

[STREET
STYLE]

SEOUL

The South Korean capital's young upstarts have designs on the future.

BY PAUL CAINE. PHOTOGRAPHED BY SHARON KIM



ART2513

THERE'S A LOT about Seoul that's confounding upon first glance. It's big: Nearly 11 million people make South Korea's capital city their home, more than New York or Hong Kong. It's as affluent as ever, but it's still a pretty parochial place, and popular luxury brands—Mercedes, Gucci, Rolex—are conservative signifiers of global privilege. South Korea is an industrial force, exporting computers and televisions by the millions, but its economic engine has always outpaced its cultural one.

That's beginning to change, as a new genera-

tion of South Korean artists, designers, and entrepreneurs vie to make their mark on the fabric of the city. These new Seoul denizens are young and fearless, having opted out of the rat race that is South Korea's corporate society. They don't have memories of the dark times after the Korean War, as their parents do, and the realities of a divided nation have mostly existed—until recent political events, that is—as a kind of white noise. Many

young Koreans have studied abroad, and now have a direct connection to a globalized scene and a big, bustling city in which to test their new ideas.

This is evident at ART2513, an organization of which the mission is to spotlight young visual artists. The gallery in Insadong, a district popular with artists and tourists, recently put on a show of young photographers who've studied in the United States. The rent is so high they've only booked the place for a week, which means that one of the artists, Soorin Kim, can't even attend—she has her final exams at Parsons in New York City and had to fly back there the day the exhibit opened.

While at school, Kim interned for Ryan McGinley, and her photos share some of her mentor's pixie dust. They're hazy, confessional shots of youth at the flashpoint between inno-



cence and adulthood—in other words, just the sort of bold and confrontational work that's never really been popular in Korea. ART2513 manager Hanseung Baik says Seoul's mainstream art scene is "too strict and too boring." It caters instead toward those who confuse money with taste. "Art must be less expensive," says Baik, and that's where ART2513 comes in. "Young collectors will enjoy what they see—and then they'll start to collect"

ART2513.COM

our seats and the waiter brings us bibs and some banchan—a selection of snacks that always arrives at the table in Korea, no matter what's ordered. Sometimes it's kimchi, the pickled vegetable dish that is the nation's most famous culinary output, other times it's dried shrimp with chili paste, steamed vegetables, or fish cakes.

Our server places a massive tray of spicy pork bulgogi and bean sprouts topped with squid on the in-table burner. The contents spit and sizzle and end up a delicious, caramelized mess. It's getting plenty of people in Hongdae excited—and covered in chili oil.

special thanks to julia mellor and chad burton



YOHIMBE

Hongdae, a neighborhood at the foot of the well-regarded Hongik University, is the sort of place you go if you're young, fashionable, and in the mood to get drunk and eat grilled meats. We certainly qualify for the latter, but it's still early, so we turn off a main street and wander downstairs to the subterranean lair that is Yohimbe bar. Featuring poured concrete, low light, and indie-rock, this is not an ordinary Korean watering hole.

That's how owner Hyungmin Jeon likes it. He and his partner opened Yohimbe three years ago after working at a nearby record store. Jeon sees the bar as a refuge from the harried, workday routine of modern Korea. "I don't like how quickly things change in Korea," he tells us as he pours two glasses of wine, while the new Caribou album meanders from the speakers. "It's unthinkable to go somewhere to hang out and just listen to good music," he adds. "I like for things to be of quality and to develop."



THE YOUTH OF Seoul are forever obsessed with the latest trend, be it some interchangeable K-pop act or a particular T-shirt. It's a great state of affairs if you manage boy bands, a bit more dire if you're trying to establish a self-nurturing music scene. That's why it's heartening to meet Minkoo Kim, better known as DJ SUPERSLUTTT. We meet up at the offices of Locksmith Music, a record label and club night collaborative in the upscale Garosugil neighborhood. Kim has worked at Locksmith for two years, helping build it into an underground Seoul fixture. When he's not planning parties or spinning house records at 5 a.m., he's at work on his party photo

blog, You Were Sleeping.

