

Our proposed film screening series “Cinematic Witnesses: Documenting Survival in East Asian Democracies” reflects on a number of broader trends illuminated by the recent political crisis in Korea. The declaration of martial law was not only a crisis of institutional democracy but the latest manifestation of colonialisms, militarized masculinity, hypercapitalist mediatization, and fascist modernity that have reverberated throughout East Asia from the Cold War to the present.

The series brings together three films: Kim-Gun (September 13, 7pm, Innis Town Hall), Close to the Bone (September 27, 7pm, Innis Town Hall), and Untold Herstory (October 24, 3pm, William Doo Auditorium). We ask through this series: What enables the synchronicity between democracy and martial law? What is the relationship between masculinity and sovereignty? What happens when we rethink martial law no longer as an exceptional event but as the modus operandi of colonialism–militarism? Featuring Professors Michelle Cho, Takashi Fujitani, and Erin Y. Huang as discussants, we aim to trouble the exceptionalization of the martial law crisis and open up a space for a critical examination of democracies throughout East Asia.

#### Schedule

	<b>DATE</b>	<b>VENUE</b>
<b>KIM-GUN</b>	2025/09/13 7PM	Innis Town Hall
<b>CLOSE TO THE BONE</b>	2025/09/27 7PM	Innis Town Hall
<b>UNTOLD HERSTORY</b>	2025/10/24 3PM	William Doo Auditorium

#### RSVP

<https://linktr.ee/cinematicwitnesses>

## FILM SUMMARIES/RATIONALES



*Kim-Gun* (Kang Sang-Woo, dir., 2019) documents the search for a figure who eludes both personal and state identification. The figure of Kim-Gun is pictured several times riding on a tank during the Gwangju Uprising in May of 1980 but never identified fully. Years later this figure was labelled by right wing academics as a North Korean militant and therefore evidence of the uprising's North Korean origins. This leads the filmmakers on a journey to discover the "true" identity of Kim-Gun. This journey brings them to the participants of the uprising and resurfaces their memories leading to discoveries of collectivity, struggle, and violence far beyond the identity of the man on the tank.

### Synopsis

KIM-GUN begins with a black-and-white photo taken in May 1980, at Geumnamro, Gwangju, South Korea. 35 years later, the identity of the young man has become a source of controversy: some claim he is "Gwangsu," one of the North Korean special agents whose mission was to instigate anti-government violence, while others remember him as "Kim-gun," a ragpicker who lived under a bridge over the Gwangjucheon Stream.



*Close to the Bone* (Okuma Katsuya, dir., 2024) follows the work of Gushiken Takamatsu, the head of a volunteer organization dedicated to recovering the remains of those who perished in the Battle of Okinawa (1945). Through the efforts of Gushiken and other volunteers, the film uncovers memories buried in the battlefield, imagining and translating the lives lost. Meanwhile, as the U.S. military gears up to relocate its Futenma Air Base to Henoko, various organizations in the Okinawan community protest its use of southern Okinawan soil that presumably is mixed with the remains of the battle's victims for land reclamation of the Henoko base. The voices of Okinawan citizens resisting the Japanese government and the U.S. military remind us that the past is not the past but a ghostly presence of trauma that refuses to fade.

### Synopsis

This documentary follows Takamatsu Gushiken, who has spent over 40 years recovering the human remains of those who perished in the Battle of Okinawa. Gushiken, who began this work at the age of 28 and is now 70 years old, has discovered approximately 400 sets of remains. Based on bone fragments, pieces of tea cups, and flamethrower traces, he assesses whether the remains belonged to soldiers or civilians and how they might have met their demise. Director Katsuya Okuma, who lost his great-aunt in the Battle of Okinawa, joins Gushiken in his search, retracing his great-aunt's footsteps while incorporating archival footage to illustrate both the history and the present of Okinawa.



*Untold Herstory* (Zero Chou, dir., 2022) recounts a group of women “thought prisoners” who were confined to Green Island (then-known as Fire Island), a penal colony off Taiwan’s eastern coast, in the 1950s during the period of martial law in Taiwan commonly known as “White Terror” (1949–1991). On the Green Island, the prisoners are forced to carry out hard labor and attend “reeducation” classes. Directed by an openly lesbian filmmaker, *Herstory* foregrounds a feminist perspective to recover these lost voices of women political prisoners, who were “disappeared” and then executed for their “crimes” by the martial law regime. Based on the prisoners’ oral accounts, the film offers an unflinching portrait of what it meant to think and imagine otherwise under abject conditions that systematically denied the prisoners’ humanity.

### Synopsis

Ever since the 1990s, there have been numerous films featuring the martial law’s brutalities, whose legacies are ongoing still. The film focuses on a little-known event of “Save the Nation with Good Conscience Movement,” which entailed “volunteering” pledges of anticommunism as a result of political transformation. The women political prisoners on Green Island refused to participate and later rebelled, resulting in an execution of 14 people. The film fills a much-needed void of women’s voices in cinematic representations of White Terror in a feminist critique of masculinity, which martial law and democracy often assume as the default form of citizenry.

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