

“Present Absence: Soo Kim,” Artillery Magazine, Vol. 6 Issue 8. 2012.

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by Tucker Neel

Soo Kim’s photographs always demand a closer look, not just because of formal engagement, but because the more time you invest in them, the more they reveal about what you don’t see, which, if you’re paying attention, extends to how you view the everyday. Since the early aughts Soo’s made photographs of beautiful but banal images – wooded dead-ends, cities asleep, unassuming hotel rooms – which she prints then cuts into. These delicately excised drawings create a second image through their absence. On a cloudless afternoon Soo and I sat down to chat about her work and Los Angeles, the city she has called home for most of her life.



Soo Kim
Untitled, Superheavies, 2008
Hand-cut C-print
25 x 25 " (63.5 x 63.5 cm)

Artillery: In keeping with the theme of this issue I'd like to ask you about L.A. What thoughts do you have about the city?

Soo Kim: Having lived here for such a long time – I went to high school, undergrad, and grad school here – I can see how the art world has changed and stayed the same. There are certain things that people always say about LA: that it's a great city for artists, that it's a place that can give you a lot of time to work in the studio without distractions, unlike in busier cities. I think a lot of that is true. But for me I think the thing that makes LA interesting is there are so many artists all connected not just through cultural production, but also through the schools. And I think it's a lot easier to make artists friends in LA than in New York. Maybe it's a little less competitive here. If you just drop into LA it's hard to make friends, but if you come here as an artist I think the art world really provides a structure for social grouping.

Artillery: Moving to your work, how and why did you decide to start cutting into photographs?

SK: First of all, I never really studied photography 'properly' and I think this let me come at it from a different perspective. I always thought there were problems with the regular conventions of 'art photography,' like you have to have a small edition, and it has to be clean – you can't touch or breathe on anything. I got tired of these constraints, and so I just started thinking about removing information by drawing.

I thought, "I'm not the Bechers. So why do I have to make more than one image of this thing? If there is a diversity of images in one body of work why does it have to talk about just one thing?" There had to be a way to talk about photography and the indexical and referential things that photography does without referring to these established models.

Artillery: What was the first foray into this new way of making work?

SK: The first piece that I kept was shot in a room at the Maritime hotel. I photographed my partner at the time on the bed – just his hand – my idea of a portrait. There was this fabric wallpaper behind him – blue with white butterflies. I went back and printed the photo, re-drew and reconfigured the butterflies and cut them out. I wanted to take something that was banal, like wallpaper, and use it to enliven the space of the photograph as a way to elongate the time we read the image. I did this because I knew people were going to look at not just the image, but also the thing that was excised, especially if it was something that was a referential shape.

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So I did that and then I took nine months to figure out the framing.

It took a lot of trial and error. I wanted the work to be site-sensitive. So the frame has a plexi border instead of a paper border, so that when you hang it, you can see through to the wall behind the work. And the cuts cast shadows, creating a dimensionality to the piece as well.



Soo Kim
Midnight Reykjavik, 12, 2007
Layered hand-cut C-prints
49 3/4 x 47 1/8 " (126.4 x 119.7 cm)

Artillery: What about banal spaces interests you?

SK: I'm interested in transitional spaces and how difficult it is to measure a kind of tentativeness they have. For example, the *Reykjavik* series is photographed at midnight but it looks like noon. So although *Reykjavik* is a solid and understandable city, I'm photographing it in a way that what you see is not what you get. I've also photographed in Istanbul, which has another duality; it's part East and West, part Europe and Asia. While it's not the primary subject, I always gravitate to these locations that have mutability. I'm drawn to the liminal.

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Though it wasn't said, it seems LA is the perfect place to inspire Soo's work. After all, this is a city of in-betweens. We are defined by transitory states and the rapidity with which people and places transform into something else. Though Soo may not take LA as a "subject," I feel her work embodies an Angeleno way of looking at the world that seeks out the ineffable that is right there in front of you, surrounding you, just waiting for you to see it.