Gallery-Hopping with Gimbap in Hand: Where It's At in Frieze Seoul

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In Where It's At, Phin Jennings walks you down the world's less-trodden cultural paths, consulting with some of the most plugged-in locals to guide you through a world of beautiful, moving, delicious, and enriching experiences. Eating, drinking, gallery-hopping, shopping, swimming, staring at the sky: nothing is off the table as he explores the outer reaches of our cultural world to find out where it's really at.



John Dilg, Looking Through, 2023. Oil on canvas. 35.5 x 46.5 x 4 cm / 14 x 18 ¼ x 1 5/8 in © John Dilg. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich / Vienna. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography, Zurich

I have a confession to make. In our year of traversing the various Art Worlds together in Where It's At, Elephant's enlightened cultural travel vertical, we've seen it all: boots, beats, beers, bouillabaisse, and much in between. It's with a tear in my eye that I'm telling you, on our anniversary, that I haven't been completely honest. I have traversed many a mean street on Google Maps, but my visits to the outer reaches of cultural and culinary excellence have often stopped short of the physical world. Thanks to constraints in time and budget and my growing allergy to press trips it has, in many cases, been a case of do as I say, not as I do.

Through this column, our business has always been recs over reports — the future over the past — so I hope you can forgive me for introducing you to the world's possibilities rather than reading you my own diary. But as we travel to South Korea for Frieze Seoul, you have my word that I'm right there with you. As I sit in this not-worth-the-money airport lounge, frantically rifling through lists of recs sent to me by a dozen of Korea's most clued-in and discerning residents and expats, the stakes are very real. I will never mislead you again.

WEDNESDAY, 3RD SEPTEMBER

Do you remember when weekends started on Saturday? The art fair circuit probably doesn't, and Frieze Seoul has gone as far as doing away with Sunday opening completely. In keeping with their schedule, our weekend begins halfway through the week. Stressed? Don't be. The writer Monica Jae Yeon Moon knows the perfect place to rip a nerve-steadying smoke moments away from the fair's venue. Head to Analogue Roasting House, an enclave of European smogginess in Seoul's cig-phobic centre, pull up a map of the fair and plan your next move.

This year, Frieze takes place in the same building at the same time as Kiaf, another art fair. This is fantastic news for people who are excited by the idea of traversing two art fairs in one afternoon. Personally, I'm yet to meet one. Tackle the double bill as you see best; as always, I advise visiting the local galleries that you haven't heard of first. ThisWeekendRoom, which I learned about through the painter Jinhee Kim, looks to have one of the city's most exciting emerging programmes, and we'll meet some more artists from its stable this week(end?) — so I suggest making a beeline for booth A23.



Jiwon Choi, Following the Curves of Orchids, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and ThisWeekendRoom, Seoul

Flipping London's well-known dynamic on its head, Seoul's corporate and uncool centre is south of the river. Many of my sources recommend avoiding the Gangnam District altogether. But we're here now, and we'll enjoy it. Tonight is the Frieze-organised Neighbourhood Night in Cheongdam, where you can find local galleries including G Gallery, SONGEUN and Gallery Planet. And if you're a culture-shocked Brit wanting a taste of home, feel free to drop into Antony Gormley's show at White Cube.

The night is far from over, and the artist Muyeong Kim knows the perfect spot across the river for the hungry and decision-fatigued post-fair, post-galleries art enjoyer. Gomitae has no menu, serving everyone the same, hopelessly aesthetically pleasing array of white-bowled morsels. If you time it right, you'll be able to finish the night by heading down the road to Channel 1969 — a favourite spot of Jungmin Cho, the artist who runs the legendary project space WHITE NOISE — to hear some ambient music. I can't say that I've heard much of Mohani, who heads the concert's bill, but I see a bald guy fiddling with wires on the poster and I've never been let down by that setup before.

THURSDAY, 4TH SEPTEMBER

Today, we stay north of the river for a day of vigorous flaneuring and sauntering with intent. In Itaewon, you'll find some of the city's best small galleries. Start at ThisWeekendRoom, where Hansaem Kim has an exhibition of video works, before heading west to P21 and Whistle. Soo Choi, who runs P21, recommends taking a moment to admire the vernacular architecture that crowds the hilly, narrow streets opposite her gallery. It's being replaced by uniform apartment blocks at an alarming rate, and well worth exploring whilst it's still there.



