

## **In Sook Kim**

### Grand Hotel

In the 21st century, a proscenium is too often the rectangular frame of a TV monitor or LCD flatscreen. It seems like only yesterday, meaning during the 20th century, that the idea of a proscenium referred to the real thing: the wall that separates the audience from the stage in a theater. This is the very piece of architecture In Sook Kim makes real and symbolic use of in her photographic works, and largely because her both exceptional and modern gaze allows her to. As a visual artist for whom photography is only one of several mediums she works in, In Sook Kim has a great emotional passion for seeing. In fact, the act of seeing is her forte. Her gaze is so consuming that she calls herself more an observer than an artist: "I don't interpret or criticise, I see." In her photographs, the notion of "seeing one's subject better than one depicts it" might even be called the guiding artistic principle.

Her work evolves in three ways: from found computer-enhanced data, from extravagantly staged shoots like those arranged for the photographs *Das Abendessen* (The Dinner) and *The Auction*, and from what has been called her "demonic" study of the female body. Regardless of what generates her work, In Sook Kim imparts to her viewers a world in which people appear as the roles they play and not necessarily as the people they really are. In the viewing process, these human subjects become both the seen and the seers (literally: voyeurs). While some appear at ease with themselves, others seem harassed or imprisoned by their own needs. These unlike human subjects in unlike circumstances amount to a "cast" of beautiful victims. But whether victims of loneliness, of each other, or of life, all the subjects remain trapped in the gaze of an invisible "observer" with a camera, someone whose knowledge of people often merges with her sense of architecture.

In the *Room* series by In Sook Kim, we see photographs of people and the room(s) that they inhabit. What we see clearest, however, is the artist's mischievous selectivity, which makes each photograph simple and complex at the same time. What could be simpler than visually acknowledging the presence and/or absence of another person? What could be more complex than making each photograph do what its creator refuses to do? Interpret to the hilt. In the process, these similarly framed episodes or vignettes support the visual candour of a straightforward photographic approach: Proscenium (hotel or apartment window) vs. Actor (hotel guest or apartment dweller). These images of people "alone together" (in what may or may not be the same room) trigger our interpretive abilities because they insinuate such "big" themes: the simultaneity of collective loneliness in major cities; the end-all pursuit of love understood in a Duchampian as well as Pina Bauschian sense; the definition of perversion; and, handed down from Hollywood of the 1930s, the so-called "Grand Hotel formula" in which being a guest in a hotel hints at a metaphor for being alive at all: As human beings, we are simply guests in the hotel of life. For that reason, too, many playwrights consider the "hotel" one of the greatest vehicles for dramatic productions.

While a master's class student of the photographer Thomas Ruff, In Sook Kim completed her conceptual series-and-study entitled *Muses*, a fragile yet provoking work on the female countenance as an inspirational device. Her *Room* series, a subsequent work, has an even greater reach: stretching from questioning what people desire to celebrating what makes them endure and stalk loneliness, it charts a "social" distance between the perimeters of eroticism and the depths of urban isolation. Without resorting to an academic or "Thomas Ruffian-" approach, a fleeting awareness of both seems present in In Sook Kim's photographs. Yet her images are best defined by the fact that she treats seeing as feeling, and photography as the proscenium for an emotional and poetic journey.

Karl Johnson: Would you say that your work is mostly concerned with alienation and the female body?

In Sook Kim: I deal with much more than just those two topics. My work deals with all of society, and because it takes in everything, I focus on women as well as men. The difference is that, in my photographs, I consciously use the images of women as symbols for different forms of social communication.

KJ: Your photo-series Muses addresses concepts of inspiration and desires. What inspired you to actually “study” inspiration and create this series?

ISK: Human feelings inspired this particular piece. While I was working on the photo-series called Muses, I concentrated on feelings and emotions. These meant everything to me. Technically speaking, there are portraits far more successful than the portraits in Muses. But here the special quality comes from capturing and documenting pure emotion and pure feelings.

KJ: You seem to have two ways of creating photographic images. Either you find raw material and enhance it with a computer, or you create it yourself and arrange the shoot the way you do for large-scale photographs. Is that correct?

ISK: I have different ways of working with images and with developing them. To begin with, the size of an image, for example, never really matters to me. For me, what’s most important is sensing the best format to tell my story in. This is what leads to the exact size, to the best size. My work is based on a wide range of source materials and techniques. But none of this makes a difference unless the result coincides with the concept. It’s a matter of feeling my way toward the best solution. I’m not a photographer; I’m an artist. And if my work functions better with a different medium, I’ll just use that other medium.

KJ: How did being a pupil in Thomas Ruff’s master class influence your study of women?

ISK: Well, the contents of the works were mine. And so being in the master’s class had no effect on that. Studying under Thomas Ruff helped me develop the underlying concept of my art. His support allowed me to better realise what I had in mind, and to work more effectively with my own subject matter.

KJ: Is the photograph Das Abendessen (The Dinner) entirely staged or computer-generated in part? Here, too, you use the “strangulation idea,” but in a larger composition. The same image of a woman being strangled turns up in both the Muse and Room series as well. How did you develop The Dinner?

ISK: The Dinner is entirely staged and I made it using analog photographic techniques. Here nothing at all is computer generated. I don’t like working with computer-generated images. All the women grouped around the table function like symbols. But they always do in all my works. And so the strangulation—in this case, the woman hanging from the ceiling light—addresses a symbolic role viewed on a social level. The original idea for the photograph came to me after walking by the same restaurant day after day, and watching the people inside.

KJ: How do you work with the models in your photographs? Do you improvise or do you follow a strict plan?

ISK: In my photographs, all the models and actors are from my circle of friends. But, yes, I do have a plan, and I carefully work the “actors” into the visual idea ahead of time. That much of the piece is highly detailed and established well in advance.

KJ: I read that you like the paintings of Tintoretto. Do you see an artistic energy in human issues and then try to interpret it visually? Or do you see the emotional, the erotic, and the social as facts of life which photography makes more visible? That would make your images more like paintings, wouldn't it?

ISK: Regardless of the medium, art is always a form of communication. But for my work, conventional painting isn't exact enough. By comparison, I find the “reproductive” quality of photography far more direct and better to work with. What appeals to me most is that, in the photographic composition, my images can be perceived as paintings as well.

KJ: Have modern non-European artists like Nam June Paik influenced your work? Or maybe filmmakers? I thought of Wong Kai-Wei's film 2046 (his sequel to In the Mood for Love), a film about a room in a hotel, about a Room 2046, but also a film about the year 2046.

ISK: Yes. I like Wong Kar-Wei's films very much. His productions treat love and the emotions like very real, everyday issues. And the style of his cinematography fascinates me: the actors use only a minimum of language, and so the telling of the story always revolves around the use of powerful imagery. In that sense, what the viewer “sees” is what tells the story. When we think of film as a novel, we can think of photography as a short poem.

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