

## Roh Choong-hyun

### PROJECT SPACE SARUBIA

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Until recently, the Seoul-based artist Roh Choong-hyun was focused on painting bleak yet poetic urban landscapes-riverside parks and zoos. But with the election of the right-wing conservative government in South Korea in 2008, Roh felt the need to respond to the uncomfortable political conditions; they triggered a "physical response," as he puts it. In the thirteen works in his exhibition "Closed-Door Room," Roh exploits confined spaces associated with repression and violence, most of which come from sites linked to recent Korean history

A typical new piece by Roh, *Room* (all works cited, 2009), shows the dirty corner of an empty office space, complete with the dusty traces of fixtures and furniture that were once there. Only a fan, an air duct, electric cords, and the dark-colored band at the bottom of the wall stand out from the creamy background, leaving the canvas mostly achromatic and desolate. Yet the image depicts a specific space: a vacated room in what was formerly the headquarters of the Defense Security Command of the Republic of Korea; the housed intelligence and investigative units for counter-Communist activities during the nation's formative period. Functioning as a surveillance station that tracked not only North Korean espionage but also subversion and disloyalty to the military regime of the Fifth Republic, the site is often associated with the violent torture of antigovernment activists in the name of investigation.

Bathed in a dark blue-green hue, *Corridor*, delineates the dramatically receding perspective of a narrow passageway; again, the referent is historically specific, an annex to the counter-Communist security office that notoriously became the location of the death of a student activist during an abusive interrogation (which included water torture) in 1987. Likewise, the

stained, dusty tile walls of *Bathroom* witnessed activists imprisoned for antigovernment riots; the locus shown used to be a bathroom of an official residence for employees of Yeongdeungpo Penitentiary.

In each case, the dreary history of the depicted site is well hidden behind the sophistication of the hue and the surface treatment that recalls what Jordan Kantor has called the "Tuymans effect" at its most painterly. As practiced by recent masters such as Luc Tuymans, the subliminal insertion of a political narrative must seem an attractive option, as it could become an outlet for an artist's sense of social responsibility without interfering with the artist's stylistic endeavor. In fact, in most works from the series, nowhere is any of the gruesome backstory hinted at, not even in their neutral titles. Only by reading the press release are viewers enlightened about each location and its history. Roh's restraint in disclosing the specific references abstracts the reading of the images, refraining from any straightforward link to the tragic events; the approach is subtle and mysterious, as are the depictions themselves. There is an elegance and even a sense of nostalgia in Roh's realism that renders the depicted experiences more surreal than real.