

Here Elsewhere Other Haunthings

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Jin-me Yoon



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HERE ELSEWHERE OTHER HAUNTINGS EXHIBITION TEXT AND LABELS

Here Elsewhere Other Hauntings is the second part of a survey exhibition devoted to the work of Korean-born, Vancouver-based artist Jin-me Yoon, covering nearly thirty years of artistic practice. Yoon first gained attention in the 1990s with photo and video works that use deconstruction as a way of challenging how identity is formed. Drawing on what she calls “inherited representations,” she introduces clues that disrupt our perception of things, and thus critiques our preconceptions and stereotypes of gender, motherhood, race, culture, and nationality. In the early 2000s, while continuing to develop performances for the camera, Yoon abandoned her initial position as object of the gaze—as a surface onto which others could project—to assert herself as a subject in the process of becoming. The video camera became a tool to express her embodied subjectivity manifested through duration. At that time, she focused her attention on Asia and projects that examine tourism, war, and militarism from both sides of the Pacific. These concerns, along with her own family history, further complicate her relationship to the colonialism that still affects both Canada and Korea.

This second instalment presents a non-chronological, thematic journey through Yoon’s previous and recent works, including projects made in Japan, South Korea, and on Canada’s Pacific coast, that exhume the memories haunting these countries’ tourist areas. Each piece suggests an alternative way of transmitting history, one that avoids the convenient model of the commemorative monument and its often unnuanced message. Here, the artist runs counter to the tendency to present an official version of history, and instead, creates situations that deliberately generate unease and address sensitive subjects in relation to power. While not exactly funny, the works in this exhibition have an unusual, offbeat, and surprising side. This humour and subversion is derived from the unconventional view of reality they offer. For example, by crawling in the streets of Seoul—one of the world’s most technologically advanced cities—Yoon perhaps suggests the image of a rational subject reduced to the status of vermin or an animal. Her slow, laborious movements are at odds with the frenzied pace of progress that characterizes this 21st-century city. While the ideology of development-at-all-costs threatens future generations, Yoon manages to suddenly provoke malaise and uncertainty by simply changing our point of view. Here, as with most works across her practice, the complex critical impact lies precisely in the simplicity of her gestures juxtaposed against urban and natural environments.

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Fugitive (Unbidden) #5, 2004

Three chromogenic prints, 99.5 x 99.5 cm each
Collection of the artist

This photographic triptych is steeped in the same identity issues as her series *Touring Home From Away* (1998–1999) and *Souvenirs of the Self* (1991), where the contrast between the setting’s context and the subject’s racialized and gendered characteristics call our interpretation of her identity into question. Although their strategies are similar, this piece represents a transition in Yoon’s work where the fusion of Canadian and Korean realities change the nature of our questioning. While Yoon reflected on her integration within the Canadian landscape and national discourse in her earlier photo-based projects, *Unbidden* sees her focus on Asia and Korea, which are still dealing with the consequences of the Korean War (1950–1953). Yoon started this project in 2003 as a form of commemoration marking the 50th year of the cease-fire, although technically, the two Koreas are still at war. The artist, who left her native country with her family in 1968, has limited direct experience with Korea. Instead, she was mainly informed by second-hand accounts, fragmented memories, and images of Korean culture filtered through media and popular culture. The “inherited stories and representations” that fuel expectations of what it means to be generically East Asian are the yardstick against which she is compared. This experience is at the core of the photo- and video-based work from this series

Danger seems imminent in *Fugitive (Unbidden) #5*, a photo series that captures scenes of an escape in three images. The rather placid setting might be difficult to identify for those who aren’t familiar with Pioneer Park on the banks of the Thomson River, near Kamloops, BC. Although the source of the menace is unclear, a black-clad Yoon appears to be playing the role of a lone ninja rather than fleeing an actual threat. Through the wry, amateur re-enactment of such gestures, the artist moves away from her usual form of portraiture to create an evolving narrative that echoes stereotypes often linked to Asian culture, including action heroes such as Bruce Lee. A conversation begins with *Unbidden (Channel)* (2003) and *(it is this/it is that)* (2004), although the story’s meaning remains unclear, conflating the imaginary and the real. Whether a parody of popular action films or the personification of painful memories passed down from generation to generation, viewers must decide for themselves.

