

“Some/One,” 2005, Do Ho Suh, South Korean, #2012.77a-d



Gallery Label:

Do Ho Suh was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1962. After studying traditional Asian brush painting at the Seoul National University and fulfilling his term of mandatory service in the South Korean military, he moved to the U.S. to continue his study of art and where he received an MFA in sculpture from Yale University. When the artist first came to the United States he felt displaced by cultural differences. He said he felt as if he were living in someone else's body and didn't know what to do with the stranger's hands and feet. He could have returned home, where he already had begun to make his mark as a painter. Instead, he used his sense of disorientation to create artworks that forge a richly expressive link between historical and contemporary concepts of culture, identity and politics.

Based on a coat of traditional Asian armor, this sculpture is composed from thousands of polished military dog tags. As the title indicates, the work juxtaposes the collective - represented by the dog tags, each representing a single soldier. The imposing, larger-than-life robe stands in contrast to the thin, vulnerable dog tags, which may also be said to embody the poetic symbolism of fallen warriors.

Global Warfare gallery label:

Two artists, born on opposite sides of the world – one British and one Korean – made these works of art nearly 50 years apart. Yet, their two sculptures reverberate with a single voice: both direct viewers to confront their feelings about war and the sacrifice of battle.

Henry Moore's *Warrior with Shield* (1953-54) reverberates with torment. It confronts viewers with the agonies of one soldier's brutalized, mutilated body. Yet, we cannot escape the equal force of his valor, his persistence to fight the fight, at this moment and even to the end.

The chilling figure of Do Ho Suh's *Some/One* (2005) presents a sense of grandeur and invincibility – it gleams and towers with glorious power. But upon close inspection, viewers find its majesty is conjured by one, not one hundred, but countless individual military dog tags, representing individual people. Each tag is small enough to be singularly overlooked. But their great numbers, presented together conjures the force of the magisterial general.

In global warfare, where troops are placed in distant, remote areas of the world, combat is detached from many Americans. Yet, today, despite the use of unmanned drones, the battle line is made up of individual men and women, sacrificing life and limb.

Questions:

1. What did you think this sculpture was made of when you approached it in the gallery? How did your ideas change as you moved closer?
2. What words would you use to describe it?
3. Imagine that you were a boy growing up in South Korea, where artist So Ho Suh came from. When Suh entered middle school at age 13, he and other boys had their heads shaved and were required to wear military uniforms and caps all the time. At that point, their teachers called them by numbers, not their names. So, the boys looked for ways to show their individuality. At the same time, their identity was being shaped by military experiences. Are there times that you are assigned to a larger group and feel you have lost your identity? What, if anything, do you do to set yourself apart as an individual?
4. What does this sculpture remind you of?
5. Look at the inside of this sculpture. Part of you will be reflected. How does this make you feel? Do you feel you could own such a coat? Would it fit? How would it feel as you moved? How does its larger-than-life size affect the power of this sculpture?

Some/One: The dog tag coat:

1. **Embodies idea of the individual v. the collective.**
 - Represents faceless, nameless soldiers who lose their identity in the military.
 - Larger-than-life garment.
 - Raises questions of power, belonging & persona.
 - Reflects Suh's experience in the Korean military, modeled on the American military.
 - Questions the identity of the individual in today's increasingly transnational, global society. Here: Anonymous individuals united in collective conformity.
2. **Made from tens of thousands of shiny stainless steel dog tags.**
 - **New dog tags. NOT old dog tags** that once belonged to soldiers. Not memorial.
 - Letters & numbers in five lines of English text. Random, nonsense letters & numbers to represent faceless troops. Suh custom- stamped them

- Mounted on stainless steel structure. Mirrored stainless steel interior.
- Suh's explanation [indented quotes from him are in bold]

“I became interested in the idea behind the military dog tag. It’s a form of identification, and it’s made out of stainless steel. So, it’s a permanent material; it will not rust. And each soldier has to carry two dog tags. And when a soldier is killed in battle, one dog tag has to remain on the dead body, and one is taken away by a surviving soldier in order to report the death of that soldier, in order to secure the identity of that soldier.”

“I wanted the viewer to have an experience with these little dog tags, these thousands of dog tags. It symbolizes each individual’s identity: these many dog tags create this one, larger-than-life figure.”

