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At The American University Museum, Carl De Keyzer's Photographs of Cuba and North Korea

Belgian photographer Carl De Keyzer offers a photographic grand tour of two of the most cut-off countries.

BY LOUIS JACOBSON — AUG 3, 2017 11 AM

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"DPR Korea Grand Tour" by Carl De Keyzer

It's hard to think of a worse time to exhibit a photographic "grand tour" of North Korea. Coming soon after North Korea's test-launch of an ICBM capable of reaching the U.S. and its return of American student **Otto Warmbier** in a comatose state, American patience with the hermit state is understandably thin, and the degree of control the regime exerted on outsider and Belgian photographer **Carl De Keyzer** was predictably high. Indeed, De Keyzer was always accompanied by a state "guide," and the exhibit acknowledges that his access, as well as "the choice of images he could photograph, was very limited."

Paradoxically, though, the longstanding closed nature of North Korean society, and the lack of world-renowned photojournalists allowed in, means that any visual depictions of North Korea will add to our limited understanding of what's going on with this key American adversary. Impressively, De Keyzer was allowed to photograph in many locations around the country, rather than just the capital, Pyongyang. So, despite his series' shortcomings, De Keyzer's work in States of Mind: Cuba and North Korea is worth our attention.

The exhibit at the American University Museum pairs 30 images of North Korea with 30 images of Cuba. This presents a bit of a stacked deck. For all of Cuba's problems—and there are many—there is little indication in De Keyzer's photographs of the heavy hand of the state shaping his work. Either that, or the Cuban government is utterly incompetent in public relations: The photographer wanders deep into neighborhoods and private homes that are so ravaged by time that one can hardly expect that the regime wanted to put that particular face forward.

In Cuba, we see baroque ceilings with massively peeling paint, Art Deco lobbies covered by grime, a piano player in a dilapidated studio who's only able to use an armchair when it's propped on its side, and a cigar store Native American staring snootily at a burned-out car. In one image, De Keyzer offers a stunning panorama of a city whose every building is seemingly undercut by crumbling facades and fully exposed beams.

Here and there, the vibrancy of the Cuban people pokes through—in family celebrations, or in the video screen a resourceful driver has installed in a 1950s jalopy. Perhaps the quintessential De Keyzer image of Cuba is the one at a tumbledown amusement park. In it, a father and son enjoy a ride in an elevated car, yet the ride's operator is out cold, his head heavy on the control board.

The differences between the two nations are apparent in De Keyzer's images. In Cuba, the photos of **Fidel Castro** seem like an afterthought; in North Korea, the framed images of dictators from the Kim family seem to have an all-too-real influence on their subjects. Whereas in Cuba, people in the street actually seem to be interacting with each other, in North Korea, they seem too scared to.

Smiles are rare. You'll sometimes see them with kids, but more often childhood seems to be experienced with an enforced rigidity, as in the music class overseen by grim posters showing martial moves the children are supposed to learn.

Where Cuba is falling apart, North Korea, at least in these images, appears antiseptic—sometimes literally so, as with an image of bedroom furniture encased behind glass walls. Even the crowds seem orderly. And where the scenes aren't antiseptic, they're downright bloody, as in the photograph of a realist painting of a soldier (uniform labeled "U.S.A.") torturing a bound, bleeding woman with a hammer.

It's a pity the exhibition doesn't offer too many details on what we're seeing; North Korea, in particular, will be so unknown to most viewers that most will want to ask questions like, "Why is there a World War I-style trench running through a pedestrian plaza?" or, "Why is this dark-clothed group of middle-aged men raising their fists in unison at an outdoor auditorium?"

But despite the practical obstacles of shooting in North Korea, De Keyser sometimes locates a telling touch within a humdrum tableaux. In one image, he documents a pair of hotplates cooking a meal next to a television showing a vivid scene of blazing artillery guns. It's hard to know whether war 'n' breakfast is something De Keyzer's minder would have wanted displayed to the outside world.

At the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center to Aug. 13. 4400 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. Free. (202) 885-1300. american.edu/cas/museum.

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