



DO HO SUH
SPECIMENS

In his sculptures, installations, and drawings, Do Ho Suh often uses architectural imagery to signify the physical spaces in which people grow up, live, work, and socialize, and also as a metaphor for immaterial structures, such as thoughts, memories, and beliefs. Having lived in Seoul, New York, London, and Berlin, Suh is particularly interested in creating alluring visualizations of home, reflecting not just his own mobility and sense of displacement, but also linking his experience to a broader reflection on migration in the 21st century.



fig. 1

In the sheer fabric works for which he is well known, Suh marries past and present, combining traditional Korean sewing techniques with 3-D modeling technologies. As one sees into and through these edifices, their qualities and conditions are shown to be relative. The large-scale sculpture *Reflection* (2004; not in this exhibition) features a pair of arches inspired by the gate to Suh's childhood home in Korea. One arch hangs upside down from a translucent scrim, while its twin above seems to be oriented normally—that is, right side up (fig. 1). When viewed from a higher vantage point such as a staircase or balcony, the top structure seems to be reflected in water or ice; from below, the inverted building impossibly defies gravity, its doppelgänger above now a mere echo on the other side of the sky. Such conceptual inversions echo the Surrealists' belief that the implacable appearance of the "real" world is a limiting perspective—a facade blocking awareness of intangible realities beyond the constraints of a mechanistic universe.

This exhibition includes *Boiler Room*, a relatively small example of Suh's full-scale architectural allusions (fig. 2). Its pliancy and translucency subvert the most basic functions of a building and its interior walls—to protect, to shield from view, and to create a distinction between private and public spaces. The sculpture's human scale

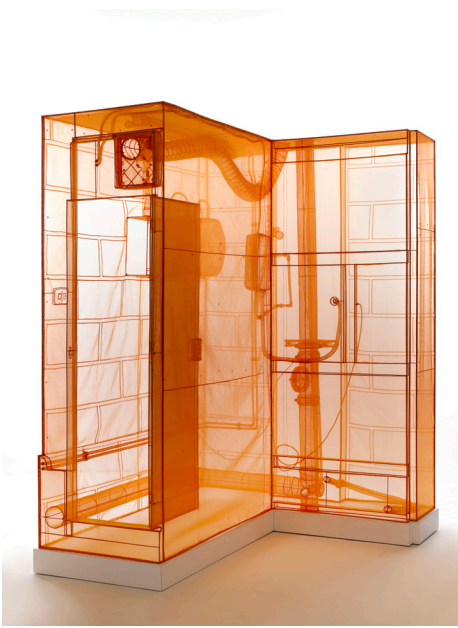


fig. 2

underscores a connection Suh has observed between architecture and clothing, which he describes as “the smallest, most inhabitable space that you can actually carry.” Speaking of his long-term home in New York’s Chelsea District, he elaborates on the way that a person comes to “wear” his or her environment, so it becomes inseparable from identity:

After living in this apartment for some time, I realized that it gave me a sense of protection that was quite physical. It became a kind of skin, and I felt so comfortable that I was almost not even aware of the space around me anymore. Eventually, I even started to experience this space as entering inside of me, as if it had shifted from a skin to something like an internal organ. At that point, I didn’t really see the space at all—the apartment became about the orientation of my things, my movement, and my routine inside.

This notion of clothing as a domestic surrounding being absorbed into one’s identity extends easily from Suh’s replications of buildings, which are often large enough to immerse the viewer, to his smaller, more discrete works, such as those in this exhibition. The *Specimen* series includes depictions of appliances and fixtures from his one-time apartment on West 22nd Street in New York. These are not literal copies of a stove, a toilet, a sink, and a refrigerator, but instead are transcriptions into sheer polyester, which are mounted in vitrines like specimens in a museum display. Eerie LED lighting makes them seem to float in the darkened gallery—ghosts in the apartment’s machinery (fig. 3). Replacing solidity with a luminous veil, these mundane objects have become alien, their inner glow giving them a sacred quality reminiscent of the Quaker concept

of the inner light of spirituality. Psychologists speak of eidetic images—visual remembrances so deeply impressed in the mind’s eye that they seem more vivid and present than the thing originally seen. The highly detailed reconstruction of these remembered fixtures implies a deep psychological connection to the objects that helped moor Suh, at least temporarily, to a home, but with the advantage that unlike real appliances, they could be folded up into a suitcase or box and carried wherever he goes.



fig. 3

Because of their intimate relationship to bodily functions, it is not difficult to see how a toilet or refrigerator can have a leading role in the artist’s construction of a self-narrative. But what about an inspection certificate, light bulbs, or an intercom? The transformation of these objects in the *Exit* series becomes more surprising with their increasing innocuousness, as if to say that nothing is beneath the attention of a person who is fully alive in the moment. This recalls the venerable tradition in art, from seventeenth-century

Dutch still-life painters through Pop Art and beyond, of finding beauty and value in the modest objects and minuscule aspects of everyday life.

