



ARTFORUM
January, 2002**AT HOME IN THE WORLD**
The Art of Do-Ho Suh

BY FRANCES RICHARD

A voluminous canopy in translucent celadon silk is suspended from the gallery ceiling like a dream or a ghost of a house. Responsive to light and air currents and open at the bottom as if it could drift down to enclose a viewer standing below, the tentlike structure is nevertheless exactly detailed, a diaphanous confection whose specific architectural character asserts itself gradually. If you crane your neck, adjusting your sight line on this fragile room-within-a-room, it takes a moment to orient your ground-bound body to the implied space above. Articulated with stitched seams, the fabric renders at full size the latticed woodwork, tile, windows, and doorframes of a one-room dwelling. The shape is familiar, in that it is clearly domestic; uncanny, in that its physicality has been thinned to near disappearance. Do-Ho Suh's *Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home*, 1999, is a portrait of the traditional Korean house in which the artist grew up, a fact that is both crucial and not. Premised in autobiography yet dematerialized to a lyrical husk, *Seoul Home...* appears as a scrim onto which anybody may project his or her reveries about any absent home.

"I experience space through, and as, the movement of displacement," Suh has written, and this consolidation of fluid motion into manifest form defines his art. Like his other sculptural installations, *Seoul Home*. . . memorializes a cultural and personal attachment but in such a pared-down, emblematic way that private narrative disperses. In this equilibrium between individuality and indeterminacy, the work's material presence holds sway. Suh's vision of "intrinsically transportable and translatable space" takes for granted a world in which the peregrination of an artist who commutes between Seoul and New York while preparing for exhibitions in Venice and LA makes perfect sense. But if theories of nomadism and globalization have matured to the status of received truths, their formal enactment becomes proportionally more important: It's hard to deny that concepts like subjectivity and nationality are fragmentary, rhizomatic, virtual, but it's also hard to create for them concise visual figures as such. *Seoul Home*. . . does this, and its psychosocial eloquence perhaps explains why the piece has been something of an icon over the last few years, when it was exhibited at the Korean Cultural Center in Los Angeles, in "Greater New York" at P.S. 1 in Queens, and in "BodySpace" at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

A bastion of stability—the childhood home—reimagined to fold into a suitcase, *Seoul Home* . . . is typical of Suh's work in that it both physicalizes and undercuts nostalgia; it's an antimonument that calls attention to its own immaterial foundations, its construction as wish. The absurd run-on title, as weighty as the object is flimsy, indexes the relentless travel of the international citizen (or art star). Each time the piece is shown, its link to an original or fixed location is further diluted, and the virgules that punctuate its title multiply until permanence dissolves into its own shadow, or in Suh's words, until "site-specificity becomes portable." Memory and fantasy collapse into a whirl of post-Proustian impossibility: the perfectly private yet perfectly shared locale. And this no-place abode is still evolving. A second house piece, made of smoky nylon rather than jade-green silk, is currently titled *348 W. 22nd St., Apt. A, New York, NY 10011, USA, at the Rodin Gallery, Seoul, Korea, 2000*. The dust-colored artificial fabric signifies the apartment's New York-ness just as the elegant, earthy, or watery silk suggests a notional quality of Asian tradition. Complete with sewn bathroom and kitchen, *348 W. 22nd St.*... models Suh's Chelsea apartment and credits the venue at which it was first displayed. As yet unknown in New York, the piece will eventually be merged with *Seoul Home*... by means of a pink nylon corridor, a fantasized connection that is rose-tinted like idealization itself. The resulting master construction will bear an appropriately hybridized title, testifying to a transience in which insubstantial form accretes to itself and obsessive nomenclature proliferates into unsayability, the linguistic corollary of an endless—but insouciant—displacement.

The house installations evoke the body through a double distance—containers for an implied person, they are themselves little more than sketches for or suggestions of shelter. Memorializing the practical structures through which national and personal identities are maintained, they bear a direct relation to Suh's earlier work, though the latter often uses the human form. This more visceral engagement with the body emphasizes Suh's concern with loss or dispersal of self. In *High School Uni-Form*, 1996, for example, a grid of sixty Korean schoolboys' black uniforms strand sewn together at the shoulders, a grim platoon of interlocked torsos. These are the uniforms Suh wore at school, and the intimate relation between the artist's memories and the material he at one time donned intensifies a painful sense of idiosyncrasy repressed by protocol. At the same time, their formal style, adopted during Korea's occupation by Japanese forces, whose aesthetic had in turn been influenced by German military design, reinscribes the installation at the level of intercultural hostility, where personal intimacies erode. *Who Am We?*, 2000, summons a similar idea of a hyperdisciplined and specifically masculine throng, though it is cut loose from political implication and leaves room for ambiguity. Thousands of tiny faces culled from the artist's high school yearbooks are printed in rows; the patterned sheets could be used as wallpaper. At a distance, the one-eighth-inch

portraits blur like benday dots, but if you look closely, individual features emerge. In effect, the viewer must decide, via the application of his or her attention, whether the image(s) will stabilize as an "I" or a "We," a series of unique visages or a unified muddle.