3. Shaped like ancient Korean armor or chain mail. Ghost-like suit of armor.

- Hollow robe. Open Kimono style.
- Dog tags shimmer like dragon or fish scales, chainmail or stacked coins from a distance.
- Extended train makes coat look like emperor’s robe. Suggests martial strength. Elegant. Ghostly. Invincible. Grandeur.
- Koreans think it looks like armor of Sejong the Great, famous 15th century Korean general. He protected Korea from Japanese invasion. Statue of him in the center of Seoul. Sejong invented a battleship [image below] that looks like a turtle, with an exoskeleton that looks like **fish scales**. In *Some/One*, Suh arranged dog tags exactly as Sejong arranged metal on the ship.
- Suh likes views to make such multiple associations of the work.

“I carefully managed to keep the work open, so it could be read in different ways.”

4. Mirrored inside

- Lighting & reflection make it hard to judge the depth – where the surface stops.

“That adds a dimension.”

“It’s ambiguous whether you’re a part of it or not, whether you are the owner of this robe when you see your own image over there. So, that’s why I had the mirror inside.”

5. Evolved from Suh’s first sculpture, *“Metal Jacket”* while student at Rhode Island School of Design.

“The old work never goes away. It stays there; you just don’t notice it.”

- Inspiration from a vivid dream:

“It was night, and I was outside of this kind of football stadium, and I was approaching this stadium from the distance. And I saw this light in the stadium, and so I thought there’s some kind of activity going on. And as I approached the stadium in order to enter the stadium, I started to hear these clicking sounds, like the sound when the metal pieces touch together. It was like there were thousands of crickets in the stadium. And then I entered the stadium in the way that the football players enter the stadium. I walked slowly and went into the stadium on the ground level, and then I see this reflecting surface in the dream. And I realized I was stepping on these metal pieces that were the military dog tags. And it was slightly vibrating; the dog tags were touching each other, and the sound was from that. And from afar, I saw the central figure in the center of the stadium. I slowly proceeded to the center, and then I realized it was all one piece that gradually rose up and formed this one figure. And it tried to go out the stadium but couldn’t go out because the train was just too big—you know, it was just too big to pull all the dog tags.

“So, that was the dream and the image that I got. After that, I made a small drawing. The small drawing was about this vast field of military dog tags on the ground and then a small figure in the center. That was the image I got, and I just waited. I waited for the right time to come. I mean, obviously, I could not create the piece that I dreamed of; it’s impossible. But it was a kind of image and a kind of hope. That was the impact that I wanted to somehow convey through that piece.”

- *Some/One*: Featured at Philip Morris branch of Whitney Museum & 49th Venice Biennale.



Do Ho Suh: The Artist:

1. 1962 - Born in Seoul, South Korea, shortly after military coup that brought Chung Hee to power

1985 – Seoul National University, BFA – Oriental painting.
1987 – Seoul National University, MFA – Oriental painting.
1994 – Rhode Island School of Design, BFA – painting
1997 – Yale University School of Art, MFA –
2. His father, Se Ok Suh, a famous Korean painter who pioneered merging of traditional & modern Korean art. His mother deeply rooted in Korean culture. Provided Do-Ho Suh w/ unique outlook, home & culture, despite the turbulent militaristic overtones of Korea.
 - Suh felt overshadowed by father. Left Korea for New York to do his “own thing.”

- Fortune teller told Suh he has “five horses.” Meant he would travel a lot.
- Like many international artists, leads itinerant life: Lives in New York & London. Frequent trips back to his home in Korea.
- Found New York really noisy. Realized the last time he had a really good sleep was in Seoul. Decided to reproduce his parents’ very traditional Korean home, a bastion of stability. His father had built the house as a replica of a famous Korean building.

“I didn’t want to sit down and cry for home. I wanted to deal with issues of longing.”

- Suh decided to make a replica of his childhood home in translucent celadon silk “transportable fabric” that he could fold up & carry in a suitcase. Koreans have a saying: “You walk the house.” They disassemble houses; rebuild in different location.

“I wanted to carry my house – my home – with me on like a snail.”

- His mother introduced him to “national treasures,” ladies who taught him to sew special seams. As he measured his family home, he came across little marks he made as a child, stirring up personal & emotional experiences.
- Likes the idea of his art becoming architecture: *Seoul Home/L.A. Home*, 1994 [below]

3. **Works with dualities: Rootedness v. Displacement. Individuality v. conformity**

- Migration, spatial & psychological, one of Suh's themes,
- Intricate sculptures & installations define and re-define the notion of identity and individuality, public and private space.
- **Challenges viewers to question their ideas of personal space, their own identity & individuality in today’s increasingly international, globally centric society.**

4. **Military life seminal** to Suh’s psyche . Shows up in his art, including *Some/One*

- Korean society is built on a militaristic & hierarchical structure.
- Korean boys know from birth that they will serve two years in military.
- Age 13 – Graduate from elementary school & enter middle school. **Hair shaved. Military uniforms & caps mandatory. Severe punishment for not wearing. Called by numbers, instead of names: “My number was 46.”**
 - “Traumatic experience” for boys.
 - Emotional dichotomy: Boys do their best to “differentiate” uniforms, one from another. Yet, much of Korean man’s identity comes from uniform & military experience. Have a kind of nostalgia about it. Shared experience.