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Unbidden (Channel), 2003

Single-channel video, colour, sound, 11 min 11 s

Collection of the artist

A figure dressed in traditional Korean clothing floats in what appears to be a river, perhaps the Han, but is in fact Paul Lake, near Kamloops BC. Two places merge into one, condensing several stories that follow the flow of memory. The body lies suspended, sinking then reappearing periodically to the rhythm of the water that sometimes submerges it completely. The play of superimposition and transparency creates the illusion of a ghostly presence, an intangible body on the edge of the visible and the invisible, of dreams and reality. Is this woman simply in repose? Or is her body a corpse drifting toward its final resting place?

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(it is this/it is that), 2004

Two lightjet chromogenic prints with overlam and acrylic surface mount, 74 x 126 cm each, Collection of the Kamloops Art Gallery, purchased with financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program

While Yoon has never experienced war first-hand, she grew up with the stories, silence, and trauma shared—or not—by community members who indirectly informed her perception and understanding of this reality. One such tale described how American soldiers entertained themselves with target practice by shooting at victims' bodies floating on the Han river during the Korean war. This story left its mark, embedding itself in her memory to the point where it resurfaces here like a dream that suspends all sense of time and space. This contemplative diptych embodies the continued wish for peace, acknowledging the coexistence of both intergenerational trauma and resilience through healing.

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As It Is Becoming (Beppu, Japan): Park, former U.S. Army Base, 2008

Single-channel video, colour, sound

14 min 24 s (loop)

Ear to Ground, 2008

Single-channel video, colour, sound

13 min 25 s (loop)

As It Is Becoming (Beppu, Japan): Onsen, Atomic Treatment Centre, 2008

Single-channel video, colour, sound

4 min 28 s (loop)

As It Is Becoming (Beppu, Japan): Kannawa District, 2008

Single-channel video, colour, sound

22 min 17 s (loop)

As It Is Becoming (Seoul, Korea), 2006

Multi-channel video installation, durations between 2 min 13s and 5 min 58 s

As it is Becoming (Seoul, Korea): Inverted City, 2006

Single-channel video, colour, mute

4 min 23 s (loop)

Collection of the artist

The end of the Second World War also signalled the end of the Japanese occupation of Korea, which lasted thirty-five years. While the country served as a source for raw materials and food, a cheap labour resource, a supplier of “comfort women,” and a support for industrial development in the war effort, (South) Korea has since transformed itself into a leading economic player in terms of new technologies. Yoon's parents were raised under the yoke of Japanese colonialism, which forbid them from speaking Korean and even forced them to adopt Japanese names. Yoon came to Canada with her family in 1968, after her parents lived through the Korean War. Giving this history, she staged a series of performances for the camera in Japan and in South Korea. Crawling on the ground like an insect, Yoon slowly crept through the Kannawa District of Beppu, Japan, known for its natural healing hot springs used to treat injuries caused by radiation exposure from atomic bombs. The dilapidated architecture of this area, characterised by a disquieting number of steam clouds, stands in sharp contrast to the bustling streets of Seoul, where she also undertook this performance as a critique of the overlooked effects of progress. With its futuristic buildings, Seoul is a symbol of the country's spectacular post-1960s economic growth during the military dictatorship. In comparison, and in a strange reversal of fortune, the areas Yoon selected in Japan—a park formerly occupied by an American military base and thermal water treatment sites—look extremely modest in comparison. By juxtaposing these sites, an ongoing question remains: “What is the nature of healing from historical trauma inflicted on bodies?”

Putting her own physical endurance to the test, Yoon conceived these works as ephemeral monuments in honour of what other bodies had suffered. In the gallery, the installation is configured on the ground, like rubble. The video's quality emphasizes its conceptual nature, where the raw esthetics and long durational takes support the idea behind the piece. The accumulation of moving images suggests a kind of eruption that reaches the gallery's ceiling. Yoon appears literally as a foreign presence, sometimes even a monstrous one, highlighting the fact that there, too, she is "out of place." Her body, moving laboriously and seemingly aimlessly, is set against the verticality of her surroundings, the choreography of cars, pedestrians and buildings. And yet, she attracts little attention from those who cross her path, going about their business, ignoring her struggle and pain, as evidenced by her bandaged hands. The incongruity of the scene, emphasized by its repetition, is surprising and might even be amusing if it weren't for the artist's extreme vulnerability. Rather than representing the suffering of civilians as a repercussion of these events in Japan and Korea, Yoon attempts to embody them, to bring herself closer to a suppressed reality that inhabits her without actually having lived it.