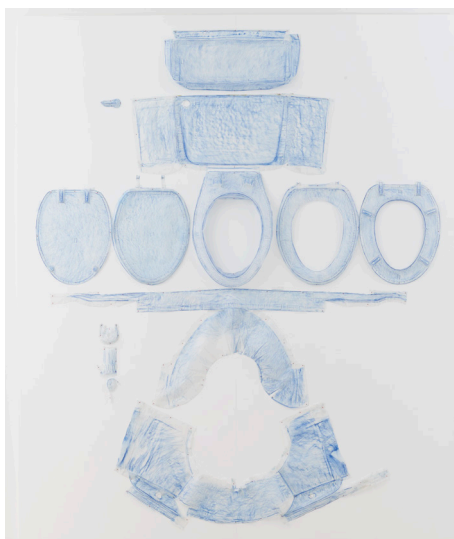


fig. 4

Suh was forced to leave his New York apartment after eighteen years—its owners had passed away, and their children had decided to sell the place. Emptying the building of his possessions gave him the



fig. 5

opportunity to realize a project he had long dreamed about. Using a process that recalls headstone rubbings, in which paper is placed over an inscription and rubbed with graphite or other material to create an index of its words and textures, he completely covered the apartment in paper, which he then proceeded to rub, striving to capture the nuances of every inch (fig. 4). Suh began with colored pencils, but later changed to pastels, which he could apply with his fingertips. This was like a caress, with rubbing understood to be an action of loving. Everything he touched reminded him of the many times he had come into contact with each small part of the space that constituted home. Two years in the making, *Rubbing/Loving* became a spiritual tribute not only to the apartment, but also to one of its landlords, who in his last years had suffered from Alzheimer's disease, robbing him of memory. In its way, *Rubbing/Loving* is a memorialization—a refusal of this loss.²

Using indexical or mnemonic processes to depict objects that have a connection to places in which he has lived, Do Ho Suh creates works that transcend the boundaries of domesticity to pose larger questions about the ambiguity of optical and tactile experiences, the collapse of time, and the malleability of space. In affirming that our most lasting memories often originate in familiar surroundings, these nebulous fabrications are reminders that what we carry through life, however light or heavy, influences how we interact with the world.

Mark W. Scala
Chief curator

ILLUSTRATIONS

COVER: *Toilet, Apartment A, 348 West 22nd Street, New York, NY 10011, USA, 2013.*

Polyester fabric, stainless steel wire, and display case with LEDs, 44 1/2 x 33 1/8 x 37 1/2 in.

Private collection. © Do Ho Suh. Photo: Taegsu Jeon

Fig. 1: *Reflection, 2004.* Nylon and stainless steel tube, dimensions variable.

© Do Ho Suh. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul

Fig. 2: *Boiler Room, London Studio, 2015.* Polyester fabric and stainless steel

tubes, 90 1/2 x 63 x 74 3/8 in. Collection of Yale Art Gallery. © Do Ho Suh.

Photo: Taegsu Jeon

Fig. 3: *Stove, Apartment A, 348 West 22nd Street, New York, NY 10011, USA, 2013.*

Polyester fabric, stainless steel wire, and display case with LEDs, 74 1/8 x 36 1/8 x 35 in. © Do Ho Suh. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul. Photo: Taegsu Jeon

Fig. 4: *Rubbing/Loving Project: Toilet, Apartment A, 348 West 22nd Street, New York, NY 10011, USA, 2014.* Colored pencil on vellum pinned on board, 92 1/2 x 75 7/8 in. © Do Ho Suh. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul

Fig. 5: Do Ho Suh's bathroom, Apartment A, 348 West 22nd Street, New York, wrapped in paper. © Do Ho Suh. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein

Notes

1. Suh, Do Ho. Interview with Julian Rose. *Artforum*, January 19, 2017, artforum.com.

2. This videotape gives an intimate perspective on Suh's relationship with his landlord, who gave him carte blanche to "do whatever you want" in the apartment, from when they first met 18 years earlier until after the landlord developed Alzheimer's disease. According to Suh, the series title relates to the fact that the Korean alphabet does not distinguish between the letters *r* and *l*, so "rubbing" would sound very much like "loving" when voiced by a native Korean speaker.

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