

Impact Statement

Youngchae Lee, Grade 11

Kim Hak Sun: A Brave Voice that Changed the World, 2024.

Graphite and gouache on paper, 15.7 x 11 inches.

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Unsung Hero: Kim Hak-Sun

When one woman chooses to speak out, she can change the world. This is the essence of my exploration into the life and legacy of Kim Hak-Sun, whose brave testimony as a former comfort woman fought against social injustices to achieve recognition and reparation of a tragic historical chapter. The atrocities committed against comfort women by the Japanese military during World War II were long shrouded in silence, with no minimal acknowledgement or a sincere apology for decades. Victims were carrying the burden of their experiences in isolation while fighting the pointing fingers of society that called the former status of a comfort woman a burden to the family. August of 1991, Kim Hak-Sun broke the silence and stepped into the public eye. She was the first Korean woman to testify about her experiences as a comfort woman and the sexual enslavement the Japanese Military conducted. Her decision to speak out became a monumental step towards redressing the injustices suffered by thousands of women; it changed the social stigma stereotyping comfort women as mere victims to acknowledging the courage of these women who had gone through their tragedies but stood up for their justice. Her day of testimony, August 14th, is now renowned as the World Comfort Women day, which was officially stated by the Asia Solidarity conference.

What I admire most about Kim Hak-Sun is her unfaltering strength and her refusal to be defined by victimhood. She was not merely a victim of wartime atrocities; she was a pioneer in the struggle for justice, a lone voice that eventually created a chorus of calls for acknowledgement and healing. Her voice initiated the global movement of warm empathy on the following stories of comfort women all over the world. Her resilience served as a powerful example of strength that confronted painful truths in societal adversity. This courage was what transformed personal grief into the public outcry for justice, vividly highlighting the significance of standing up against injustices, no matter how insurmountable they may seem. Kim Hak-Sun's legacy teaches us that one individual's voice can echo across generations, instigating significant cultural and legal changes.

Through my artwork, I wanted to honor Kim Hak-Sun not only as a historical figure but as a source of inspiration. As her story became a reminder of the impact of one voice against the silence of oppression, I gave stark contrasts in the portrait – between light and shadow, strength and vulnerability – to mirror the complexities of her experiences.

The portrait of Kim Hak-Sun portrays a stern look, parallel to the protest she led which shows eagerness within Kim to achieve justice representing the thousands of comfort women who were left with a scar inside and out without any apology. Contrasting the colorless portrayals of Kim's life, the colorful elements display the ongoing legacy of Kim and the people of Korea honoring her bravery to continue to actively participate in protests for justice. The softness of blooming hibiscuses is a metaphor for the harsh realities she endured and the gentle yet unyielding spirit with which she faced them.

Creating this artwork centered on Kim Hak-Sun has shifted my perspective on the power of individual stories to shape collective memory and drive societal change. Through the process, I've learned that art is not just a tool for expression but a mechanism for historical education and emotional connection. Engaging with Kim's story deepened my understanding of resilience and the capacity of human spirit to overcome unimaginable hardships for the greater good, instilling a renewed commitment to use my brush and pen to spotlight overlooked narratives that can foster empathy and initiate dialogue. I plan to utilize social media platforms to reach a broader audience, providing visibility to the artwork and textual content about the history of these stories. With this perspective, I hope to contribute to an informed, compassionate community, inspiring others to learn from the past and advocate for justice and dignity.