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GALLERY-GOING

By ALEX MAR

He's a joke out of any number of comedies: an artist, standing, drink in hand, at a cocktail party, going on about how his work is "universal," will "unite the masses," et cetera. Why does he talk like that? Can art even do that? At 590 Madison Avenue, Mariko Mori has constructed an elaborate space in which to consider this question.

Ms. Mori's effects-heavy video installations and digitally manipulated photos were first introduced to New York on a grand scale with "Empty Dreams," her 1999 show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The artist featured herself posing in fancy dress in most of the works: a sexy, futuristic doll; floating forest spirit; spacey stewardess; little goddess of the mountain.

At 590 Madison Avenue, the nonprofit Public Art Fund brings us Ms. Mori's "Wave UFO." It's an elaborate installation produced by Jeffrey Deitch (who recently helped give performance art a second life through the likes of Fischerspooner). Actually, it's less of an installation than a visitation: a large, pearl-colored tear shape seems to have dropped down into the glass atrium of the office building, full of people on their lunch breaks.

This has to be one of the few art installations to list in its credits a "system engineer of brain-wave interface," as the two-part, 7-minute interactive video housed in the "UFO" makes use of real-time computer graphics and brainwave technology. Before entering the pod in groups of three, viewers must remove their shoes and slip on white, rubber-bottomed booties, after which a female attendant in a "2001"-style labcoat daintily applies electrodes to their foreheads.

Visitors ascend the staircase, tiptoe through the elliptical sliding door, recline in a seat, and get plugged in. The door slides shut. On a domed screen above their heads, the video begins. Three sets of similar blob-shapes represent the left and right lobes of each viewer's brain, responding in color and shape to different types of brainwaves. This segues into the second section, entitled "Connected World," which is meant to "link the individual experience to the universal." Through the swelling of soothing music and swirling multi-color graphics, you are led into a symphony of shapes which culminate in a sort of shower of stars from the projection's center. Slow fade to black, and the door slides open.

The related text explains that the installation draws on "the Buddhist principle that all forms of life in the universe are interconnected." But this is tantamount to using the biblical injunction to "love thy neighbor" as the conceptual justification for a video loop of two men hugging. In aiming to "connect" individuals to the "world at large," Ms. Mori has set herself an ambitious, admirable goal. But how is it that the world at large is represented through a series of New Age cliches? Whose world is that, really?

As in the bulk of Ms. Mori's work, there are a lot of empty production values to be found. Anyone would be impressed by an intricate film or stage set: the question is whether or not there's anything resonant, anything to take away with you beyond the prettiness of this "shared experience." Unfortunately, the work is superficial — both in content and form. After all, the jiggling shapes which represent each of the visitors' brain activity remain side by side, and it's not until the tacked-on finale of the second half — unrelated formally to the first — that the screen shows us an encompassing image.

At a moment when cultural and religious differences seem frighteningly relevant, for a young artist to suggest that global unity is just a color-coded brainwave away is disappointing to say the least.

While Ms. Mori's world is digital and virtual, Do-Ho Suh impresses with the tangible. His visual world is expansive, but it's rooted in detail, in attention to how things are scaled and put together.

The artist's work deals in part with how each individual defines his space, and how that space can be both flexible and transportable. In moving from his native Seoul to New York in his late 20s, he felt the nomad's desire to carry his territory with him. Mr. Suh made his name in 2000's "Greater New York" at P.S.1, with "Seoul Home / L.A. Home / New York Home / Baltimore Home / London Home / Seattle Home" (1999): a translucent, pale green silk sewn sculpture modeled on his childhood home in Seoul and suspended from the ceiling.

At Lehmann Maupin now is a new installment of this evolving project: "The Perfect Home II" (2003). With great care and craftsmanship, Mr. Suh has recreated, in translucent nylon of the lightest blue and purple, his New York apartment — and it's tremendously beautiful.

With seams that are delicate and precise, the artist describes all the familiar details of his — and possibly any New Yorker's — living space: the window frames, doorknobs, an intercom, light fixtures, built-in cabinets in the kitchen, a stove with all its dials, the sink faucet and the refrigerator's handles, intricate plumbing in the bathroom, a length of pipe running along the ceiling in the hall, the stairs which lead to the next floor complete with handrail. All these details, although made only from fabric, retain their shape; and even the "bricks" in the "walls" are indicated by lean scribbles of thread.

You can walk around the construction, and the thin skin of the rooms — reminiscent of a gorgeous kite — allows you to see the ghost-like forms of the other visitors walking and pausing inside. Mr. Suh has created a personal space that's at once recognizable and ethereal; the figures occupying it look at home from the outside, while really only passing through. To spend time in that space is to see the most obvious things that you have in common with so many others, rendered with incredible attention. This, I think, is as close as art gets to creating connections.

"Mariko Mori: Wave UFO" presented by the Public Art Fund until July 31 (590 Madison Avenue, at 56th Street, 212-980-3942).

"Do-Ho Suh: The Perfect Home 2," at Lehmann Maupin (540 W. 26th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-255-2923).