Sagu Players

The billiards room is full of Asian men, and Asian men only. They are all wearing white dress shirts and dark ties, all except two: one who wears a green, plaid dress shirt; another who wears a dark blue fleece jacket over what is likely another white dress shirt. There are billiards tables arranged in a grid over the floor (a dark and light green checkerboard carpet), spaced apart from each other by about the length of each table's shorter side. The same blue cloth playing surface on all of them. Frames and legs that look wooden, but could just as easily be another material with a brown finish. On each of the tables we can see, we see three or four balls: two red, and one yellow or white; or two red, one yellow, and one white. There are no pockets on any of the tables.

The game they are playing is called Sagu. We know this from the title of the work. They are not playing American billiards, or pool, because the tables have no pockets, have only three to four balls on them that are always red and yellow/white, and are all blue on top, instead of the classic American green. It's a game most of us have never seen before. And if we fall in that majority, we might take a longer look at this painting, and try to learn for ourselves what the heck is going on, how Sagu is played.

But of course we can't do that. We can't learn a game just from a snapshot. So what then, we ask, is the artist's intent? Why show us a game we do not know and cannot learn without further research? We explore the rest of the painting, the rest of the room.

On the wall, on the left side of the canvas, there's a "No Smoking" sign, written in English and Korean. The sign uses the "No Smoking" symbol commonly used in Western cultures, the red circle with a red diagonal line over a cigarette. Funny, you say. Cigarette smoke abounds

here in the room. This windowless room. This windowless billiards hall in, presumably, a basement. You count three men in the room smoking cigarettes. There could be more, resting their cigarettes in ashtrays while it's their turn to shoot. You look for others. And then you notice something in the back. One of the Sagu players wearing a white dress shirt doesn't look so much like the rest of them. In fact, he may not even be Asian. He could be a foreigner. And in fact, you might think, he is not only a foreigner, but a very specific foreigner indeed. That's right, you astute viewer of paintings who has never played Sagu, you. Like Diego Velazquez, Alfred Hitchcock, and others before him, the artist Felsman has inserted himself into his work.

That said, for Koreans (or the rare foreigner) familiar with the game, there is an alternate reading. If you know how Sagu is played, you're more likely to look closely at the table in the foreground, the placement of the balls, and the shot that the Korean workingman is now lining up to take, and less likely to find the hidden artist.

The shooter is aiming his cue ball straight into the cushion. This seems like a strange choice; there is an easy way for him to hit both red balls if he just turns around and aims his cue ball the other way, at the first red ball with a little bit of spin, but instead, he is aiming straight at the cushion. Why? Well, you know Sagu. And you know that in Sagu, on your final shot, you must hit at least three cushions, along with the two red balls. So this Sagu player must be on his final shot, cigarette defiantly in mouth, going for the win.