



ART INNOVATOR

DO HO SUH

2013

From three-dimensional fabric sculptures of his parents' house in Korea to an intimate drawing of his New York studio, Suh's work investigates the idea of home—and what it means to belong in the 21st century.

BY JULIE L. BELCOVE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES MOLLISON

AFTER KOREAN-BORN artist Do Ho Suh moved to London a few years ago to be with his wife, he missed his adopted home of New York. He kept a 500-square-foot live-in studio there, in a former sailors' dorm in Chelsea, and began to contemplate ways of memorializing it. Many of Suh's most famed sculptures had reimagined his homes—in translucent fabric or resin, or as a painstakingly detailed, oversize dollhouse—from his childhood in Seoul and his young adulthood in the United States. This time, though, he wanted to make a drawing. Except Suh was not content to sit in a chair with a pad and pencil and render what he saw. Instead, he covered every inch of the interior—walls, floors, ceiling, refrigerator, window air conditioner—with paper, then rubbed with a blue-colored pencil—the way a child might preserve the memory of a leaf in the fall. "Rubbing is a different interpretation of space. It's

quite sensual—very physical and quite sexual," says Suh, wearing a T-shirt and shorts on a late summer day in his London studio. "You have to very carefully caress the surface and try to understand what's there."

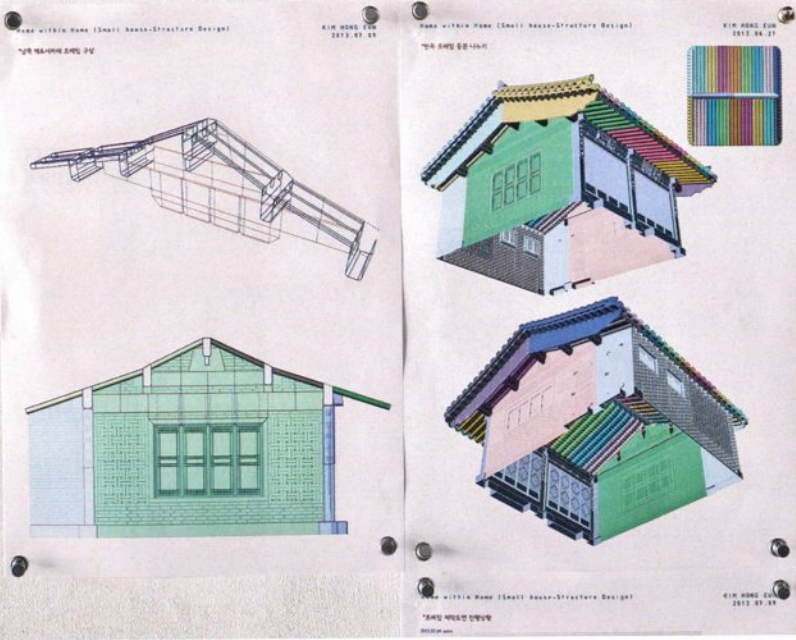
That dictum could easily apply to the entirety of Suh's oeuvre, which has explored the varying meanings of space, from the smallest territory we occupy—our clothing—to our homes and homelands. Issues of memory, history, displacement, identity and the body all come into play. In an age of exponentially increasing globalization, Suh's consideration of what it means to belong strikes a nerve. His almost uncanny ability to hit these major touchstones of our time—and do it with the lyricism of a poet—has made him one of the most internationally in-demand artists of his generation.

Suh has fashioned a monumental emperor's robe from thousands of soldiers' dog tags and precariously perched a fully furnished house on the edge of a roof seven stories up. He has used his personal history of

wearing uniforms—from schoolboy to soldier—as the basis for a self-portrait, and set an army of tiny figurines under a glass floor, inviting viewers to walk on the artwork without necessarily even realizing it. In Suh's mind, it all has the same origin: "Everything starts from an idea of personal space—what is the dimension of personal space," says Suh. "What makes a person a person, and when does a person become a group? What is interpersonal space—space between people?"

"The whole approach is quite rich," says Rochelle Steiner, professor at the USC Roski School of Fine Arts, who is working on a book about Suh's drawings. "He's been very, very inventive."

With a boyishly round face and a playful grin, Suh looks younger than his 51 years by a decade, but he exudes the seriousness of a veteran artist. It's a disposition he knows well: His father, Suh Se-ok, is a well-regarded abstract painter in Seoul. After



STUDIO VISIT
Renderings of a traditional Korean hanok and newspaper clippings. Opposite: Toy models by the Japanese comic artist Kow Yokoyama.

secondary school, the younger Suh had hoped to become a marine biologist, but with a poor math score standing in his way, he applied to art school at the last minute and was accepted. He studied traditional Korean painting before following his first wife, a Korean-American grad student, to the states in 1991. The Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) was the only American art school to accept him, and though he'd already earned a master's degree in Seoul, RISD insisted he enter as a sophomore. Still, immigrating alleviated some of the pressure of being his father's son. "I felt relieved when I went to the states," he says. "I felt much more freedom. I realized the danger of having a father like mine—he's going to always come up—but in the U.S. my father is nobody."

Asked how his father regards his success, Suh says, "I'm not sure if he feels proud of me. I don't know if he feels competition. He doesn't show those things."

