

Performed and Crafted

Demonstrating an uncanny ability to synthesize performance and craft while pushing material boundaries, Jaye Rhee's use of string in *Notes* (2007) and colored yarn in *Seasaw* (2002) as staging devices bear comparison, respectively, with Martha Graham dancers' looping and rigid steps and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's moving fabric as backdrop. While Rhee's gestures can be read in connection with, or as an outgrowth of these performance lineages, she has been able to develop a purely original artistic voice. Attention to craft and choreographed movement epitomizes Rhee's oeuvre in the mediums of video, photography, sculpture, and sound, which she employs to deconstruct the cultural signifiers of being Korean, Asian, woman, and human through reflective processes that invariably implicate the viewer.

Notes is an eight-channel, black-and-white installation. Each channel zooms in and out on a group of notes represented by black-clad female figures stepping over, on, and off five horizontal black strings that stand in for the lines of the musical stave. The dancers pluck and tap at the lines, which visibly vibrate against a layered piano track of structuralist sound composed and performed by Elliott Sharp. In this piece, Rhee suggests a temporal tension between a minimalist choreography and editing, where time is slightly sped up with staccato inflection. Also concerned with time is Graham's *Sketches from 'Chronicle'* (1936), which is comprised of movements that allude to economic gloom and impending war, and features marching dancers—all female—whose legs move like pendulums swinging and halting across the stage.

The craft element of *Notes*, however, is relatively minimal in comparison to *Seasaw's* layers of colored yarn. One of Rhee's earlier works, *Seasaw* is a video project that stretches across five channels to form a wide horizon, across which Rhee unrolls balls of yarn in hues of sea greens and blues to form a rising horizon line of the sea. She moves back and forth behind a wall of water-like tapestry that continues to rise and eventually fall in front of her as she moves back and forth, across the screens. In "Take Me To The Water," the second movement of Alvin Ailey's signature choreographic work *Revelations* (1960), dancers enact a ceremonial baptism, which takes place in a sculptural undulating river of blue silk that moves back and forth across the stage. The connection from Ailey to Rhee is the moving—rising and falling—blue horizon line of Ailey's blue silk river and Rhee's blue/green yarn sea in *Seasaw*.

Rhee's installations, in which she herself often performs, do more than deal in nostalgia and authenticity; they express a nostalgia *for* the authentic through an exploration of exported cultural symbols that are often misrecognized as foreign within the context of particular pieces. Works like the series *Swan, Polar Bear, and Niagara* (2007-8) and *Mediterranean* (2009) challenge our perceptions about places and cultures near, far, and unknown by playing on the inaccuracies of memory.

The *Swan*, *Polar Bear*, and *Niagara* series captures the surreal experience of being submerged in South Korean bathhouses where paintings on tiled walls above the baths become establishing shots for fantasies of being at the North Pole, Niagara Falls, or wherever Swan Lake may be. Realized as videos and still photographs, these works convey the painterly simulated landscapes of intimate spaces that can be found within the bathhouses, as well as the comedic experience of observing Rhee's performers becoming one with fetishized landscapes they have never encountered in real life.

Exploring related questions of appropriated cultural references, Rhee's video *Mediterranean* (2009) involves a time-lapse assemblage of Mediterranean cultural symbols converging in a white room: perched on the radiator, a neon sign blinks the word "Mediterranean"; a poster of a tropical Mediterranean seascape is tacked onto the wall; panels of blue fabric are wheeled into the space; and the artist winds blue tape stripes onto her white shirt. Together these signifiers project a notion of Mediterranean aesthetics, although each one is not necessarily of the same place, and not necessarily within the same region. The poster of a blue seascape and palm trees could just as easily be of a beach in the Caribbean, while Rhee's blue and white striped shirt is classic French Riviera. All of these loose signifiers reflect a vague and inaccurate understanding of foreign cultures.

By contrast, other works like *Tear* (2002) along with the aforementioned *Notes* and *Seasaw*, push the symbolic into a more abstract field where we can imagine ourselves moving beyond the literal towards a more universal understanding of the human condition, across and beyond cultures and, perhaps, past outdated notions of authenticity. In *Tear*, Rhee is alone within four frames of video. She tears through a continuous stretch of fabric. Her movement splits the length of the fabric horizontally, and suggests walking on—and through—water. Moreover, the amplified sound of fabric tearing complicates our reading of *Tear*. Not only does this ripping literally articulate Rhee's action, such violent breakage of the stage set also conjures notions of rupture that hint at broader aesthetic and political concerns. Here, Rhee has moved beyond localized signifiers to those of gender and collective humanity.

Sara Reisman is the Director of Percent for Art at the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs where she commissions permanent artworks for civic spaces like police and correctional facilities, public schools, theaters, plazas, courthouses, parks, and health centers. As a curator and writer, Reisman has organized exhibitions and written on themes like public engagement and public art, social practice, the aesthetics of globalization, and site-specificity for the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, Queens Museum of Art, The Cooper Union School of Art, Smack Mellon, Socrates Sculpture Park, and Aljira, among others.