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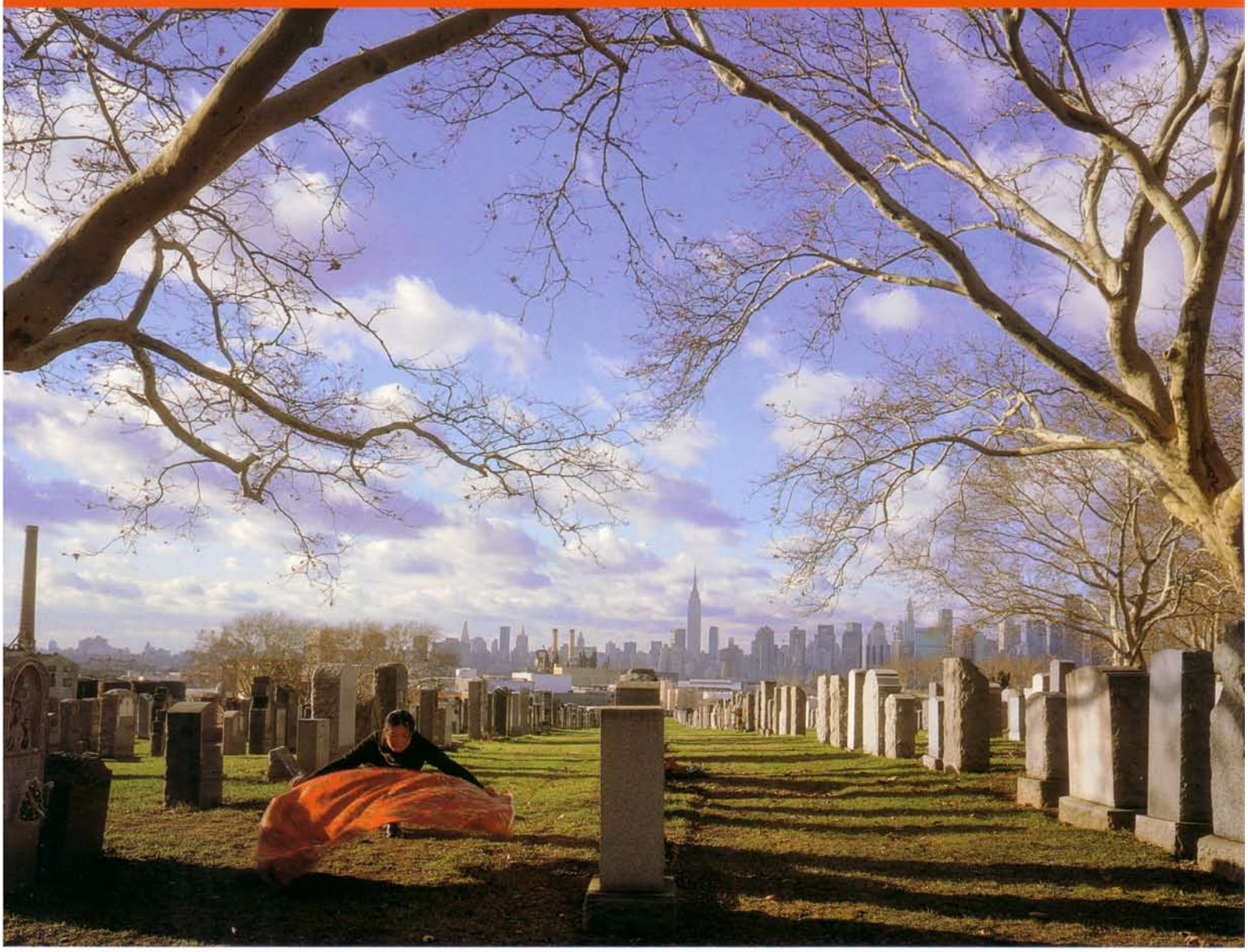
In contemporary Korean photography, young artists question the concepts of place, identity, and belonging.



The relationship between contemporary artists of Korean descent and Korea the place is one of claims; a complicated relationship in which the artists often reclaim and disclaim their association with the notion of Korea, manifested in multiple ways. Often out of a justified fear of being pushed to the periphery in a global art market that craves familiar and easily absorbed kinds of difference, these artists vacillate in deciding whether to "belong" to Korea or not. Terms such as

◂ **Kim Sooja** *Epitaph*, 2002, digital C-Print on vinyl, 480 x 600 cm. Produced by Busan Biennale, 2002.

▾ **Kang Hong-goo** *Gwangan Beach Series 1*, 2002, digital photography, 201 x 102 cm. Courtesy media_city seoul, 2002.

▾▾ **Kang Hong-goo** *Gwangan Beach Series 2*, 2002, digital photography, 201 x 102 cm. Courtesy media_city seoul, 2002.

"Korea" or "Korean" become heavily loaded as their mere invocation may reflect yearning on the part of the artists and the audience that extends far beyond simple nostalgia.
At the same time, these terms often become awkward and disconcerting, invoked in connection with nationalistic or market-driven impulses premised upon asserting a singular indigenous identity that inadvertently echoes the separatist politics of the Japanese colonial regime in Korea during the earlier part of the twentieth century.
Such vacillation is particularly visible in recent photography, such as that on view during the Busan Biennale and media_city seoul exhibitions of 2002. The ability of photography to capture an image, consume it, and then disseminate it makes it the most effective medium through which to confront the problem of place, as defined as one's own relationship to a particular place and the need to negotiate how one is placed, or located, by others.
"Confront" in this case is especially apt in this period when the rhetoric of globalization, present in critical writings and curatorial framing, is so powerful as to be ubiquitous.
The question of place extends beyond questions of representation generated by the artist; what must also be taken into consideration is the geographic location of the artist and the way in which the artist is positioned in the art world as

