

ARTS | STONY BROOK

World War II Sex Slaves Bear Witness

Survivors give accounts of kidnapping and rape at the hands of Japanese soldiers.

By AILEEN JACOBSON

Chang-Jin Lee, a New York artist, wanted to commemorate what she feared would become a "forgotten history," she said. After reading an article in The New York Times in 2007 about the experiences of an estimated 200,000 women and girls who had been forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II, she decided to do something about it.

From 2008 to 2012, Ms. Lee, who grew up in Seoul, South Korea, took four trips to seven countries to interview survivors, take photographs and gather images, which she has exhibited in different ways across the United States and in other countries over the last few years.

The latest exhibition — seven striking panels showing survivors when they were young and two videos with interviews, photographs and folk songs — is now on view at the Charles B. Wang Center at Stony Brook University. Titled "Comfort Women Wanted," it is named after the headline in newspaper advertisements intended to lure women to work as prostitutes for soldiers in the Imperial Japanese Army.

The advertisement did not work very well, Ms. Lee said, though a few women may have been paid for their work in the beginning. The rest were kidnapped or deceived with offers of other jobs that did not exist. They ended up being raped up to 100 times per day by one soldier after another in spaces, euphemistically called "comfort stations," which came in the form of huts or rooms in industrial complexes throughout imperial Japan, and occupied territories. A former Japanese soldier — one of only two to publicly acknowledge and apologize for the practice, she said — describes the conditions in one of Ms. Lee's videos.

"It was fast," says Yasuji Kaneko, the former soldier. "No hug, no kiss. We had no time to do such things." The women sat, wearing kimonos, he says, as men stood in front of them for a few minutes "and just had sex." His video runs concurrently with a longer one featuring interviews with some of the survivors.

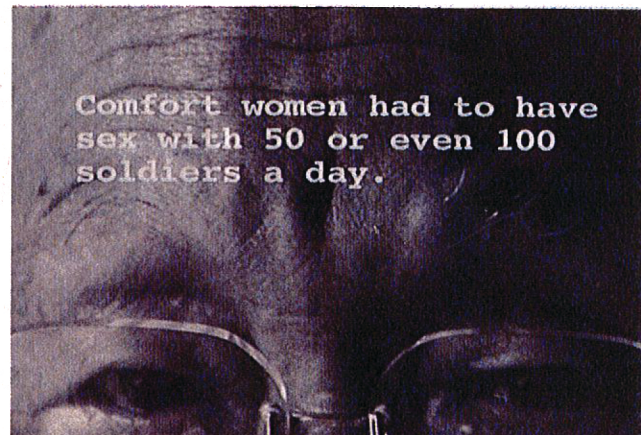
Emah Kastima, an Indonesian woman who was kidnapped from a market when she was 17, says in a whispery voice: "It hurt me inside. Some of them beat me. It hurt my heart. I hated being treated like



that," Jan Ruff O'Herne, who Ms. Lee said was the first European to come forward, describes being selected at age 21 at a Japanese prison camp where she had already spent three and a half years, as her mother and the families of nine other young women who were also being hauled away with her cried and wailed. Lee Yong Soo, a Korean and a former comfort woman, says, "If I am ever born again, I hope to be born as a woman soldier."

The cacophony created by the battling sounds of the simultaneous videos is intentional, the artist said; it is meant to draw a visceral response. It also reflects the controversy that still surrounds the issue. Though Japan issued an apology in

Two images from the exhibition "Comfort Women Wanted," named after the headline in ads intended to lure women into prostitution for the Imperial Japanese Army. Most of the women were unpaid and unwilling, and were kidnapped or tricked. "It hurt me inside," one woman says. "Some of them beat me."



IMAGES BY CHANG-JIN LEE

1993, the current government's policy, led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, is to deny that the women were coerced into working in brothels. However, many other nations and most scholars believe the testimony of the survivors (who represent only about 25 to 30 percent of the women who went through the ordeal, Ms. Lee said).

Jinyoung Jin, the associate director of cultural programs at the Wang Center, who invited Ms. Lee to show her work and curated the exhibition, said it was not about "finger-pointing" but did highlight a continuing global human trafficking problem. "The video is very caring," Ms. Jin said. "This happened to women who didn't have a strong voice in society." The exhibition has elicited strong responses from viewers and has benefited both history and art students. "How you interpret a historical subject in a visual language is also important for students studying art," she said.

Logan Marks, an master's student in fine arts at Stony Brook, helped to install the show. "Its location is very effective, because it's kind of in the belly of the building" on its lowest level, he said. "It has darker and more ominous subject matter, so it fits well with the space." He added: "It's a heavy-duty subject. If you're not moved by that, what kind of person are you?"

Ms. Lee agreed that she set out to make bold artistic choices. "I'm not a documentarian," she said. To help present the women "as individuals rather than as victims," she said, she asked each to record a

favorite song in her own language to introduce each segment. With support from several grants and fellowships, including aid from the New York State Council on the Arts and the Asian Cultural Council, she traveled to Japan, Korea and Taiwan in 2008, to China and Indonesia in 2010, to Australia in 2011 and to the Philippines in 2012. Seven languages are represented in her video.

For the large prints showing the women who were able to give her photographs of themselves as teenagers before, soon after or, in one case, during their enslavement, she went for a "strong visual impact," she said. "I want it carved into your memory." Each print is more than five feet tall.

Fashioned after the advertisements, the photographs are at the center, framed in black and red with "Comfort Women Wanted" boldly displayed in English, Chinese, Filipino and Korean. But the background is gold leaf, "like a saint's halo in a Renaissance painting," Ms. Lee said.

The one she finds most moving is of Mei Chen, a Taiwanese survivor whose unsmiling face was photographed by a Japanese soldier. "It's like she's no longer there," Ms. Lee said. "Her expression says something about what these women went through. She's just not there."

"Comfort Women Wanted" is on display through Jan. 10, 2015 at the Zodiac Lobby Gallery, Charles B. Wang Center, Stony Brook University. Information: stonybrook.edu/wang or 631-632-4400.