
Art Review

The Art of Do Ho Suh: Traversing Two Cultures

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In early 2008, Lehmann Maupin Gallery inaugurated its second location in Soho Art District in New York, in which Do Ho Suh's *Reflection* (2007), a mixed media site-specific installation supported with a massive nylon fabric and wire, was exhibited.

Do Ho grew up in Korea as son of Se Ok Suh, a prominent South Korean ink painter, and completed a BFA and MFA in oriental painting at Seoul National University. After completing the mandatory military service in Korea, he came to the United States to fulfill his educational and professional dream as an artist. He earned a second BFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA in sculpture from Yale University. He currently lives and works in New York City and Seoul, traversing the lines of dual cultural and ethnic identities. His works of art represent ambivalence toward his life experiences with Confucian collectivism in Korea and individual egalitarianism in the United States.

Selected Artworks of Do Ho Suh

Do Ho's large-scale installations and use of transparent fabric, similar to Christo and Jeanne-Claude's choice of materials, shed the monumental image of traditional Korean cultural symbols, when seen from a distance; upon closer inspection, these transient structures of life deliver a fresh look. The imposing Korean architecture, typical of traditional palaces, temples or scholar's homes, which he uses in his artworks contains substructures with many interconnected components, much like a metaphor of America's multicultural society. Do Ho's life fluctuates between being Korean on the outside and American in the inside. His artwork is a reflection of his psychological, social, and, cultural adjustment in two countries.

Paratrooper Series

In Do Ho Suh's *Paratrooper* series, his works are based on paratrooper-related images. In his 2003 installation *Paratrooper-I*, he used linen, polyester thread, cast stainless steel, cast concrete, and plastic beads (122" x 153" x 240"). He collected some 3,000 different signatures of family and friends from his personal journals and exhibition guestbooks, which were hand-stitched onto layers of linen. Long, loose pink threads extending from each name are bound together and held by a small polished stainless steel paratrooper figure standing on top of a concrete base.



In 2005 he created *Paratrooper-II*, where he used monofilament, resin, nylon, poly organza, and stainless steel armature (192" x 180"). He explores notions of human relationship, displacement, personal history, and space. The paratrooper is a metaphor for being dropped into and surviving within a new environment similar to a person traveling to a new society and experiencing culture shock. His reliance on his parachute for a safe landing is a key to his journey and survival. The strands, connected to important people in life, become deliberate lifelines equally responsible for the fate and existence of an individual in a new socio-cultural environment.

In 2005 he made *Paratrooper-V* that uses various materials including linen, polyester thread, cast stainless steel, cast concrete, and plastic beads (110" x 197" x 281"). His *Paratrooper-V* installation, containing 5,000 names inscribed on cloth filaments, shows a collective hierarchical system that maintains its structures and functions by adjusting interdependent mechanisms. This message of collectivity appears again in two other intricate major works, *Some/One* (2001) and *Floor* (2001).

Self and Collective Identity Series

In *Some/One* (2001), Do Ho constructed a standing regal gown of a towering figure, which resembles the legendary Admiral Yi Sun Sin from the 16th-century Korea, with 70,000 stamped stainless steel military dog tags. The floor of the gallery is blanketed with a sea of polished military dog tags. Evocatively displaying how an individual soldier is part of a larger troop or military body, these tags swell to form a hollow, ghost-like suit of armor at the center of the



the achievements and contributions of individuals merged into the collective identity of today's transnational, global society.

room on which viewers are free to walk. The dog tags, like thousands of sand granules trapped in ocean waves, wash up on the heroic figure and then go out with the tide dispersing his aura and power. He successfully unites a traditional Korean armor suit with his military service and individual dog tags with the power of collective identity. Do Ho's sculptures represent

In *Floor* (2001), shown at the 2001 Venice Biennale, the faceless mass of humanity takes on individuality in the same way as the life-sized 2nd-century B.C. terracotta warriors and horses of Shi Huang Di, the first Emperor of China, did. This installation (143" x 400" x 460") is composed of sheets of acrylic glass supported by 180,000 two-inch-tall plastic figures of men and women with contorted expressions. Each figure alone is insignificant but, when united, they struggle together to support the burdens of humanity and world history. The work may represent the United States that, as a nation



of immigrants, has historical ties to the past and present waves of voluntary and involuntary workers from all racial, ethnic, and religious groups.

Do Ho raises questions about individual identity and collective strength by exploring his personal beliefs about space and collective actions. Through investigation and observation of his stunning works of art, one can easily discover why he selected memories of his childhood and home in Korea and compared and contrasted them in his art works: *Who Am We* (2000), *Uni-Form/s: Self-Portrait/s: My 39 Years* (2006), *North Wall* (2005), *Reflection* (2007) and *Seoul Home/L.A. Home* (1999).

In 2006 Do Ho's installation, entitled *Uni-Form/s: Self-Portrait/s: My 39 Years*, was displayed in Basel, Switzerland. It employs a mixed media of fabric, fiberglass resin, stainless steel, and casters (66" x 100" x 22"). Until the 1980's, Korean middle and high school students were required to wear a school uniform on which a student's name tag and school identity badge was usually affixed. This school uniform code was a legacy of the 36-year-long Japanese colonial occupation of Korea (1910-1945) and was abolished in the late 1980's as part of the Korean national pride movement. In the late 1990's, as Korea's economic affluence grew, school uniforms were readopted to conceal the socio-economic gap between rich and poor students displayed by their clothing. Do Ho's installation of 300 school uniforms is a metaphor for the struggle of maintaining an individual self identity within uniformity. Student identities were being defined and controlled by others using the nationalistic politics of the resurgent power of the Korean government. Do Ho reflects on how he was constructed and constricted by the political, military, and educational system that defined his identity during 39 years of his life. Through this self portrait he questions his self-identity formation and individualism as it was constructed in Korean society.