Kim is aware that Korean tastes don't leave much room for independently minded music fans. "The biggest difference between mainstream and underground

musicians is that the mainstream ones are like idols," he says. "The younger kids worship them and do everything that they do. Underground is more about the individual."

DJ SUPERSLUTTT/ LOCKSMITH MUSIC

LOCKSMITHMUSIC.COM

YOUWERESLEEPING.COM



MEN (AND WOMEN) IN UNIFORM

The streets of Seoul are awash with uniforms of one sort or another. Whether it's a strapping young lad serving time in the Army, a crossing guard directing human traffic, or a food vendor forced to don something ridiculous, there's no end to the excellent outfits on display.



FROM LEFT: namjoo woo; soorin kim; hyewon park.



KONGBUL

"MODERN" OR "AVANT-GARDE" Korean food doesn't really exist. What there is, however, are endless variations on a few time-honored themes, and a sense that dining is something to be enjoyed with friends.

Take Kongbul, a restaurant that's been serving its namesake dish to massive crowds in the Hongdae neighborhood since opening earlier this year. We take

KONGBUL.COM





SUPER COLOR SUPER

FOR INDIE BANDS attempting world tours, hop-scotching across Asia is fraught with peril. Expensive flights, scattershot clubs, and promoters who don't really know what they're doing are par for the course, which means that a lot of acts play a couple of shows in Japan before catching long flights back home. Sean Maylone, a native Californian who's lived in Seoul since 2006, would like to change that.

We catch up with Maylone around 11 p.m., far later than we'd originally planned to meet. He's been setting up a club for a performance by French hip-hop act DAT Politics: tweaking the soundtrack, making the guest list, checking sure the band gets a bite to eat. "We're trying to transplant a freaked-out, fucked-up scene," says Maylone. He's talking about his promotion enterprise, Super Color Super, which works to bring Western independent acts to South Korea, though he could just as well be talking about his band, Sighborg, which trades in a cerebral, IDM-inflected take on math-

rock; the act often serves as an opener during Super Color Super concerts.

The eventual goal, explains Maylone, is to "build a circuit, and make touring Asia like touring the West." With China's rapidly growing rock scene (Super Color Super recently hosted Carsick Cars, a popular Beijing band) and Tokyo's perennial clout, a greater number of bands can feasibly tour the region without hemorrhaging money. Super Color Super (which also includes Maylone's partner, Christina Cho) has already hosted shows by Mount Eerie, Handsome Furs, Xiu Xiu—"all this shit my Korean friends would never see," he says.

Maylone often bills a band's appearance as its "Debut Korean Performance," a funny and telling sign of his venture's mercurial nature. Sometimes the crowds come, and sometimes they don't—although yesterday's DAT Politics show in another city brought a packed house, Maylone expects to lose money on this one. "It's still trial and error," he says.



SUPERCOLORSUPER.COM



CHANGDUK KIM

WORLD DESIGN CAPITAL. We see these three words all over the place: on the sides of high-rises, in pamphlets touting Seoul's modernity, at furniture shops of varying quality. But although Seoul is, in fact, the World Design Capital, it doesn't much look like it. Tall apartment complexes stand next to other tall apartment complexes, and the architectural vernacular tends toward "boxy" and "unadorned." So we burrow ever deeper into the heart of Seoul's design community, eventually ending up at the studio of Changduk Kim, the inventor of the Universal Toilet.

The young creative's portfolio speaks for itself. While still an undergraduate he earned renown for his wheelchair-accessible Universal Toilet, which presents a solution to an intractable problem: how to give handicapped individuals the dignity they deserve without taking up large quantities of space. The toilet works equally well for the able-bodied, and stands out as a design piece. "Aside from making things pretty," Kim explains, "isn't the job of a designer to solve problems?" The toilet gained recognition during the 2008 World Cup, held in Seoul, and its design has been licensed worldwide.

UNIVERSAL-TOILET.COM



Kim's projects continue to merge functionality with clever conceits. An electrical cord designed to look like a spigot, for example, makes a statement about energy use. He recently got engaged to another designer and Kim tells us they enjoy talking shop, but that doesn't mean they share all the same interests. "I don't think couples should be too similar," he says. Turns out, his fiancée designs handbags.

