

Chang-jin Lee, *Comfort Women Wanted*, 2013, print on archival paper

Collateral Damage

at the Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery, John Jay College of Criminal Justice

by Jonathan Goodman

It is believed that up to 200,000 Korean women served as sex slaves in comfort stations for Japanese soldiers during

the Second World War. Japan's apology to Korea for the comfort woman issue, was not acceptable to the victims. And, Japan's eight million won settlement was turned down by many living comfort women, because it was offered privately and as consolation prize rather than legal compensation. Most recently, a Japanese ambassadorial visit to Seoul was canceled because of a

sculpture of a comfort woman installed in front of the Japanese embassy there – the women want to be included in a proper public apology, but it is not forthcoming. So the memory still is sharply alive in Korean culture, not least because the habit of having women sexually serve an occupying military remains current – for example, having happened during the Bosnian War in the early to middle 1990s and in recent African conflicts. The problem doesn't seem to go away, and is illustrated on an epically tragic scale during Japan's occupation of Korea.

Collateral Damage, curated by Dr. Jungsil Lee and Dr. Thalia Vrachopoulos at the Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery, John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, was a powerful, deeply moving treatment of the suffering of these women. In addition to the particular Korean tragedy, *Collateral Damage* examines other war crimes perpetrated on civilians, including those committed by the Khmer Rouge and the plight of mixed-race children left behind in Vietnam once the American presence left. A large group of artists participated in the exhibition, coming from both Korean and other cultures. Clearly, the issues have been pushed to the side for too long, and a show like *Collateral Damage* has done considerable good work in presenting the heartfelt expressions of pain and anger that inevitably follow this history of exploitation during wartime.

In addition to the illustration of unassuaged anguish, there is the problem of representing a historical occurrence the artist does not know herself. Empathy is necessary to render the real pain of these women's experience, and it is not easy to visually depict the rape of innocent women, for despite the best intention on the part of the artist, the image can be overwrought and retreat into bathos. For this reason, perhaps, active representation of sex was not found in the show. Instead, the artists concentrated on images of active pain, for example, the watercolor of Christ on the cross with a woman's face and a pack of wolves beneath

her; or on conceptual presentations, such as Young-Soon Min's T-shirts with a particular year printed on them, beginning with 1931, when the first Japanese comfort station was introduced. The art writer is hard put to judge such works of art because they are so clearly in the service of a higher cause. Indeed, this is the dilemma of a show as impassioned and visually nuanced as *Collateral Damage*, whose images are so heartfelt as to exclude discussion of their achievement as art.

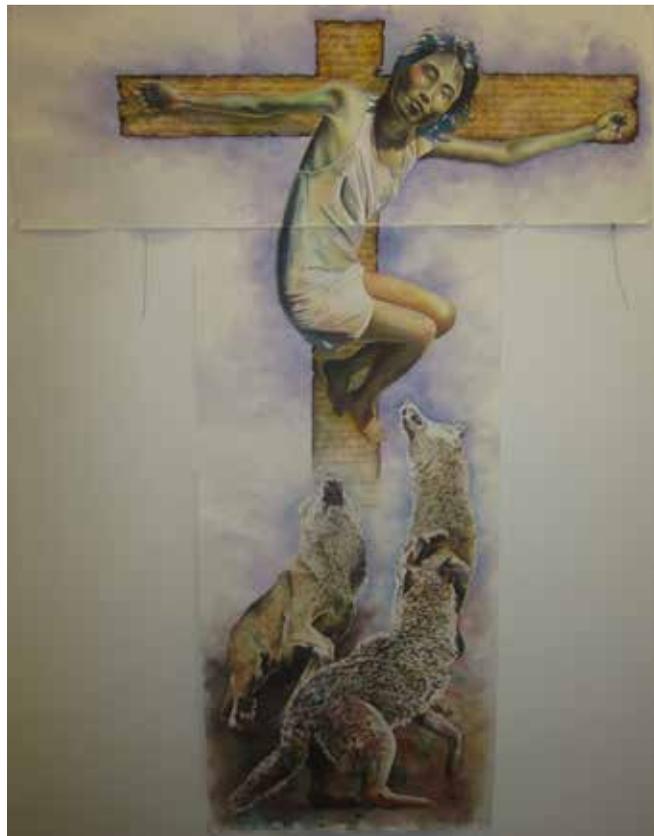
Greek artist Despina Meimaroglou's genuinely frightening work consisted of *Me Instead of Them* (2008), for which she printed the photographs of heads of tortured prisoners on paper bags and wore them herself, taking a stance, standing or sitting, that reflected the way the heads were angled. The prisoners depicted came from the infamous Tuoi Sieng Museum for Genocidal Crimes – located in Phnom Penh, the museum was one of the original, and the most notorious, holding pens for Cambodian prisoners imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge. Another Greek artist, Despo Magoni, presented collages that included photographs of mixed-race children in Vietnam, a tragic legacy of the war, intimating their rejection by mainstream society. Looking at the images of both artists is a harrowing experience; there is not much that can be said, so eloquent is the suffering and fear experienced by innocent people and children.

While the issue of the comfort women did not take over the exhibition completely, it did hold sway as a prominent issue. Min Sun Oh's ink work, *Abduction II* (2015), shows two jack-booted Japanese soldiers in tan uniforms and hats, pinioning the arms of a young Korean woman in traditional dress in the midst of a snowfall. Her mouth, opened in a painful crying out, indicates both the psychic and physical brutality of the scene. Frank van Osch offered a one-hour video detailing the suffering of Indonesian comfort women, who still are waiting for some kind of compensation regarding their rape. As the filmmaker explains, this

kind of treatment is far from over, giving the examples mentioned above: the Bosnian war as well as ongoing atrocities in African civil wars. Part of the power of these images had to do with the viewer's inability to change anything that happened – the pictures are all based on the past, and history is never redeemed.

Not all the artists can be mentioned in a fairly large group show such as *Collateral Damage*, but the power of the work and the deep sincerity of the artists cannot be challenged, nor can the viewer evade some sense of responsibility, if not guilt, simply for being part of human events, whose predilection for psychic and physical damage simply does not go away. Art can only point to the harm (as the British writer W.H.

Auden said, *Poetry makes nothing happen*). These artists are offering a heartfelt view of painful circumstances that must be recorded if we are ever going to give the victims their due, as well as keep alive a truthful regard for history, so necessary for the hope that such things will not happen again. This writer is skeptical that history will change; violence remains deeply embedded in humanity. But perhaps shows such as *Collateral Damage* will make it slightly harder for atrocities to happen by raising the awareness that the suffering is real and did take place. Documentation keeps our memory alive, and memories are the only things we can take with us from the past – so that repetitions of violence diminish even if they cannot be erased entirely.



Steve Cavallo, *The Savage Art of Political Gain*, 2015, watercolor on paper