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CRAFT & FOLK ART MUSEUM

Soo Kim

Soo Kim uses paper-based digital prints made from digital photographs to construct complex renderings of familiar things or places in our daily experience of the world. In recent years, she has produced three main bodies of photographs: trees, cityscapes, and industrial landscapes such as factories and seaports. These heavily manipulated photographic images are multifaceted and fascinating to look at in their own right. But on a deeper level, her ongoing project investigates the nature of the photographic surface physically, formally, and pictorially to probe the question of what constitutes an image in human perception.

Her photographic art is quite unconventional. Her series of trees, for example, are produced as she stands beneath a leafless tree during the winter, training her camera up into the tangle of branches overhead. She then produces a digital print on paper, usually working in a fairly large-scale 4-foot-square format. But the resulting picture is not the final form the photograph takes. Working on a flat surface, Kim takes scalpels, scissors, and X-ACTO knives to the image, cutting away all traces of sky or extraneous content, to leave an elaborately complex and random meshwork of images of branches. Some of the images interlock; many do not. As a consequence, when Kim lifts the cut photograph off the worktable and into a vertical position, many strands of the branchy imagery

cascade downward and clump in a random thicket of paper toward the lower portions of the original photograph. Kim displays her “de-composed” photographs just so—cut, shredded, and clumping—suspended in protective box frames. If trees grow according to some innate natural order, Kim undoes that natural order in her artistic manipulations of the photograph.

Her pictures of cityscapes and industrial sites have an even more involved process. *Midnight Reykjavik, #12* (2006) is an aerial vista of a densely compact seaside city. Following patterns in the buildings’ columns, fenestrations, and other architectural features, Kim cuts away much of the visible content of her image, leaving what can only be described, in visual terms, as the “skeleton” of the city and all its buildings. She turns the continuous image of a city into a veritable stencil of what comprises the city, and displays the paper stencil suspended in front of a white surface.

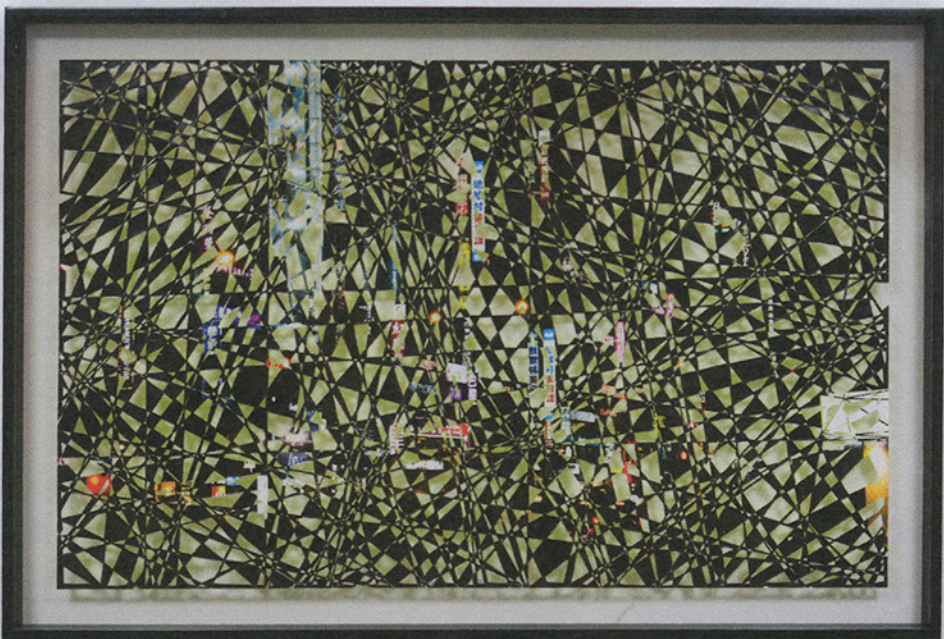
(Pushes forward, lost in thought) (2011), presenting a view of a teeming urban intersection with tall buildings, stores, and theaters that might be located in any modern American or Asian metropolis, is a composite of two “stencilized” photographs taken at approximately the same spot; the images are a near match, but not identical. Kim superimposes one stencil in front of the other to create a compositional “twitch” or “echo,” causing

Opposite, top to bottom:
(Pushes forward, lost in thought), 2011
Two hand-cut inkjet prints on Somerset velvet paper
28 x 42 x 2 ½ in.
Private collection
Photo: Brian Forrest

(He turns on him suddenly, reaches out a hand), 2014
Hand-cut inkjet print, acrylic lacquer
49 ¾ x 72 ¾ x 2 ½ in.
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Brian Forrest

a visual hurly-burly. The image coheres enough to be discerned as a picture of a city; but in fact any given “bit” of the overall picture is just another moment of visual gibberish that taken together with all the other “bits,” somehow adds up, in the viewer’s imagination and perceptual habits, to a recognizable picture.

The physical surface of a printed photograph is a two-dimensional plane of photographic emulsion or inks or dyes capable of recording the appearance of real objects and suggesting their three-dimensional shape, size, texture, color, and relationship to all that surrounds them. But of course that is an illusion. What we actually see in a photograph is no more real than the colored play of light and shadow projected onto a movie screen or displayed on a video screen. Soo Kim explores the perceptual disparity between what is mere illusion and the representation of what we choose to believe, or experience, about those illusions. Working with large-scale photographs printed on paper enables Kim to quite literally deconstruct them into fragments that entirely fracture the overall image. Yet the viewer’s perceptive faculties insist on “restoring” them subliminally into surprisingly coherent, unified entities.





Midnight Reykjavik, #12, 2006
Hand-cut chromogenic prints
40 x 40 in.
Collection of Jim and Cherye Pierce
Photo: Joshua White



(And whenever one wishes one may return to it), 2014
Hand-cut paper
27 ¼ x 24 in.
Collection of Emily Greenspan
Photo: Brian Forrest