Korea when the country was partitioned in 1945.

It would not be until the 1950s that Park began to earn serious attention for his memorable scenes of daily life; his status as one of Korea’s most beloved modern painters was established only in the decades after his death, from liver disease, at the age of 51. But through harsh times, for both himself and his country, he seems to have been buoyed by the same sense of self-reliance that radiates from the people in his spare, roughly textured paintings. Women hang laundry on a line to dry, men sit around and talk, and in one tiny piece from the late 1950s, his daughter In-sook hunches over a magazine.

An encounter at the age of 12 with a photo of a painting by Jean-François Millet, another close observer of the workaday world, set Park on the path to becoming an artist. Formal study, however, was out of the question. His father’s mining business had collapsed a few years earlier and a flood had made their field in Gangwon unfarmable. His mother died of breast cancer in 1935. ‘I had to take the place of my late mother, caring for my father

and brothers,’ he explained. After finishing elementary school, where a teacher named Oh Deukyeong had nurtured his talents, he taught himself how to paint.

In ‘Park Soo Keun: The Naked Tree Awaiting Spring’, at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art’s Deoksugung branch in Seoul, vitrines hold the artist’s scrapbooks, in which reproductions of ancient Greek and Asian art sit alongside American and European art: paintings by Millet, Vincent van Gogh, Georges Rouault (whose thickly outlined figures were a clear influence), a Buddha statue from the Unified Silla Kingdom, and more. Here, too, are postcards with images of life in Korea that Park collected, a habit that suggests an artist paying careful attention to conventions of representation.

Even as Park shifted to new styles, he returned to some of the same subjects, such as a woman pounding grain in a large wooden bucket, often with a young child strapped to her back. (His wife Kim regularly posed as his model.) The show’s curator, Kim Yejin, notes on a wall label that this vision of personal industry would have earned the approval of the organisers of the annual government-backed ‘Joseon Art Exhibition’ in the 1930s under Japanese rule, but it may also have been informed by the artist’s own experience as a caretaker. He was still painting variations on this theme in the 1950s and ‘60s. As Western businessmen and their wives arrived in post-war Seoul, Park had pleasing depictions of Korea ready for them to purchase at attractive prices.

Park’s commercial and political success should not be held against him. Like Gustave Courbet, he had the rare ability to offer charismatic pictures in a language that is both accessible and historically grounded. His works can be so concise that it is easy to overlook how formally inventive they are. Piling layers and layers of paint on to his canvases (or cardboard when short on supplies), he forged a gravelly finish – tans, blacks and whites hiding bits of other colours – that has been compared to ceramics, textiles or *changhoji*, a sturdy rice paper used for doors. Conjured with just a few dark lines on this tough material, his people and animals have the stolid

presence of carvings in rocks. They look as if they will endure for a long time.

But while Park’s works possess an easy charm, they are not without darkness. Giant trees tower over working people; their sharply angled branches, bare of leaves, recall talons. (There is high drama in a pitch-black gallery of his larger paintings, which are spotlit.) In *The Jobless* (1961), one man is sprawled out on the ground and another sits alone. In a work completed in 1952, at the height of the Korean War, two fish with what appear to be deep frowns rest on a cutting board, waiting to be gutted (Fig. 1). Park fled alone to South Korea early in the conflict, eventually finding work doing portraits at the United States Army post exchange in Seoul. It would be about two years before he would reunite with his family.

The title of the exhibition comes from *The Naked Tree* (1970), a novel by Park Wansuh, who knew the artist during the war and who has described how the painter ‘had lived in Seoul, this deserted city on the frontlines, without going crazy, without losing his mind, without getting drunk, without abandoning painting or giving up supporting his family’.

The real power of this survey lies in its sense of balance, narrating this remarkable biography while serving up artistic revelations. A small room of photos of the South Korean capital after the war by Han Youngsoo lends depth to Park’s life and his practice, displaying the fast-changing world from which he distilled his restrained images. A judicious selection of his juvenilia, his jobs as an illustrator, and his studies of traditional Korean folk paintings, pottery and tiles, also illuminate the range and development of his talents.

Personal items dot the exhibition, to powerful effect. There is a handwritten manuscript of a biography of the artist that Park’s wife wrote after his death and there is a case of the greeting cards that he adorned with simple, elegant prints and sent to friends. One card made to toast the start of 1965, the year of his death, is addressed to Oh Deukyeong, his teacher of nearly four decades earlier. Flowers are shooting up from the ground and there is a small limpid bloom atop every stem.

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Fish on a Cutting Board, 1952, Park Soo Keun (1914–65),
oil on cardboard, 18 x 24.2cm. Private collection