“It’s a good initiation to the real world because the whole Korean society, the whole system, is actually based on this militaristic, very hierarchical structure.”

- Led to Suh’s sense of displacement between home & school:

“Leaving home to go to school every day was a kind of displacement — I had to leave an unreal environment and enter reality.”

- Captures those feelings in *High School Uni-Form, 1997* [below]. **Headless** grid of 60 Korean schoolboys' black uniforms sewn together at the shoulders: Grim platoon of interlocked torsos.
 - Intimate relation between Suh's memories & uniforms he once. Painful sense of idiosyncrasy repressed by protocol. Their formal style, adopted during Korea's occupation by Japanese forces, whose aesthetic was in turn influenced by German military design, reinscribes the installation w/ intercultural hostility, where personal intimacies erode.
 - Illegal in Korea to buy or have military stuff. Korean men develop a kind of **fetishism** about military equipment.
5. **Suh served two years in Korean military.** Went after graduate school. He was six or seven years older than other soldiers. Same age as captains. Was trained as sharpshooter.
- Suh was "really good at many things" before entering military: Had a black belt. Good shot. Very healthy. Yet, military training program was taken to physical & psychological extremes.
 - Trained Suh & other soldiers to feel invincible. Able to "**Kill someone.**"
 - When Korean men get together & drink, they swap stories of horrendous experiences in military.
 - Suh experienced what like to be dehumanized. Uses that in his art.

6. **Background & Materials for "Some/One"**

- While at Rhode Island School of Design, Suh "accidentally" took a sculpture course for an elective because the glass-blowing class he wanted was full. Changed his life.
- Found Army-and-Navy Surplus Store in Cranston, Rhode Island, run by old Korean guy. Suh told him about his sculpture assignment: "Use a form of clothing to address the issue of identity."
- Korean shopkeeper gave Suh a lot of military stuff for free, including many old dog tags. Let him use a "typewriter" for stamping names & letters on new dog tags.

"At the army surplus, they make dog tags for you. And sometimes they make a mistake and spell wrong, and so they have these rejects. And also, he helped me to get the blank dog tags and gave me a really good deal. Not only that, he allowed me to use this special typewriter for the dog tags.

"It was spring break, so I went there every day, I think, for almost two weeks and typed dog tags. And I had around thirty thousand dog tags there. And we had a conversation, you know; we talked about things going on, back in Korea.

"That was also right after the L.A. riots, and I think there were some issues related to the Korean-American communities in L.A. during the riots. That was what really allowed me to think about my identity as a Korean in the United States, through that project. I think somehow my experience in the military in Korea was also something that I wanted to address through the project." [compare to Nick Cave's experience with Rodney King aftermath & Cave's resulting Sound Suit]

- Suh's first sculpture was made from these dog tags: *Metal Jacket*. Looked like ancient Oriental armor. Covered with thousands of military dog tags.

- From a distance, the dog tags look like fish scales.
- Project changed Suh's artistic focus from painting to sculpture.

“The shape of that jacket was not something that I invented. I used the U.S. military jacket liner and just put the dog tags on top of it. So, I used all contemporary materials, but they ended up looking like ancient ones.”

7. Move to New York. Cultural displacement provides “critical distance” for his art.

- Felt as if he were living in someone else's body. Didn't know what to do with stranger's hands & feet.
- Allows Suh to compare **culture of the individual v. the collective**.
- Experiments with **concept of personal space**. Differences between Korean & American concepts of personal space.
- Seoul very crowded. Normal for people to bump into you. Living in New York made him think about individual & collective space.
- Koreans & Americans have different concepts of personal space. Suh shows graphically *Floor* installation [below]. Tiny plastic figures crowded together support glass plates.
- Asked to do outdoor monument. Most monuments honor illustrious individual & are larger than life. Suh wanted to recognize & depict anonymous, everyday life: Many figures holding up a monumental block. Facial expressions: People don't look oppressed. Wanted viewer to decide what it means. *Public Figures* [below]

8. “Who Am We?”