Haneyl Choi, Life as a struggling uncle, 2023. Plexiglas board, expanded polystyrene, urethane resin, putty. 164 x 41 x 33 cm. Courtesy of the artist and P21, Seoul



Zheng Yuan, Dream Delivery, 2018. 9 min. © Zheng Yuan. Courtesy of the artist and Frieze

For lunch, we have options. For traditional Korean fare — thick rice-and-seaweed rolls, fragrant with sesame oil — Muyeong Kim's favourite spot is the easy-to-miss but eminently delicious Sehee-Ne Gimbap. For a more euro-coded wine and snack type of lunch, the artist Min Ha Park recommends Foodissue. More European still would be a trip to Paul's Diner, an Italian restaurant whose cobbled floors and mildly ornate furniture combines with its building's distinctly Korean hard-edged modernist architecture to pleasing effect.

After lunch (and, if you're still in a mediterranean mood, a siesta), Hansaem Kim recommends a trip to Yakhyeon Catholic Church for a lesson on Korea's unexpected history of Catholicism. From here, head to the Seoul Museum of Art for a screening of Zheng Yuan's beautiful and slightly heartbreaking 2022 film Dream Delivery, which traces the utopian dream of a napping food delivery rider. Dinner is a favourite of the once Seoul-based Danish curator Jeppe Ugelvig, Songjuk Porridge, for a bowl of congee-like savoury rice porridge. Belly full, it's time for an early night.

FRIDAY, 5TH SEPTEMBER

As much as I wish it was, Frieze House Seoul is not the Love Island-styled setting for a titillating reality show centred around art world figures (though what a world that would be... Television producers, please contact me to link and create.) It is, in fact, a new permanent space where the fair will programme exhibitions year-round. Under the directorship of Andy St. Louis (who I learned, too late to include his local wisdom in this piece, is a mastermind of the Korean art scene), its first exhibition is curated by the writer, curator and gallerist Jae Seok Kim. Today, the penultimate day of our weekend trip and just one day before the actual weekend starts, begins here, wandering through the garden and gazing into the thick glass bricks that make the building's windows.

The afternoon is for the artist Yehwan Song's museums of choice, both of which have just opened exciting solo shows. At the Art Sonje Centre to the north is a far-reaching exhibition of sculptures by the Argentine-Peruvian artist Adrián Villar Rojas, who pushes his medium both towards the organic and towards the digital. Back in Itaewon, the Leeum Museum is mounting a retrospective of the dystopian genius Lee Bul. Both are worth visiting, as is the nearby 원평갈비 — a Korean barbecue spot whose recommender I have lost thanks to a language barrier. You know who you are.



Adrián Villar Rojas, The End of Imagination VI, 2024. Live simulation of active digital ecologies, and layered composites of organic, inorganic, human and machine-made matter. 482 × 420 × 260 cm. Installation view at Foundation Beyeler, Basel, Switzerland, 2024. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Jörg Baumann

For a drink, Muyeong Kim — the most generous recommender in this edition — suggests the Grand Ole Opry, an American-style bar first opened for Korean War veterans that plays country music and is presided over by Mama Kim. I'm told that she can be surly or sweet, depending on who you are. "Known for refusing Koreans' cash while letting Americans pay by card, it's politically charged — but that's the vibe," says Muyeong. If the feeling takes you then Ring, Jeppe Ugelvig's favourite club in town, will be playing techno with a strict no-camera policy — another promising combo — until bedtime.

SATURDAY, 6TH SEPTEMBER

Woken up on your final day in Seoul feeling ropey? Don't fret! Just head to Qyun, a vegan cafe and grocery shop specialising in fermented foods frequented by the curator Ji Yun Kim. Drink a cup of coffee and take something gut-friendly to go. Today's activity is a mind-clearing hike up Inwangsan, a mountain from the top of which you'll get a new perspective on the city. Jae Seok Kim encourages you to ask: "What kind of city does Seoul appear to be from above?" before descending via a section of Hanyangdoseong, the city wall that was first constructed in the fourteenth century.

Nearby is the Yangnyeongsi Herb Medicine Museum, whose Hirst-like cabinets of natural cures promise either to comfort or disquiet the hungover brain. There's only one way to find out, before making your way to the nearby Dongmyo Flea Market, where I'm told you might strike gold with some K-pop memorabilia. What's left but to while away your final afternoon in Hell Cafe, a haunt of Frieze Seoul's director Pat Lee, listening to esoteric jazz records through their tannoy speakers and reflecting on your dive into the heart of South Korea's cultural world.

Later in the evening, you might bump into me at Seendosi, a bar that almost everyone I spoke with for this piece told me to visit. This time, for once, I'm following their advice.

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