At RISD, Suh couldn't get into the classes he most wanted to take and ended up enrolling in *The Figure in Contemporary Sculpture*. "It changed the course of my life," Suh says, adding that the professor, Jay Coogan, "is responsible for my becoming a sculptor." Presented with the first assignment—use clothing to consider the human condition—Suh delved into ideas about the body, a topic that was taboo in Korea. Around the same time, the Rodney King riots erupted in Los Angeles, and news images of armed Korean immigrants protecting their stores made Suh think for the first time about how non-Koreans perceived his ethnic group. His classmates, he recalls, all younger than he, related neither to the immigrant experience nor to the mandatory military training that every Korean man, himself included, must endure.

Fastening thousands of army dog tags to a military jacket, Suh created his first major sculpture: *Metal Jacket*. The modern-day coat of armor touched on many of the themes—personal space; the tension between the individual and the group; the inevitable culture clashes that arise with human migration—that continue to preoccupy his work, and it also became the prototype for *Some/One*, the imposing robe made of dog tags. From a distance, the viewer sees each sculpture as a single silvery surface. Only upon closer inspection does it register as a mosaic of



in Seoul—a traditional slope-roofed *hanok*, quite out of style when his father commissioned a former carpenter at the royal palace to build it from reclaimed wood in the 1970s—in dreamy fabric, suspended from a gallery ceiling. "It has an interesting narrative," he says of his childhood house. "But then, every building, every space, has that. It's just not told."

Using fabric gave the pieces a ghostlike quality. Viewers were invited to enter some of the installations, heightening the sensation of being in a home, or the memory of one. Suh recalls how his brother, an architect, was disconcerted to see strangers wandering under a version of their family home at a 2000 exhibition at New York's P.S. 1 museum.

Fallen Star 1/5 (2008–11), one of his best-known works, takes a more solid model of that hanok and

soldier part with the metal identification. *Net-Work* (2010), which was installed on a Japanese beach for the Setouchi International Art Festival, looks like a fishing net from a distance; only up close is it clear that Suh constructed it from scores of shiny figurines, each one's arms and legs outstretched to another's in the shape of an X. The piece was shown during typhoon season, and though the organizers insisted on securing it, Suh would have been content to see it wash away with the tide. "I thought it would be a beautiful thing to happen to the piece—nature comes and takes my piece away, takes it to the ocean, and the work disappears."

Says his longtime friend and fellow artist Janice Kerbel: "The works in a way are like him—they're these very gentle things, almost like specters. There's something ethereal about Do Ho—he doesn't seem to belong to the place he's in."

In 2010, Suh moved to London to join his second wife, Rebecca Boyle Suh, a British arts educator. Their first daughter was born soon after; their second followed this past summer. "I've been following my loves," Suh says of his continent hopping, adding with a laugh, "it was never a career move." If anything, London has been tougher to adjust to than the United States. "Things are so different here. I feel like it's a completely different language, mentality and humor. I miss a lot of American values—like being straightforward and more relaxed."

His life in London revolves around family. He is not one to join the art world social scene. "His commitment to his practice is so intense," says Kerbel, who is also based in London. "He's a quiet person and keeps very much to himself. He needs that time to be alone and in his head."

Suh maintains an international practice, taking intercontinental trips two to three times per month, including frequent stints in Korea, where the fabric pieces are sewn. Much of Suh's sculpture is

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dog tags, each representing an individual soldier.

Coogan, now the president of the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, recalls his reaction to *Metal Jacket*: "Oh my gosh! His work was so fantastic. It was ambitious in scale and in the kind of global ideas he was working with." Coogan, who has remained close to Suh, adds, "Do Ho is exploring issues of what divides us and what unites us as human beings."

In 1997, Suh scored a prestigious two-person show at New York gallery Gavin Brown's Enterprise before earning an MFA from Yale and moving to Manhattan. As he continued to exhibit new work, his hauntingly powerful pieces about the nature of home quickly gained notice. He made versions of his parents' house

crashes it through the wall of a carefully furnished, dollhouse-like re-creation of the apartment building where he lived in Providence. Contrary to most viewers' assumptions, his various home pieces are not exact replicas. "It's intrinsically impossible to make them exact," he says. "I wanted to achieve something intangible. It's about memory, time spent in the space."

In addition to exploring ideas about culture shock, Suh's works can have a sense of humor—a house teetering on a roof seems to be winking at *The Wizard of Oz*—and also a sense of loss. There is, of course, the rubble of the walls in *Fallen Star 1/5*, but even in a dog tag piece, viewers are left wondering what happened to the tags' owners, since only in death does a



PERSONAL SPACE

Above: Suh constructed *Some/One*, 2003, from stainless-steel military dog tags and nickel-plated copper sheets.

Right: *Fallen Star*, 2012, is a 70-ton house awkwardly perched on the roof of the engineering school at the University of California, San Diego.



INTERIOR VIEW Left: One of Suh's life-size rubbing projects. Above: Installed at Western Washington University, 2011's *Cause & Effect* is comprised of thousands of figurines of men stacked in piggyback formation.

TOP LEFT: *SOME/ONE*, 2003. STAINLESS STEEL MILITARY DOG TAGS, NICKEL-PLATED COPPER SHEETS, STEEL STRUCTURE, GLASS FIBER REINFORCED RESIN, RUBBER SHEETS, RUBBER STRIPS, STAINLESS STEEL. RIGHT: *FALLEN STAR*, 2012. STEEL FRAME ARTISTS AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, BRICK CHAIRS, BLACK CHAIRS, LAWN CHAIRS, TABLE, HIBACHI-STYLE GRILL, HIBACHI-STYLE TABLE, HIBACHI-STYLE CHAIRS, CHIMNEY, GARDEN. BOTTOM: *CAUSE & EFFECT*, 2011. PHOTO: PHILLIPP SCHOLZ RITTMANN, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG.