- Scanned 60 people from his high school year book, superimposed on that of his face. Created a composite “average” person. A kind of self-portrait.
- Collects yearbooks from 1917-93. Many of their faces look like composite: “So maybe we're not that unique.”
- “Who am we?” – Portraits of 40,000 teens taken from Suh's high school yearbooks printed in rows. Patterned sheets could be used as wallpaper. One-eighth inch portraits blur like benday dots. Faces cannot be distinguished. Closer, individual faces emerge.
- Viewer must decide whether the image/s stabilize as an “I” or a “We.” Series of unique faces. Or a unified muddle.
- Stresses oppressive sameness & collective strength.

9. Hot international artist:

- 2001 - Represented Korea at Venice Biennale. Participated in 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale, the 2010 Liverpool Biennial, & 2012 Gwangju Biennial.
- Recent solo exhibitions include *Wielandstr.18, 12159*, DAAD Galerie, Germany (2011); *Asian Art and Do Ho Suh*, Seattle Art Museum, Washington (2011); *Home Within Home*, Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, Korea (2012); *Blueprint*, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Japan (2012); *In Between*, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Japan (2012); *Perfect Home*, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan (2012).

Background on invasions & Korean military:

1. **Korea's** military history spans back thousands of years, beginning with the early struggles of the ancient Kingdom of Gojoseon. Its long history consists of the many successful repulsions of major invasions and defensive against foreign invasions.
 - Examples of Korean military prowess: Campaigns during time of Gojoseon, Three Kingdoms (namely Goguryeo, Baekje, Silla), as well as those of the subsequent Kingdoms of Unified Silla, Balhae, Goryeo, Joseon.
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 - Today, both North and South Korea field some of the largest and most lethal armies in the world. On one hand, North Korea is widely suspected of having nuclear weapons, as well as other weapons of mass destruction. South Korea, for its part, is equipped with a sophisticated conventional military with state-of-the-art weapons. South Korean troops actively participated in Vietnam War & currently serve in UN peacekeeping missions globally. South Korean military enjoys military alliances with other countries, particularly the United States.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_history_of_Korea

2. Over the last millenium or so Korea has been harassed and invaded by its larger, more aggressive neighbors numerous times - the Chinese, the Mongols, the Jurchens(Manchus), and especially the Japanese. The Koreans have an expression which is telling: "A shrimp caught between whales."

After the devastating double invasion by Japan near the end of the 16th century Korea never quite recovered from the loss until modern times, whereas Japan profited not only from the material plunder but also from the skills and civilizing influence of craftsmen and scholars captured and taken to Japan. There is in the outskirts of Kyoto, Japan, a monument known as Mimizuka ("Ear Mound"), which is literally the tomb of some 38,000 noses and ears cut from dead Koreans as war trophies.

As a result of this horrible experience the Korean court closed the country off from the outside world (hence the nickname "The Hermit Kingdom") until forced to open up late in the 19th century. By then Japan had already opened up to Western civilization and was rapidly becoming a military power to reckon with, which led to Japan taking over Korea once again early in the 20th century, this time annexing it officially as a colony of Japan.

Life in Korea under Japanese colonial rule was brutal and exploitative. Koreans were forbidden to speak their own language and had to change their names to Japanese ones. Many cultural treasures were destroyed or stolen not only for their value but in a systematic attempt to erase Korean history and identity altogether, to try to turn Koreans into second-class Japanese. Buildings were moved in order to ruin the good *feng sui* in Korea's capital. Sounds incredible, but it happened.

Many Koreans were relocated to Japan, Central Asia and Siberia, either by force or through deceptive recruitment, to help with Japan's war effort in the 1940's, then simply abandoned there when Japan surrendered. There are many ethnic Koreans living in those areas today, descendants of those unfortunates. There is also the problem of the 'Comfort Women',

women of Korean and other Asian countries (and also some Dutch women captured in Indonesia) who were forced to work as sex slaves to Japanese soldiers. The whitewashing of history and reluctance on the part of the Japanese government to confront this particular chapter of Japan's imperial history has been a source of ongoing tension between Japan and its neighbors.

Today though, there are many healthy signs of progress. Young people in South Korea and Japan are becoming aware of each other as people, not just historical abstractions. They are visiting each other's countries in record numbers. Korean TV shows and pop stars are becoming popular in Japan. Japanese comics and animation are all the rage in South Korea. The respective governments have done much good work in order to cement economic and cultural ties between the two nations which are, after all, next-door neighbors with many physical and cultural similarities, and have always had close dealings throughout history. There is even talk of constructing an undersea tunnel connecting the two countries. Whether or not that actually comes to pass, it is surely a sign of more to come.

