

Do Ho Suh stitches the fabric of home and memory

Rafael Francisco Salas, Special to the Journal Sentinel February 27, 2017



Do Ho Suh's "Secret Garden" is a 1/16th re-creation of his childhood home and garden, loaded onto the bed of an 18-wheeler. (Photo: Madison Museum of Contemporary Art)

MADISON - Do Ho Suh reflects on what a home is and what time and distance transform a home into. His large-scale sculpture at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art evokes a distant recollection, a place we know we have visited but that our minds cannot quite grasp through the veil of memory. In an era of global migration and upheaval, the artist's reflections seem particularly important to witness.

Suh is an internationally renowned artist and a self-proclaimed nomad. He has lived in many countries and created a home for himself in each. These places from his past — which he has touched, smelled, slept in — remain a part of his consciousness and Suh finds inspiration in the intersections between memory and place.

In the main gallery, Suh has created a full-scale replica of his former apartment and studio in New York City out of diaphanous, colored fabric. Visitors can walk through the translucent and gently moving spaces as if within an actual dwelling. The experience is full of intimate detail but is also foggy and ephemeral. This seeming contradiction between exhaustive realism and translucence gives this work a deep, dreamy power.

A stainless steel armature suspends gauzy fabric of light blue, yellow and red. Sinks, toilets and light switches are each stitched with impeccable attention. One is confronted with the questions of what it feels like to live in a particular place at a particular time and what happens to that place when it is no longer a home. Perhaps more pointedly, what is it like to no longer have a home at all?

In a separate, darkened gallery, Suh has isolated details of the apartment also utilizing his soft sculptural techniques in fabric. A bathtub, toilet, stove and refrigerator are exhibited as separate works. Each sits within a glass vitrine that is lighted from the inside. In the dark, these objects shine out, the fugitive solidity of the fabric even more evident. The series is called "Specimen," and indeed these domestic objects out of context invite a different examination.

Tensions between detail and the elusive nature of memory continue to play out in drawings that Suh created from the same apartment. He crafted and cut tracing paper to cover every cranny of the kitchen and entryway. He then created drawings by rubbing the paper with blue colored pencil over their surfaces. Tellingly, he has titled these works "Rubbing/Loving Project." Images of the now familiar stove, refrigerator and cabinets painstakingly emerge from the paper. The resultant drawings are beautiful but they also communicate his process, that Suh touched and rubbed every inch of the place he once called home. This meticulous process of recording his past carries a deep poignancy. It is a visual love poem, a remembrance on paper.

Another series of drawings diverge from his apartment works. In these, Suh draws himself as a whimsical Everyman, thought bubbles of houses radiating from his head or swirling around as he walks. Many of these drawings are created using thread embedded and pressed into paper. They are humorous and suggest a variation in tone from Suh's more somber large works. There are documentary films also being screened on a nearby wall.

In the adjoining Imprint gallery, I was enchanted several times over with the sculpture and accompanying film titled "Secret Garden." Suh originates from Seoul, South Korea, and in this work he has re-created his childhood home and garden in 1/16 scale and loaded it onto the bed of an 18-wheeler. The cab on this rig is painted candy-apple red and even sports classic, customized flames.

The film is the animated journey of the truck hauling Suh's home across the U.S. and coming to a halt in Madison Square Garden. The truck drives over bridges and roads along the way and has a cartoonish inertia, like watching Thomas the Tank Engine. It is hilarious. We then watch the garden, now parked in the city, entertain possible futures, where the trees and bushes wither and die, or where everything blooms into a joyous and colorful spring. Either is possible, of course, but to me, the artwork of Suh remains optimistic in all of its variations.

Perhaps this optimism describes Suh's connection to the essence of architecture. A home is aspirational and our nostalgia for home beautiful, even if we can no longer return.

"Do Ho Suh" is on view through May 14 at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, 227 State St., Madison. For information, visit mmoca.org.



Do Ho Suh has created a full-scale replica of his former apartment and studio in New York City out of diaphanous, colored fabric. (Photo: Madison Museum of Contemporary Art)

Rafael Francisco Salas is an artist, an associate professor of art at Ripon College and a regular Art City contributor.