



DRAWN IN THE CLOUDS

HELSINKI

The title *Drawn in the Clouds—Asian Contemporary Art* connotes passage through the nebulous realm, a place marked by atmospheric turbulence, startling luminosity, and soaring vistas [Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma; November 1, 2008—February 1, 2009]. But in this exhibition, the title frequently seems at odds with the work, which remains close to the ground. Still, a number of pieces direct our gaze upward—one even takes it out the window—and if things do become airborne, they float instead of soar, reminding us that escaping the effects of gravity is not an easy thing to do. Though the exhibition dashes expectations of transcendence, we have no reason to be disappointed. *Drawn in the Clouds* still surprises, lets us marvel, and jogs our point of view. It presents a cogent essay about longing, cultural alienation, immobility, and displacement. It also utilizes spaces not typically used for the presentation of art, which reinforces some of the ideas explored by artists wrestling with the mundanity of day-to-day existence. For us, it turns the viewing process into an architectural as well as artistic experience. And, by moving the work outside Kiasma's traditional gallery spaces, it makes this institution's youthful building seem altogether new again.

Do Ho Suh's *North Wall*, 2005, is the focal point of the exhibition. His massive suspended structure recreates a facade of his childhood home and animates the museum's central light-filled atrium. Sewn out of a green polyester mesh fabric that transmits light and responds to the movement of air currents, this portable memento—cultural baggage in a literal sense—projects an image of weightlessness. Its puffed-up roofline also recalls kites and all kinds of inflatable objects, from hot-air balloons to yard decorations. In many respects, *North Wall* stands in opposition to its setting. Reflecting different architectural traditions, materials, and purposes, the facade's inherent flexibility, buoyancy, and structural details deftly contradict the solidity, weight, and blankness of the surrounding walls. *North Wall's* color also intimates vegetation. We think of rice paper panels or the cultivated landscape of a garden. The facade operates

on both historical and personal levels. The artist links the work's mobility to Koreans' nomadic past. By contrast, the bleakness of the atrium's walls suggests a modified canyon that resists the effects of a harsh northern climate. Kiasma's name, though, derives from a Greek word that means crossing and refers to various biological pathways and points of intersection. Ultimately, these references to movement bring sculpture and architecture together.

Tsang Kin-Wah's vines of letters *Untitled—Helsinki*, 2008, occupy a stairwell. Beginning at the base of a wall on the building's lowest level, ambient sound accompanies black vinyl alphabetic characters that cover a wall, cross the ceiling, and then wend their way up several floors on the underside of a spiral staircase. As we begin to follow the so-called growth, the sound fades. What starts as a dense and indistinct cluster of letters gradually thins into a number of distinct branches, the vegetal character of which, oddly enough, evokes Jugendstil embellishment. On closer inspection, we first identify words and then make out phrases in English and Finnish. The streams of upper case letters refer to "ACOLDBLOODEDETEXT" and curses, "HATETH-EMHATHEMWHOLEFUCKINGMANKIND." As the work dissipates upward, the arboreal rant abates. The contradiction in juxtaposing crude language with the elegance of stylized natural forms offers a caustic perspective that simultaneously evokes our aspirations and limitations.

Opera sound draws us to the top of the staircase where Jiang Zhi's early video *Fly, Fly*, 1997, unfolds. The effect is anticlimactic. A human arm moves like a bird's wing through a cramped and rundown big city apartment, a platitudinal statement about the impossibility of escape and its annihilation of any hope of freedom. Hiraki Sawa's video *Dwelling*, 2002, mirrors *Fly, Fly's* sense of claustrophobia. His conversion of his London apartment into a flyway for miniature aircraft might suggest international travel but it brings us nowhere. In addition, the work's presentation in a utility room—an

atmosphere of generic, clinical serviceability connoting ambiguity and sterility—reinforces the drama.

In their explorations of day-to-day life, June Bum Park and Ki-Bong Rhee rely on perplexity. Park focuses on social structures; Rhee probes information. Park's videos depict irresolvable puzzles. Rational systems, like the grid in *Puzzle 2-02*, 2002, fail to provide an optimum arrangement for a group of students and their desks. And in *The Occupation*, 2006, the quest to create the perfect storefront evades realization. Adjacent to the cafeteria, Rhee's *Bachelor—The Dual Body*, 2003, consists of a book swimming in a dreamy blue tank. Resembling a bird, its pages flutter. While the text is legible, it cannot be read. Object and content remain out of our reach.

Yuken Teruya, Li Wei, and Kako Ueda also make significant contributions to the exhibition. Their work's vivid imagery entices the imagination while also drawing our attention to current threats on traditional cultures, universal forms of language, and the interrelatedness of life and death.

—John Gayer

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Ki-Bong Rhee**, *Bachelor—The Dual Body*, 2003, Perspex, steel, water, book, water pump, light, 150 x 110 x 65 cm [courtesy of the artist and Kiasma, Helsinki; photo: Petri Virtanen]; **Michael Kenna**, *Hashikui Rocks, Kushimoto, Honshu, Japan*, 2002, sepia-toned silver gelatin print, 7.75 x 7.75 inches [courtesy of the artist and Stania Gallery, Lexington, VA]