GENERAL IDEA

SKULLS ARE A strangely ubiquitous item, but it's still odd to see a stack of silver craniums shoved into a vintage refrigerator, flanked by the sort of aggressively-cut blazers, pants, and button-downs that only the most lithe could slither into. This is the work of BumSuk Choi, the designer behind General Idea. Wild stripes, slimline sweaters, and clever takes on Ivy League style—Choi's staked his career on effusive traditionalism. We drop by his shop to check out the latest collection.



GENERALIDEA.CO.KR

How has Seoul fashion changed in the past decade? I love designing in Seoul. The scene has evolved dramatically, but we have a long way to go.

Where do you take inspiration from? I am usually inspired when I am not working. Actually, when I am not doing anything. When I stand still, ideas come.

Where's your favorite place to hang out in Seoul? There are different districts for different purposes. I suggest Hannam-dong and Itaewon.

DARE TO BE RARE



WHEN WE WALK into Dare To Be Rare, a vintage clothing and furniture shop in the upscale Apqujong neighborhood, owner Ben Park greets us in perfect English. Turns out he went to high school in Virginia, just a mile away from where one of us grew up, and he's more than happy to show us around. Small world.

Park caught the vintage bug while in America, and when he came home he sought to open a place selling eclectic, perfectly curated goods. That might mean an old wristwatch, some antlers, an overstuffed leather armchair, or maybe just a well-tailored vest—anything, as long as Park likes it. "I want to keep everything," he admits. He's using his keen eye to combat what he calls Koreans' "fear of used stuff," showing locals that old objects can be far more rewarding than indulging the latest trend.

DARETOBERARE.CO.KR

RED STUDIO

THERE'S NO SIGN on the outside. Walk by and you wouldn't pause for a second—just another standard-issue building in the Hongdae neighborhood: Four stories, modern, and utterly unremarkable. As we enter, this impression only grows stronger. Here's a graphic design firm, there's a marketing agency. Normal. Then we reach the top floor, where we're met with a locked door and a small sign reading Red Tattoo. We knock. We hear the sound of dogs scampering, and a tall, striking woman opens the door. Her name is Guhuul—Korean for mirror—and her lair is just that: a reflection of a youth culture that's less and less interested in the social mores of past generations.

Guhuul's studio inhabits a realm still taboo in Korea. Though they're more popular than ever, tattoos in Korea are not met with the social approval—and legitimacy as an art form—that exists elsewhere. Practitioners like Guhuul operate in a strange gray area: As the ruling classes shake their heads in dismay, the younger generation is increasingly drawn toward body art. "The most popular things are small items like tiny hearts or lettering," Guhuul explains. "What I like to do is big, sprawling pieces with color and detail." She's the first to admit the scene is a nascent one, still searching for its own style. "Everyone wants to visit America because the tattoo culture is so much more established there," she says. "There's creativity, and there's acceptance."

REDSTUDIO.CO.KR



THREE YOUNG KOREAN DESIGNERS TO WATCH

PROPAGANDA

Dong-Woo Park and Jee-Woong Choi run Propaganda, a firm specializing in posters for concerts and local releases of Hollywood films. Their work is inventive within the confines of their medium, and that's how they like it. "We prefer to take elements of the movie and articulate that in a way that allows for space and meaning," says Choi. "We're not interested in filling up the whole poster with the celebrity."



PROPA-GANDA.CO.KR

NAME FACTORY STUDIO

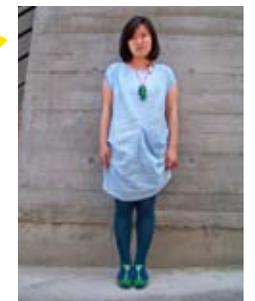


Ichon Cheong works in the obscure medium of word art, forming puns and double entendres from the building blocks of language. Well, languages actually: Cheong, who studied design in the Emirates, works in English, Korean, and Chinese. His recent campaign for Kiehl's hinged on the overlap between the words *heart* and *earth*, and all of his branding makes clever use of words' symbolic might. "Seoul has started to care about design," Cheong tells us, "and citizens are starting to realize that better design makes for a better life."

