

Panel 1
Art in the Wake of Violence

Irrigating a Scorched Korea

Suah Lim
University of Manchester

On April 3 1948, residents of Jeju Island took up arms against the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK). The residents had been protesting a UN-imposed presidential election that would divide the North and South of Korea, and instead rallied for unified sovereignty to restore an independent Korea after liberation from the Japanese. The USAMGIK painted them as communist aggressors, and swiftly deemed Jeju an “island of reds”. What followed was a brutal genocide resulting in the massacre of 30,000 islanders and an indeterminable number of refugees. Of 400 villages on Jeju, only 170 remained by the end of the violence in 1949.

The deceitful colonial mythology of the ‘Cold’ War is apparent: the transference of ideological heat onto foreign soil created foreign, forgotten victims. In the wake of scorched earth tactics used by the USAMGIK, the war became not only political but environmental, its resulting scars of ideological trauma fading into the existing volcanic scars of Jeju’s landscape. Filmmaker and visual artist Jane Jin Kaisen, born in 1980 on Jeju Island, describes the Jeju Massacre as “a kind of primal scene”. Her works, which embody the nature and shamanist folk traditions of Korea, represent the innate intermediality between land (the realm of people) and sea (the realm of the Dragon King in Korean shamanistic beliefs). Against the backdrop of the Jeju Massacre, Kaisen’s negotiations with ideological hauntings on Jeju Island simultaneously reinvolve old wounds and purify them, each practice of memory-recollection erasing the boundaries between pain, recovery, loss and life.

Biography

Suah Lim is a Film Studies and History of Art undergraduate at the University of Manchester. Concerned with the politics of bodies as witnesses to time and the qualities we ascribe to them (natural, biological, or national), she seeks to recognize the trappings of colonial modernity not as losses but as hauntings that help reinvolve a heterogeneous experience of time.