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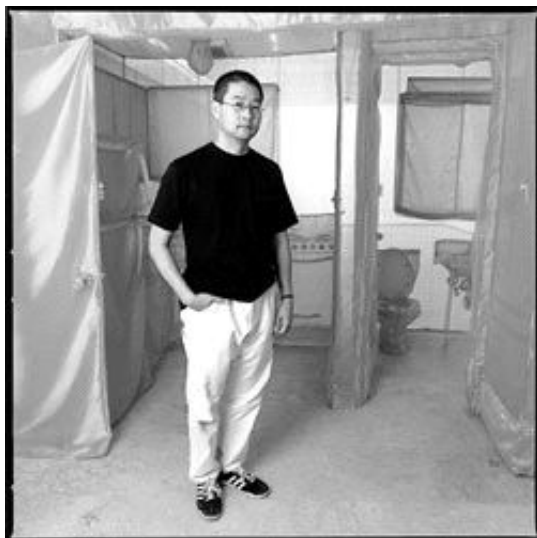
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In the House With Do-Ho Suh

World of Interiors

by C. Carr

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A custom-made costume for the space: the artist in *The Perfect Home II* (photo: Robin Holland)

Some sculpture gathers no dust. Do-Ho Suh might put things on a pedestal—even as he questions the whole notion of a pedestal—but he's just as likely to build a wall or a floor. Often his work doesn't take up space so much as create one. For *The Perfect Home II*, his current project at Lehmann Maupin (540 West 26th Street, through July 11), Suh presents a full-scale nylon replica of his ground-floor Chelsea apartment. Walk in and note the soft radiators, the gently sagging stove, the stitches outlining each brick in the fireplace wall. Suh calls it "a custom-made costume for the space."

It's a tent. It's transparent. It's been growing. First came the silver-blue nylon version of his tiny apartment, looking as it did when Suh moved in—a single room with kitchenette and bathroom, stripped of any belongings. He exhibited that three years ago in his native Seoul. For a show in Japan a year later, he added the hallway, duplicated in pink nylon right down to the overhead pipes, door hinges, and light switches. For the current show, he tacked on a celadon nylon stairway leading to the floor above. He thinks he's finished with the interior now, but has become enamored of the strip of land just outside his windows, complete with trash cans and a little fence: his "view."

Whether he adds that to the piece or not, Suh has managed to mint a fresh paradox, what he calls "the transportable site-specific piece." He's the un-Serra, and not just for wielding gossamer instead of steel. During the controversy over his *Tilted Arc*, Richard Serra argued that the piece was site-specific and would have no meaning if moved elsewhere. Suh's work only has meaning if it *is* moved elsewhere.

In 1999, Suh made an exact replica of his parents' traditional Korean house out of pale green silk. A large, fragile piece always suspended from the ceiling, *Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home* (seen in P.S.1's 2000 "Greater New York" survey) acquires the name of each city in which it's displayed. "It's like a suitcase," the artist has said. "You keep adding something to it every time you travel." And in so many ways, the piece is about displacement.

Early in the 19th century, the king of Korea ordered a civilian-style residence built in his palace complex so he could experience the life of ordinary people. Suh's father not only made a replica of that house, but when the palace complex was demolished in the 1970s, he

collected some of the discarded lumber and incorporated it. "My house is a copy of that copy," says Suh, who created his diaphanous floating version to address the sense of longing and nostalgia he felt when he came to this country in 1991.

Here to study Western painting, he'd already earned both a B.F.A. and an M.F.A. in Oriental painting at Seoul National University. His father, Se-Ok Suh, is, he says, "a huge figure in Korean painting," who bridges the traditional and the contemporary, marrying minimalism to calligraphy. "It was very natural for me to be a painter," young Suh explains. Then, at the Rhode Island School of Design, he happened to take sculpture as one of his non-major electives, and it changed his life. For one thing, it allowed him to address issues of personal space, which had struck him immediately as the biggest difference between East and West.

