

SOO KIM

PHOTOSYNTHESIS, PHOTOSEVERANCE



What a late bloomer. I'm at The Getty in LA, gaping at Soo Kim's *Midnight Reykjavik* series, not even reading the goddamn title. Guilty as charged: several minutes pass before I realize these photographs (are they photos? They don't look like photos) were taken — that's right — at midnight, on the summer solstice. At least I got the Reykjavik part.

They're powerful images to begin with, but once that verbal hint-hint hits me, it kills me on impact. It's horribly touching, isn't it? The idea of a city at its darkest, most intimate hour — but with the lights turned on, the covers pulled off? I am this close to calling the image vulnerable. But I'll opt for another overused word that fails to capture precisely

what I want to say: exposed. This is a portrait of a city with nothing to hide behind. No people, no bricks, drywall, no glass. Kim hand-cut whatever you want to call it — a city's sunglasses? The hat a city pulls over its face? — from the image, and left Reykjavik squinting in the limelight.

"In theory, you're looking at a panorama of Reykjavik," she says. "But the panorama doesn't help you locate yourself within the city. This portrait is disorienting. You feel like you're entering a place for the first time, or returning home to find that everything feels different. It's this kind of disjunction I'm interested in."

A feeling of disconnect burrows itself into most of Soo Kim's works. What she does is, strictly

speaking, photography. But while most photographers cling to whatever the lens 'captures,' Kim tends to let it go. She catches an image, then literally cuts it loose. In so doing, she underscores that something is always missing — in a photograph, in the photographed. 'Separated at birth' syndrome: The artwork's presence is moving because of absences inherent to it.

"By nature, photography has a very stubborn 'indexicality,'" Kim tells me. "A photograph has an index to the real world. But I'm more interested in illegibility, ambiguity, the inability to translate something. My approach is not, 'Photography can do this, therefore I do this.' My approach is: 'Photography can do this, therefore I fuck with it.'"

KT How did you and photography first meet?

SK Actually, I come from a generation of artists trained to have ideas, and to use whatever medium it takes to make sense of those ideas. You know, the whole Sol LeWitt school of thought, that ideas are machines for making art. So when I was studying Art in grad school, I was doing more sculptural installations and films. I never studied photography, and didn't start making photographs until the very end of my grad studies. They were very boring photographs, of course.

After that, I taught myself more about photography. The rules are: don't touch anything,

don't leave fingerprints, don't do anything to anything in the photograph. My response was to start cutting the pictures I took. I thought, 'Why should I make an edition of a photograph? I should make a subtraction.' Photography is already this rather subtractive medium, right? You put your camera in front of the world and you reduce that world, subtract it into one frame. So I became interested in taking away even more of the photographic image, wondering what could be inserted through that removal. What can come in through absence?

I try to change a photograph in order to include whatever the camera failed to record. I always question whether I can make a photograph that is unique — literally, unique. An object, the only one like it in the world.

KT Do you come from an artistic background?

SK Oh, no. No, no. I didn't grow up looking at art. I didn't know anything about art until I went to college. My undergrad years were a crash-course for me. It's an interesting question — when do people know that they will be artists, or writers, or dancers? I can't answer it. I always liked drawing. I always had a lingering fascination with alienation. Not quite fitting in. Sorry, I don't know how else to put it, but so much of my work has been about 'misfit.'

I was born in Korea and moved to Los Angeles with my parents when I was young. They didn't know any English, didn't have any money, they just moved to this different country, and it is such a romantic and weird thing. Maybe it was horrible to live through, a difficult time, but I still always think: how great to go to a different country with nothing, and to just learn.

KT Do you ever think of moving to a different country, like that?

Below:
Untitled #37
Hand-cut inkjet print,
artist book
25.4 x 20.3 cm
2004



SK Every day of my life. But it's never going to happen. I don't think I could make the work I make if I were anywhere other than Los Angeles. A lot of my work possesses a certain kind of slowness, which I don't think I could properly get at if I were anywhere else in the world. I would be more impatient. L.A. allows me to be patient.

My friends from Europe, for example, they sometimes have this idea of L.A. as a gang-ridden and dangerous place. But L.A. is so boring most of the time. In London, New York, or Berlin, I would be too distracted to work. Not here. [Laughs.] That's why I guess I have to stay here for the rest of my ca-

reer. Then again, L.A. is also a good place to leave. I am not so tied to this city. It's easy for me to get up and travel.

KT You have been traveling quite a bit for your recent works — to Reykjavik, to Dubrovnik.

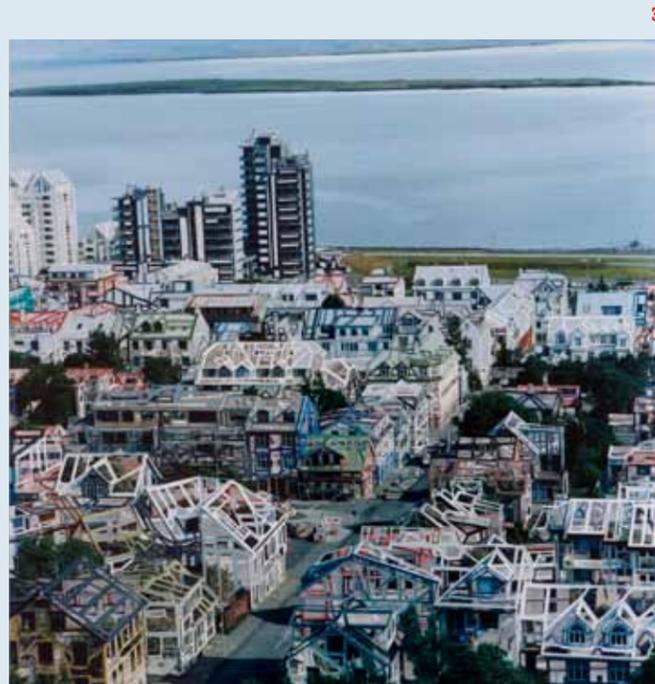
SK Yes, but I know artists who can go anywhere in the world and just start photographing. I can't do that. I really need to research a place before I go there. I try to stay for at least two weeks, if I can, and the first week, I don't shoot at all. I hang around and get a sense of the city. In Reykjavik, I walked around and knocked on peoples' doors because I wanted to find just the right view.

KT Ha! You 'cold-called' just like that?

SK I'm five foot four, I'm Asian, I have no muscle. I'm the least intimidating person in the world, and I have my baby with me. 'Can I come in? Yeah? Can I come back again at midnight on June twenty-first?'

It was also a personal exercise for me because — and this is boring personal stuff, but — because, my entire life, I've been so cripplingly shy. It's why I can't do commercial work. It's also why I mostly photograph buildings. I'm not shy in front of buildings. Anyway, I get on with it. I'm not so shy anymore ●

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1:
(They walk awhile in silence)
Two hand-cut chromogenic prints
91.4 x 91.4 cm
2009

2:
Midnight Reykjavik #12
Two hand-cut chromogenic prints
121.9 x 121.9 cm
2007

3:
Me and my brother
Two hand-cut chromogenic prints
121.9 x 121.9 cm
2009

4:
You and your sister
Two hand-cut chromogenic prints
121.9 x 121.9 cm
2009

5:
Untitled #35
Hand-cut inkjet print, artist book
25.4 x 20.3 cm
2004

6:
Untitled #30
Hand-cut inkjet print, artist book
25.4 x 20.3 cm
2004

7:
Untitled #36
Hand-cut inkjet print, artist book
25.4 x 20.3 cm
2004