NAMEFACTORY.CO.KR

OH YEON KYOUNG

"I get inspired by everyday things," says Oh Yeon Kyoung, an illustrator whose whimsical marker sketches are gaining traction among commercial clients and collectors alike. "And girls, girls, girls! When I see a girl in a dress with a pretty pattern, I like taking that image and putting my own twist on it!"



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CLOTHES ENCOUNTERS



THE XOXO KIDS

TAKE THE SUBWAY to the Hongdae neighborhood on a weekend night, snake through a crooked alley, and you'll be met with doner kebabs, mixed drinks served in vinyl pouches, and hordes of polo shirt-clad people speaking English to one another, flirting and bellowing as one only does when one is three sheets to the wind. Welcome to South Korea, land of the recent college graduate from America, Australia, Canada, and Great Britain.

A national obsession with learning English has led to an explosion of private English hagwans, night schools with teaching staff made up of English-speaking graduates. Some come for the paycheck—living expenses are often subsidized and salaries are competitive—and bid their time in expat pubs. But others jump into Seoul's scene.

Chad Butler—model, street style blogger, party thrower—is one English instructor shaking things up. Originally from a small town on the Canadian prairie, Butler came to Korea two years ago. He quickly fell into the underground club circuit and started making connections. "The scene is young," he says. "Sometimes I'm the only foreigner present."

He's thrown a couple of parties, including a recent "B.Y.O.G.B" (Bring Your Own Ghetto Blaster) bash that included tons of art and music in a guerilla location underneath one of Seoul's many highways, while his blog, The XOXO Kids, is an influential voice in Seoul fashion, featuring photos of young clubgoers partying without a care in the world.

THEXOXOKIDS.COM

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KIA, NAMYANG DESIGN CENTER

South Korea's rise to economic prominence is represented by a number of industries—electronics, banking, plastic surgery—but the automobile is perhaps most famous thanks to Kia, one of the country's boldest brands. We travel an hour and a half south to Namyang, a farm town with not much going on outside the company's massive design headquarters. Close to 500 football fields in size, the facility boasts a test track, parking lots filled with competitors' vehicles, and a museum charting Kia's evolution from teeny motorcycle manufacturer to global behemoth. The coolest part is the wind tunnel—an enormous room with padded walls, instrument dials and gauges, and a fan big enough to create gale-force conditions. The tunnel cost millions of dollars to build, but it has helped the company increase its vehicles' fuel efficiency by almost 30 percent. In turn, that's led to hot new rides like the Kia Soul, a crossover SUV that gets an unheard-of 30 miles-per-gallon on the highway. Aerodynamics, meet awesome.



KIA.COM

À LAND



WE FALL IN love with À Land the second we walk through the door. The multi-storied emporiums (there are currently five of them in Seoul, as well as an online shop) sell an impeccably curated collection of urban accoutrements. A.P.C. button-downs are on the racks, but vintage T-shirts aren't—rather, they're thrown into a massive pile that's as fun to dig through as it is to look at. Casio watches from the '80s sit in rows under glass. A franchise of Doughnut Plant, the popular New York pastry shop, tempts shoppers on the third floor, as does a color-coordinated collection of messenger bags and—why not?—an extremely expensive Dutch bicycle. Toys, sharp-looking stationary, limited-edition denim—"omnivorous" doesn't even begin to do the place justice. À Land might be the single-best shopping experience in Seoul.

A-LAND.KR

* BUT IF YOU WANT TO GO CHEAP...

Check out the KWANGJANG FABRIC MARKET, a labyrinthine clothing bazaar in the heart of Seoul. There's more old clothing here than you've likely ever seen in your life, and it's all priced to move. When we visit, we run into Korean designer Park Jong Chul of Sling Stone, who tells us he's trolling for inspiration.

KWANGJANGMARKET.CO.KR
PARKJONGCHUL.COM