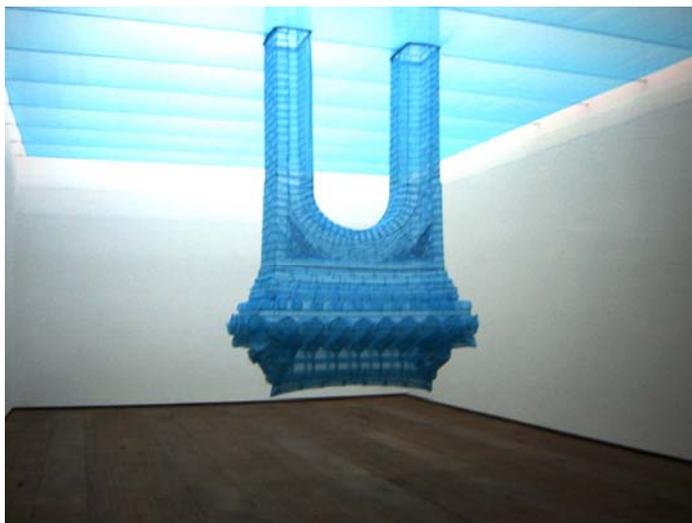
In *Who Am We?* (2000), Do Ho addresses the issue of individual identity in Korean society where the family takes precedence over each person and being part of a societal unit is more important. This work, composed of 12 sheets of color offset wallpaper (24" x 36"), is about the sense of personal identity and questions the collective identity of a Korean living in America. Do Ho critiques the social condition in which an individual identity is lost to a group. The ambivalent work offers a sense of belonging and security to an individual who is a part of a group. Collective identity is a strong characteristic of Korean tradition where being a member of a group is more important than individuality.

Home Series

A prevailing theme of displacement is longing for one's home, ancestral roots, and nurturing abode. Do Ho creates and recreates his Korean life by transplanting and super-imposing it on his adopted home in America. His gates, walls, homes, and apartments were constructed of a fabric so thin and light that each one can be disassembled, folded, and placed in a single large suitcase. These replicate translucent fairy tale images of life in Korea along with an idealized and detailed series of dwellings in Rhode Island, Los Angeles, and New York City.

North Wall (2005), an installation of polyester, stainless steel armature and cable (199" x 325" x 49"), and *Seoul Home/L.A. Home* present replicas of the interior of his parent's home modeled after a 19th-century Confucian scholars abode. Do Ho Suh's *Korean House* project stems from his need to fill a desired personal space. He wanted to transport his Korean home and squeeze it into his small New York City apartment. He chose a light and transportable fabric to tell a part of the story of traversing two cultures. The merging of Seoul, LA and NYC

is a way to deal with cultural displacement. Do Ho believes that at some point in life we must leave home and that when we return for a visit it is not the same home anymore, but just filled with nostalgic memories that we carry for the rest of our lives. He felt longing and a sense of loss, so he created a transportable home to cure his homesickness. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (535 BC – 475 BC) described this dilemma when he wrote, “You cannot step in the same stream twice.” The change is endemic, especially in Korea where the standard of living jumped from a Third-World nation to the nation of the 11th highest GDP in less than 30 years.



Reflection (2007) is a fabric and wire replica of the gate between the main house and the children’s bedroom of his parent’s home in Korea. He recreated every detail of the original gate including the dragon and crane design on the bricks and roof tiles. His lake-blue Korean gate, serenely floating above and below the water line, is a meditative space for individual contemplation. *Reflection*, as an installation, rises above and below a plane of reality. Can the viewers place themselves near the surface gate, which cannot be reached because the floor is a thin fabric, or touch the ground-level gate in a translucent form? He is looking back at his childhood home in order to move forward. Do Ho asks if life is real on a metaphorical and actual level because its present existence is dictated by impure and filtered

memories of yesterday translated by the values of today.

Summary

Do Ho Suh’s life experiences between two cultures profoundly impacted his artistic concepts, subject matters, and manipulation of multimedia materials

that include translucent soft fabrics, stainless steel components, wire frames, and other components. His sewing method of stitching cloth to a wire substructure gives his traditional objects substantial form. His large site-specific installations, based on his own life experiences in Korea and metaphorical thinking, demand deeper interpretation. He is reconnecting with his Korean roots and, like so many other immigrants in America's diverse landscape, is fulfilling his deep longing for the fading memory of his Korean identity. He is traversing two cultures and struggling with the transformation of his personal Korean identity in the face of the unstoppable assimilation into the mainstream of American culture.

He had solo exhibitions at the Serpentine Gallery in London, Seattle Art Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, and the Art Sonje Center in Korea. He participated in group exhibitions at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the 49th Venice Biennale. The artist's work is represented in major museum collections including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Do Ho's efforts to reach global audiences continue including a three month long international exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London, England during 2008.

References

Do Ho Suh's works of art are available at the Lehmann Maupin Gallery website <http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/>

An interview with Do Ho Suh and works of art are available at Designboom <http://www.designboom.com/eng/interview/dohosuh.html>

Quote by Heraclitus (535 BC – 475 BC). Retrieved May 28, 2008, from <http://www.abu.nb.ca/Courses/GrPhil/Heraclitus.htm>

Acknowledgment

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