Suh recalls his first New York apartment, on 113th Street across from a fire station, where he lived before making his way to RISD. Constantly awakened by sirens, he began to fantasize about transporting his old room to New York. Eventually, this led to *Seoul Home*, which he can carry in two suitcases.

"In the summer in Korea," he explains, "you put up a mosquito net. It's like a tent. In your room. And you open all the windows and doors. So it's like a space within a space, and it's translucent. The traditional architecture is also very porous, with a lot of layers. Basically, we don't have that many walls. It's all shoji screen, the screen that's papered with rice paper. So you can hear the sounds [around you]. You feel like you're camping.

"When I first came to the States, I really felt that I was just dropped from the sky. Like you're suddenly living in somebody else's body, so you don't know how long your arms are. You have to find a new relationship to your surroundings, to the architecture, because the way the building is built is totally culturally determined."

Once he got to RISD, Suh says, "I literally started to just measure the space around me, without knowing what I would do with those measurements." He did his first site-specific installation in the corridor outside his studio, taking a birch rod the same diameter as the hallway pipes, and bending it into a loop held in place by its own tension. He thinks coming to this country made him more sensitive to these liminal spaces, the passageways where you're neither here nor there. He says that in *The Perfect Home II*, the hallway is actually more important than the apartment, "because I feel like I'm in that kind of space—between one culture or the other."

Suh has also created a whole body of work that appears to comment on individuality versus collectivity. In *Floor*, gallerygoers walk across a grid of 40 glass plates supported by more than 180,000 plastic human figures about two inches high, cast from six different molds representing different races and both sexes. *Who Am We?* (in the Korean language, there's no distinction between singular and plural) appears to be wallpaper covered with benday dots, but on looking closer, one sees that the dots are thousands of tiny faces taken from Suh's high school yearbooks, each about one-eighth of an inch high. *High School Uni-Form*, modeled on the uniform jacket Suh himself had

to wear, consists of a whole troop of 300 such jackets, each row sewn together shoulder to shoulder. *Some/One* is an armored garment made from thousands of dog tags that fan out to become the work's built-in pedestal.

"All those works result from contemplating the notion of personal space," Suh declares. "It has a political side to it, but that's on the surface. I'm not making any statement in my work."

He says that ideally he would have made 180,000 different molds for *Floor*. Both this piece and the dotted wallpaper are more an indictment of the spectator than any dictator, since it's up to the viewer to notice that these are all individuals. "The word 'anonymity' should not exist," says Suh. As for the high school uniform, he notes that some Koreans regard it with nostalgia while others find it disturbing. It was forced on them during the Japanese occupation, but the style is taken from the British or German military. When the government discontinued the uniform in 1983, both parents and teachers protested. "It became totally internalized, and that fascinates me."

"My question was, how much space does one need to be an individual? What if we take away the space between people? Then how do you define the individual versus the collective? That's how I started. If the space between uniforms is gone, the individual disappears into this huge mass, but also feels protected."

The first sculpture Suh ever created was a jacket made of dog tags, and *Some/One* just expands on that. "I see clothing as the smallest, most intimate habitat that one person can carry. And when you expand that idea, it becomes architecture." So far, he has made rigid clothing and soft architecture. Open like a robe in front, *Some/One* is large enough to suggest that a viewer might crawl inside. Suh lined the interior with a mirror. He says Westerners tend to see the piece as armor, while Asians see it as a kimono.

Currently preparing for his first solo show in Korea, Suh decided to add two new pieces. *Paratrooper* is a 15-inch statue of a soldier gathering his parachute, which is represented by fabric on the wall. Four thousand signatures collected by the artist are embroidered on that cloth and connected to the trooper by 4,000 threads. The other new piece consists of two huge feet walking in businessmen's shoes and supported by small running figures both under each shoe and in its shadow. "They could be us," says Suh. "Or they could be people who are so crucial to our existence in this world, whom we are not aware of."