

Katie experiences life in a danger zone

A VIDEO piece called 38th Parallel by Sheffield artist Katie Davies is going on show at the Millennium Galleries as part of Art Sheffield 08.

Filmed at the Demilitarized Zone on the border between North and South Korea, it aims to show the reality of the no man's land that upholds a 57-year ceasefire and is the most heavily fortified strip of land in the world.

Davies first became aware of it when, as a second-year metalwork and jewellery student at Sheffield Hallam University, she went to South Korea on an exchange programme.

"The US military organise tourist trips to the DMZ and it struck me then there is a lot to see and also nothing to see," she says. You have to hand over your passport even though you are not leaving the country.

After switching to Fine Art to do an MA, Davies went back on a teaching and research programme to Seoul in 2005-6. "When I returned from that I knew I wanted to do something about the DMZ which is a mere one hour's drive from Seoul.

"I called from England and said I wanted to take a camera to research an arts project and I was given access after much planning with the United Nations to film the Demarcation Line and the UN Joint Security Area from within the Demilitarized Zone on the South Korean side."

Despite the seemingly laidback response to her approach, when she got out there it was clear a security check had been made. Her American escort referred to the fact that she had grown up in an RAF family with a father who was a flight lieutenant.

The American was Lt Cmdr Christopher Dignan of the United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission who was at her side at all times as she collected video footage, audio recordings and interviews with other military personnel.

In the military vehicle she had to wear a media armband, although she insists this is very different from a journalistic approach.

"Lieutenant Commander Dignan, who sleeps 20 metres from the Demarcation



Artist Katie Davies in Korea

Line, is the first point of contact between the South and North and is responsible for facilitating dialogue and maintaining composure between the two sides. Half a century on from the war a peace treaty has never been signed and Korea remains divided."

Davies was struck by how, in what is supposed to be a neutral environment, all information about it is partial, from whichever side. She became aware that as a tourist it might be neutral but for a Korean to go there it was likely to hold painful memories.

A feeling of eeriness pervades a place where nothing much happens.

"It is a highly stressful environment, the most dangerous strip of land in the world according to George Bush," she says. "The stress comes from the strong presence of authority and not knowing the rules in the way they operate. There is tension in the air."

The piece shows how the border guards of both sides follow military protocols although the manner of it may be different. "The changing of the guard in the North is much more formal, for example," she notes.

The 38th Parallel will run on an eight-minute loop on a plasma screen. She will also play an audio track of interview extracts relayed by a directional speaker, technology ironically developed for the military.