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Watered Ground, 2008

Single-channel video, colour, sound

46 min 19 s (loop)

Collection of the artist

Water's powerful ability to soothe both body and mind, thanks to its mineral properties, has made Beppu's hot springs, especially those in the Kannawa District, a favourite healing place for the Japanese. After the Second World War, the city opened treatment centres to deal with the effects of the atomic bomb, taking full advantage of the region's exceptional location on top of a geothermal hot spot. Several free public baths are located there as well. In this video, this common outdoor bath is an inviting, relaxing environment where people can take a moment for themselves. Men and women occupy separate bathing periods, however the artist, a Korean woman, bathes with Japanese men. This innocuous gesture is one of huge significance considering the sexual exploitation of Korean women—the history of comfort women—for example. The quiet coexistence of bodies in this context suggests healing and reconciliation.

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Testing Ground, 2019

Single-channel video, colour, sound

9 min 27 s (loop)

Collection of the artist

Testing Ground was filmed on Long Beach, in Vancouver Island's Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, and was loosely influenced by Samuel Beckett's *Quad I and II* (1981), which inspired Yoon to create an absurd ballet where soldiers move mechanically on the beach but fail to interact. Set against the background of the Pacific Ocean, the soldiers suddenly multiply, emerging from behind a mound like a colony of ants to briefly survey the area before abruptly disappearing, leaving behind a few casual strollers along the water's edge. When a fierce hail storm strikes, the sound it creates is reminiscent of bomb strikes and lends an uncanny feeling to an otherwise everyday scene. In this sequence, two temporalities co-exist: the reactivation of the region's military vocation during World War II and the Cold War through the sound of hail and the soldiers' ethereal, mirage-like appearance, and the exclusion of this history by the presence of a few beachgoers, going about their daily lives. The gap between these two states, between the soldiers' determined movements and the banal motions of ordinary passers-by, adds to the incongruity of a scene that seems haunted by a restless memory. This same area was once used as a practice target for bombings. And while the land knows this history well and is anchored in it, the tide has washed away its traces.

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Long View, 2017

Single-channel video, colour, sound

10 min 3 s (loop)

Collection of the artist

The *Long View* series is typical of Yoon's approach to art-making. For the past twenty years, the artist has examined her subjects through photography and video, using the singular possibilities of each medium to address different aspects of the same concept. When invited to produce a new work as part of the *Repères2017/Landmarks2017* project, Yoon chose to dig a hole in the sand at Long Beach, in Pacific Rim National Park Reserve on Vancouver Island, to unearth the layers of meaning—historical, touristic, emotional—sedimented in the memories so often silenced by the beauty of the endless horizon.

The video shows members of the artist's family on the beach performing an activity, which, while prosaic, perhaps also references the labour involved in building a dwelling. Unlike the kind of appropriation that permanently modifies a landscape, their minimal, modest gesture leaves only an ephemeral trace. This piece is closely related to other recent works by the artist where, rather than portraying humans as superior beings indifferent to the cycles and phenomena of the natural world, she highlights our interdependent and interconnected relationships with all living forms. In *Long View*, the protagonists regularly stop to scan the horizon, perhaps watching for potential threats, or simply letting their gaze drift toward the Korean coast across the Pacific Ocean. An anonymous black-clad figure disappears into the freshly dug hole. Acting like a bridge, they return to the past by bringing the site's history to the surface. By employing montage and experimenting with radical camera movements, Yoon creates a sense of disorientation that signals the passage to an interior, memory-based reality, reinforced by sequences of archival footage. The camera becomes a tool to express the real in an affective way, rather than simply capturing it objectively, thus making us feel the invisible aspect of the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Past, present, and future come together, here and there, inviting us to broaden our understanding of this site and its histories to include the entire ocean that separates but also connects the two coastlines that have shaped the artist's identity.

