

## Down the street from vandalized comfort-women statue is an exhibit honoring the women



Artist Han Ho put on a performance in response to the recent vandalism of a comfort-woman statue in Glendale. His installation is also part of an exhibit down the street from the statue that aims to shed awareness on sexual assaults. (Courtesy of ReflectSpace)

by LILA SEIDMAN

Two days after a statue in Glendale Central Park honoring women who were held as sex slaves by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II was vandalized, a group packed an auditorium down the street to honor the group known as comfort women.

After a commemoration ceremony, the nearly 300 attendees of the annual event at Glendale's Downtown Central Library streamed in front of the ReflectSpace gallery in the library to watch a performance by Korean artist Han-Ho created in response to the statue's recent defacement, according to gallery co-curator Ara Oshagan.

Wearing an elaborate costume, including a headpiece outfitted with a monitor, Ho used a rope to connect people in the audience.

He remained silent, save one-word utterances. A man playing a traditional Armenian flute called a duduk played in the background to highlight the parallel cultural trauma wrought by the Armenian Genocide and fate of the comfort women, Oshagan said.

"What has been done to the monument is such an ugly act and goes against what we should pursue. Make the world a better place," Ho said in a statement.

The statue, which depicts a young woman in traditional Korean dress sitting next to an empty chair, was smeared with a brown, sticky substance last Thursday morning, according to Glendale police. It wasn't the first time the statue had been vandalized, police said.

“As one of the artists who think this world should be a better place, I wasn’t able to retain my sorrow and anger. This inspired me,” Ho’s statement continued.

Ho performed in front of an entire exhibit inspired by domestic violence against women, with many of the featured artists directly addressing comfort women, according to visiting co-curator Monica Hye Yoen Jun.

Called “1 in 3” — referring to the number of women who will experience sexual assault in their lifetimes — the exhibit will run until Sept. 1.

Korea-based Jun has been working with the ReflectSpace since 2014 to put on the annual exhibit. The partnership began shortly after Glendale city officials installed the 1,100-pound statue in the park in 2013, Oshagan said.

The Korean Sister City Assn. designed and paid for the memorial. Glendale is in Sister City programs with two South Korean communities — Goseong and Gimpo.

Through a translator, Jun said the goal of the exhibit was, in part, to promote understanding and reconciliation among countries, including Korea and Japan, which are still in conflict over the comfort-women issue, as well as to further women’s rights.

There is a version of the #MeToo movement playing out in Korea, although it’s not as large as the one in the United States, she added.

The exhibit is designed to set the record straight about history, which is sometimes distorted or contested, she said.

“If people really knew the history of the comfort women, they wouldn’t have even dared to put feces on the face [of the statue],” Jun said. An inaugural memorial day was held for the women in Korea last August.

Last week, Glendale police said they could not identify the substance on the statue because it was cleaned off before they arrived. They are still searching for the perpetrator, and are asking for tips from the public.

In the middle of the current exhibit is a box, created by Ho, resembling a traditional Korean dowry box with a photo of a comfort woman emblazoned on top. Inside the work are none of the items one would expect to find in such a box. It’s empty, except for obscured historical images flashing on a screen. The idea is that it’s the type of dowry box a comfort woman would receive, Oshagan said.

Jung Bae Seo, another featured artist, similarly evokes the nexus between tradition and history by drawing on a large scroll. Throughout the work, a fictional character wrestles with complex emotions after assault, including an impulse not to speak out, Oshagan said.

Many of the works feature digital enhancements. For example, digital teardrops fall in Lee Lee Nam’s reimagining of the classic “Girl With a Pearl Earring” painting. In Seoung Woo Kim’s digital collages, orbs of light dance around sourced portraits of comfort women who are transported to modern contexts.

Despite the busy visuals, the exhibit resonates as a quiet, calm space. Between Seo’s narrative drawing of repression and Ho’s monosyllabic performance, silence — and the shattering of that silence — becomes a de facto theme.

It took until 1991 for Kim Hak-sun, a former comfort woman, to come forward to tell her story publicly. She was the first to do so.

As Oshagan put it, “There were 50 years of silence in Korea.”