well as how the work is situated in the viewer's gaze.
In Kim Sooja's digital print *Epitaph*, the artist is shown laying down a brightly colored silk coverlet in a Brooklyn cemetery panoramically framed by the Manhattan cityscape. Viewers, especially those familiar with her "Bottari" (Bundle) series employing similar coverlets, tend to immediately focus upon the coverlet as a sign of Kim's cultural difference. However well-intentioned, this appreciation by the viewer, ostensibly from a Western liberal background, is often a euphemism for the capitalist consumption of difference. While the sign of Kim's connection to the place of Korea is readily evident, this act of seeming reclamation is taking place in New York.
She is not disclaiming her ties to New York by reclaiming her tie to Korea, but dialectically synthesizing the two. But there is also vacillation—*Epitaph* strikes a resounding contrast to previous works such as *Sewing Into Walking* (1995) in which hundreds of coverlets were laid in a forest in the city of Gwangju.
Without necessarily reverting to the kind of sociological analysis sometimes used in lieu of formal critical reading, it could be argued that Sooja's approach to place stems from her own personal situation as a Korean who has lived for several years in New York, but who still retains her Korean citizenship and is a frequent visitor to Seoul. The converse situation would be that of an increasing number of artists classified as Korean American who have shown considerable interest in living or working in Korea. For them, the notion of Korea as place is viscerally felt, and they demonstrate in their work a heightened awareness to its difference vis-à-vis their own origins living in the U.S. or elsewhere, as well as the potential of that difference to be altered or consumed through the gaze of multiple audiences.
Taken during her recent residency at Ssamzie Space, an alternative space in Seoul, Jean Shin's photographs of various street scenes are stripped of any overt reference to specific places. The usual visible markers of difference, such as the rainbow-hued threads and ribbons dangling from a fabric merchant's cart for example, are emptied of their capital as signs of "Koreanness" for they could easily be from any number of cities with similar carts, such as Hong Kong or Bangkok. Through the close-up, Shin aestheticizes the image, or what she calls "found installations," by emphasizing the horizontal—in a photo of stacked colored cloth, for instance, each fabric roll forms a vivid line. The particular frame she employs in capturing these images mirrors the gaze of the viewer to whom such scenes are merely part of the effluvium of

▲ **Jean Shin** *Found Installation (Seam Tapes and Cords)*, 2002, C-print, 50.8 x 40.6 cm.

◀ **Jean Shin** *Found Installation (Ribbons)*, 2002, C-print, 50.8 x 40.6 cm.

▲ **Moon Hyung-min** *Untitled*, 2002, digital photography, 450 x 250 cm. Courtesy media_city seoul, 2002.

▶ **Moon Hyung-min** *Untitled*, 2002, digital photography, 250 x 250 cm. Courtesy media_city seoul, 2002.

daily life. The artist thus draws attention to the existence of global synchronicity, which is often ignored in contemporary art in favor of celebrating the novelty of the specific. Subsequently, it would thus appear that the image disclaims any belongingness to Korea save for the fact that the photographs were physically taken there. However, Shin is quick to point out that "although the image looks as though it could have been taken anywhere, there are some people who do recognize the cart as being from Seoul."

Thus, the identification of a work as "being Korean," is less a function of the work's inherent qualities than the expectations or presumptions of the viewer and their implicit desire to locate Koreanness. Put more succinctly, whether a work is located as being "from" or "of" Korea depends on who's doing the looking.

Sometimes the artist's construction of place is premised upon the subversion of the gaze, as in the digitally manipulated photographs of Kang Hong-goo and Moon Hyung-min. Kang's "Gwangan Bridge" series consist of black-and-white beach scenes that seem to masquerade as the kind of tourist landscapes one might see in postcards. The title corroborates this expectation given that Gwangan Bridge in Busan is Korea's largest and something of a city attraction.

In these atavistically beautiful images, the gritty public beaches near the bridge appear romanticized or even glorified, in the same vein as a Hollywood glamour shot.

Even the bathers' mounds of unsightly flesh that might elicit notions of the abject are transformed through Kang's gaze into part of a sensuous, grainy terrain that tempts, rather than repels, the viewer's attention.

But the "Gwangan Bridge" photographs are not the simple depictions of a glorified, or glorifiable, place as would be the case in ordinary tourist photographs. Digitally severed at various points and then sutured together to form a narrative filled with ruptures, Kang has interfered with the simple optical pleasure of consuming Korea as place. Instead, he has remastered these images to create a notion of place that is altogether strange, albeit couched in the familiar terms of the seaside and the beach picnic. The strangeness of the beach thwarts the viewer who seeks to claim the beach as a representation of Korea. Yet in doing so, the artist disclaims the proclivity of all gazes to appropriate the image as supporting evidence for their preconceptions, even as the images themselves lure the eye into their optic domain. The idea of place as problematic is best encapsulated in the work of Moon Hyung-min, a young photographer who creates untitled, large color prints of banal,


everyday scenes in which he has removed all text. Thus images that would otherwise be exceptionally ordinary, such as a shot of a Los Angeles street corner, or a drugstore cold remedy display, are made odd and jarring. But these images are not unfamiliar. Even with the text removed, many viewers can still easily place the street scene as being from Los Angeles, taking as clues the low-rise buildings, the pervasive sense of flatness and the ever-present stream of cars. Likewise, some viewers may still recognize the design of a cough syrup bottle as belonging to a certain brand. Extrapolated to the question of place, what Moon's photographs note is that while the gaze can be diverted, place itself may never be fully erased, subject as it is to the act of claiming. Place is a condition or, more accurately, a problem from which there is no true solution or escape.