<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20091019163034AAAnDyK1>

3. The Korean War began on June 24th 1950, with attack by North Korean forces across 38th parallel dividing North and South Korea. Attack a complete surprise to American administration. It was feared that this attack heralded the beginning of World War III.

The image of Chamberlain's 1938 Munich capitulation to Germany, immediately provoked American policy makers. They felt it was better to fight a small war in the present, than a large-scale one later on. Soviet Union was boycotting United Nations sessions; United States was able to obtain resolution calling for U.N. force to oppose the invasion. U.S. fought under U.N. flag.

North Korean forces advanced far to the south, trapping Americans into small area of South Korea near the city of Pusan. Brilliant, amphibious landing in Inchon in September turned tide of war. By November, American forces had almost reached the Chinese border. Chinese troops intervened, however, forcing back American forces.

Finally, the military positions stabilized, not far from the original border where the war began. General MacArthur, Supreme Allied Commander of the U.N. Forces, called for additional power against Chinese, including use of nuclear weapons. The President and the rest of the Administration decided more important to concentrate on defending Europe. (Many in the Administration were concerned about a possible Soviet attack in Europe.) When MacArthur continued to speak out against the administration's policies, President Truman fired him. It took another two years to reach a cease-fire agreement.

<http://www.historycentral.com/asia/NKoreaInvadesS.html>

Other works by Do-Ho Suh:



DO HO SUH
High School Uni-Form, 1997
fabric, plastic, stainless steel, casters
300 parts total...



DO HO SUH
Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home/L.A. Home,
1999



DO HO SUH
Karma, 2003
urethane paint on fiberglass/resin



DO HO SUH

Public Figures

Installation at the Metrotech Center Commons, Brooklyn, NY, October 1998-

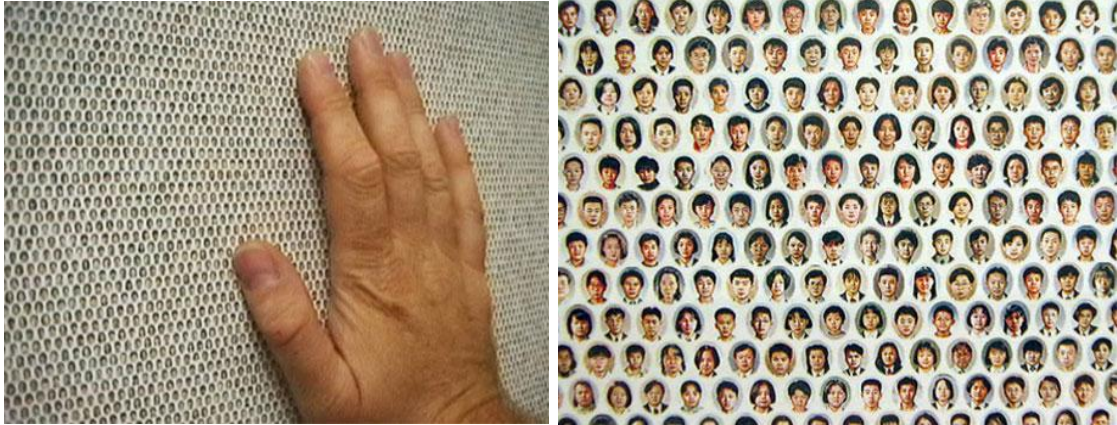


DO HO SUH

Screen, Installation at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, 2005 (detail)



'Floor' installation, Venice Art Biennial, 2001



'Who am we?' 1996/2001. Wallpaper shown in the Italian Pavilion of Venice Biennial, 2001



Replica of turtle by Korean 15th century general. War Memorial in Seoul

<http://www.art21.org/texts/do-ho-suh/interview-do-ho-suh-some-one-and-the-korean-military>

Resources:

<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/do-ho-suh>

<http://www.art21.org/texts/do-ho-suh/interview-do-ho-suh-some-one-and-the-korean-military>

<http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/do-ho-suh>

http://www.artspace.com/do_ho_suh

<http://www.arrestedmotion.net/2011/08/do-ho-suh.html>

http://www.askart.com/askart/s/doho_suh/doho_suh.aspx

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/03/artseen/reflection>

<http://www.kansassampler.org/8wonders/artresults.php?id=91>

“At Home in the World: The Art of Do-Ho Suh,” by Frances Richard, Artforum, Jan. 1, 2002.

<http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/do-ho-suh/press/61>

<http://sculptureresearch.wordpress.com/do-ho-suh>

<http://thegrandnarrative.com/2007/10/30/koreas-convenient-invasion-myths/>