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Long view series, 2017

6 chromogenic prints, 83.3 x 141 cm each

Collection of the artist

This photo series, a companion piece to the video of the same name, was shot in the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. It begins and ends with two key images that call to each other beyond the image's frame: a woman scans the horizon with a pair of binoculars and seizes upon the blurred silhouette of a stranger, an ultimate symbol of The Other. Between these two images unfolds a scene punctuated by a mound of sand similar in size to the war memorial on Radar Hill, north of the park. A former military site, Radar Hill had an active radar station during World War II and the Cold War capable of detecting potential aerial attacks. A monument to Canadian veterans of the Korean War who fought in the battle of Kapyong in 1951 is located along the path to the site, and serves as a reference for the sand mound on the beach, which in turn also evokes a

funeral rite. An active military base with air and sea squadrons is still stationed at Comox, on Vancouver Island. Situated on the traditional territory of the Nuučaan̓ [Nuu-chah-nulth] peoples, the park's natural beauty makes it a prime tourist spot. However, the presence of military patrols in the area, both historically and today, reminds us how coastlines, as frontiers, are also perceived as areas of potential threat in the form of illegal immigration, drug trafficking, pollutants, illegal fishing, and foreign submarines. But who occupies the position of the Foreigner here? Are recent and past immigrants, who settle on unceded land upon their arrival in Canada, aware of this situation, and what responsibilities do they have toward it? These questions remain relevant, especially once their complex implications are revealed.

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Other Hauntings: A Geography Beloved (Song), 2016

Single-channel video, colour, sound

7 min 20 s (loop)

Other Hauntings: A Geography Beloved (Dance), 2016

Single-channel video, colour, sound

8 min 14 s (loop)

Collection of the artist

The *Long View series* contains a photo that is compositionally similar to an iconic painting titled *To Prince Edward Island* (1965), by Canadian artist Alex Coleville. Both feature a close-up, frontal view of a woman scanning the ocean's horizon with a pair of binoculars. Yoon has often quoted other artworks in her photo projects of the 1990s, where, through appropriation, she challenged stereotypical modes of representation associated with certain cultural identities. Although Coleville's painting comes to mind here, the artist's main concern is in the act of looking. For Yoon, the image is much more reminiscent of photographs of Korean soldiers observing an enemy camp's activities from a demilitarized zone. The one that runs along the 248 km separating both sides of the Korean peninsula attracts an increasing number of tourists hoping to witness first-hand the threat that still lingers over one of the most militarized regions in the world, where more than one million soldiers monitor the area from both sides. Should we see to believe?

The photo is hung on the gallery wall across from two videos shot on Jeju Island off the coast of South Korea, and suggests

that Yoon is looking toward Gureombi Rock, located in the village of Gangjeong. The rock is a sacred site that has been occupied by a South Korean naval base since 2016. It also serves the US Army, which uses it as a strategic pillar in its mission to contain the Chinese. Many years of protests led by the island's residents and supported by activists from around the world have tried to stop the construction of the military base because it threatens the area's fragile ecosystem, a recognized UNESCO Biosphere Reserve since 2002. *Other Hauntings: A Geography Beloved (Dance)* and *Other Hauntings: A Geography Beloved (Song)* are filmed with a hand-held camera using experimental techniques. These choices reflect the intimate nature and sense of urgency that led to their creation. By using the camera this way, the artist opens herself up to reality's affective and invisible dimensions, made tangible through the apparatus. Here, a local resident tries to explain, using gestures as much as words, the deep uncertainty that has plagued the villagers' lives since the base began construction. As the woman speaks in Korean, Yoon provides a simultaneous translation, but her own hesitation and repetition show her struggling to interpret the language, and the resulting narrative gaps provide an incomplete story. As such, the work parallels the villagers' own difficulty in making themselves heard despite countless protests. Many wonder if Gureombi still exists. When asked this, the activist replies, philosophically, that the rock is simply wounded and is still there under its damaged surface. Must we see to believe? A young man sings a song in offering to the sacred rock that sinks below the water's surface. He refuses to believe that Gureombi is gone.

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