These meditations on the totalizing "uni-form" depict the group project of participatory belief that is required for the establishment of Law, the faceless presence from which the State incorporates. A back-and-forth scale shift from self to crowd is central to this process, and Suh has developed a corresponding vocabulary of domestic, interior objects (wallpaper, clothes, welcome mats) and public, exterior ones (the monument, the bridge). Here the body is not only visible but structurally necessary—representations of the human form become integral to architectural integrity. Individuality remains subsumed. But where *High School Uni-Form* and *Who Am We?* stress an oppressive sameness, others of Suh's "crowd" sculptures express collective strength. *Doormat: Welcome (Amber)*, 1998, and *Doormat: Welcome (Green)*, 1999, *Blue-Green Bridge*, 2000, and *Floor*, 1997-2000, all involve vast numbers of human figures, two inches high and cast in plastic. Some are neuter, ideograms for "person." Others are discernibly male or female, with differing racial features, haircuts, and outfits. In each case, the mob of miniatures supports the Brobdingnagian bodies of gallery-goers aloft on their outstretched hands, while in *Public Figures*, 1998, a massive but empty classical plinth is raised by a legion of little-guy Atlases cast in resin to appear as bronze. Crushed under the heels of the visitor or groaning beneath the heavy void of an invisible hero, the figurines, like the yearbook faces, fade to a sea of color and form unless focused attention is brought to bear. Neatly proving that individual achievement arises from collective strength, these pieces are in a sense visual puns—an impression underlined by the punning titles of some. *Public Figures* was designed for temporary display at downtown Brooklyn's MetroTech Center, and subsequently reconfigured as part of Suh's contribution to both the Korean and the International Pavilions at the 2001 Venice Biennale (a fact that puts extra spin on the piece's critique of celebrity).

Suh's newest work, recently installed at the Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, extends this idea of the single, powerful entity and its adversarial/dependent relationship with its constituent parts. Its title, *Some/One*, encapsulates the play between embodiment and emptiness, aggregate and unit, receptacle and scam. But where autobiographical or "small" narrative often inflects previous works, *Some/One*, 2001, streamlines questions of power, belonging, and persona, focusing them toward the grand level of myth. Using thousands of custom-stamped stainless-steel dog tags, Suh constructs a regal yet sincorporeal personage, a stylized, hollow robe rising like coalesced mercury from the gallery floor. Its shimmering imbrication suggests dragon scales, or chainmail, or stacked coins, as if an ancient figure of martial strength had manifested itself. Like the works in silk and nylon, it is both elegant and ghostly, overwhelming yet quicksilver. Its back is

turned to entering viewers, who must walk around the freestanding object, much as they must walk over the Bridge, across the Floor, or under *Seoul Home*.... Submitting to the spatial field of the sculpture, treading cautiously on the overlapped metal "train," you discover the nonsense "names" stamped into the dog tags, another mute homage to indecipherable masses. These myriad tesserae cooperate to form the total garment, which faces the back of the room. The second discovery is that the cloak gapes open and is lined with mirrored foil. The temptation to step inside, to feel yourself assume larger-than-life power, is thwarted not only by the narrowness of the slit, but by the uneasy wonder of confronting a disembodied presence, a static object that seems inscrutably alive. A flickering thought: The tensile-seeming form could snap shut, imprisoning the unwary, much as the school uniforms eviscerate personality and *Seoul Home*..., despite its delicacy, seems poised to drop like a trap.

The attraction/repulsion of the aloof and unnamed god, like that of the infinite regress of the many-named, unattainable home site or the silent, interlocked, and effective multitude, evince a wide range of associations—desire and passivity dynamism and beauty, enigma and threat. These totems of exchange and flow acknowledge the longing for subjective integration, the primal importance of asking who you are and where you have come from or may be going. The understanding that neither abstract authority nor personal sentimentality can provide a stable answer to these questions is not something Suh has to insist on—rather, he accepts it as his element, not so much refusing solidity as pursuing it to an atomized level where it naturally breaks apart. The loss he describes is total, but for the most part, not especially sad. What he calls "the specificity and moveability of space" keeps phase-shifting from metal to nylon, plastic to silk, joke to elegy, and body to building, renewing itself in visual form each time it is quenched as idea.

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