



*Charm
Offensive*

September 8 - October 12, 2000

Kim Abeles Rheim Alkadhi Steve Appleton Kaucyila Brooke Mark Greenfield
Connie Samaras Allan Sekula Yong Sin Joo Kyung Yoon

Korean Cultural Center



Kim Abeles, detail, "Asher B. Durand's 'The Hunter' in *Thirty Days of Smog*, mixed media painting, 2000



wish I could take credit for inventing the exhibition title. It was actually found in two separate [LA Times](#) articles in July about the historic meeting between North and South Korean leaders, in which the turn of phrase, "charm offensive" was used to denote the unprecedented, and unexpected "open" posture of what is perceived to be North Korea's diplomatic strategy. For example, the July 19th article observed that, "Kim Jong Il's

diplomatic charm offensive continues, as he seeks to establish ties between what was until recently called the 'Hermit Kingdom' and its capitalist former enemies from whom it now seeks trade and investment." Evidently, this curious neologism is part of a rich lexicon of double-speak that informs our affairs of the world, such as the recent elevation of North Korea from "rogue nation" to "nation of concern" (an early indication of the success of its "charm offensive"), and an updated variant of the oxymoron, "Peace Offensive," a moniker given to the Soviet Union's early signs of détente in its evil empire days.

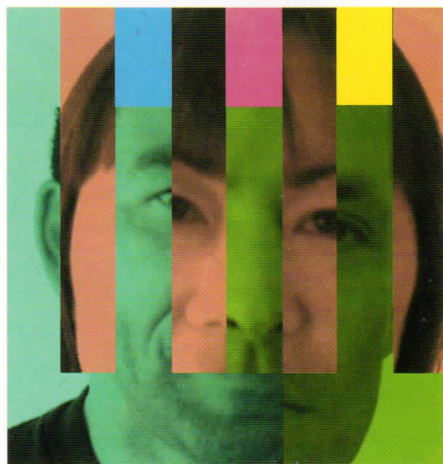
Aside from using this title to historically situate this exhibition in relation to what I view as a watershed event with global implications similar to the fall of the Berlin Wall, I have appropriated this term to explore its utility in the realm of the visual and visual culture. Artworks charm, that is please, attract or fascinate and there are innumerable tomes in art history and criticism about aesthetic pleasure. In the works on view, the experience of visual pleasure leads to a whole range of discourses. A vital tension motivates and animates these selected works with their formally seductive and aesthetically pleasing veneer. Artists employ varying strategies that engage with certain aesthetic conventions and genres such as those of landscape or documentary photography, all the while using them to direct the viewer's attention away from the object and



Rheim Alkadhi, video still from *Iraqi Girl's School*, mixed media installation, 1999

towards something beyond the image. In the modernist canon, that something can often remain elusive, and is purposely held to be positioned outside the realm of language, temporality and politics in its widest sense. In other words, the works seduce in an attempt at transcendence and notions of universality. In contrast, the works here recognize their position as culturally imagined, produced and viewed objects. They use the same or similar conventions of seduction, but more as a means to draw the viewer into the realm of culture, in other words back into the communicative, the temporal, and yes—the charm offensive—even the political.

This exhibition brings together a broad range of works by nine artists all based in Los Angeles. Together they share an acuity to process and an interest in the interweave of history and a sense of place. They use representational strategies which argue that the experience of viewing art work and, by extension, experience itself is mediated.



Steve Appleton, *Face Interleave*, auto-videographic print, 2000

Kim Abeles is widely known for her complex installations and sculptures that straddle both assemblage and conceptual traditions in ways that one commentator describes as combining "anthropological observation and Dadaist humor." The two works in the exhibition are what the artist calls "smog translations" of Asher B. Durand's "The Hunter" and of "The Canal" by Albert Ryder. Abeles created stencil replicas of these paintings and exposed them to the outdoor smog for 30 days, creating a sly likeness that speaks volumes about the dissonance of the romance of nature and its gritty contemporary realities, especially in our fair city infamous for its foul air. This landscape series is part of a larger body of work, "Smog Collectors" which have rendered likenesses of Presidents as well as everyday objects. Initiated in 1991, this series has brought the artist the most media attention.

Those familiar with the better-known discursive work of Kaucyila Brooke may be surprised by the "straight" landscape photographs on display. These are part of a large series, "Burned...", a year-long project documenting the Vermont Canyon of Griffith Park in Los Angeles. In the Fall of 1997, a lightning fire in this canyon was followed by El Niño weather which deluged the region in heavy rains contributing to a voracious and irrepressible regrowth. The resulting



Kaucyila Brooke, *Untitled from the Series, Burned...*, color photograph, 1998-2000



Mark Greenfield, *Bill's Footsteps*, mixed media on paper, 2000

Connie Samaras, *Testing the Minuteman Missile over Los Angeles*, color photograph, 1999



progress. While the color photographs are compelling and suggestive on their own, the images are accompanied by densely informative and allusive text panels. The combination works dialectically: the photos are not mere visual illustrations for the text nor does the text merely inform the images. The juxtaposition of visual documentation and Sekula's speculative and far-ranging writing effectively unsettles any easy verities derived from what is seen in order to provoke closer examination of the given image and text, and beyond.

Modernist paradigms of photographic truth are at once tested and claimed in Connie Samaras' recent color photography. On the one hand, images such as "Testing the Minuteman Missile over Los Angeles" shows her ability to capture in a precise instant a complete composition, in the tradition of "decisive-moment" photography. Samaras is adept at transforming the everyday into vivid scenes that command our attention. The artist has stated her interest in the examination of "the quotidian for social complexity and multiple reality." On the other hand, the images in the exhibit that display the uncanny suggest digital manipulation and the competing realities of cyberspace. It is in this context that these works raise the question of the photographer's relationship to her subjects and the authorial privileging of the photographer. Samaras goes on to say that "looking for 'exoticism' and 'displacement' in my own backyard, these images speak to not only a geological approach to time, as Mike Davis suggests we take in his book, *Ecology of Fear*, but also to the more 'unseen' aspects of the growing intersection of technology with our daily lives." These images unravel slowly to reward close attention with wonder and speculation.



Yong Sin, detail, *Being & Nothingness No. 33*, mixed media painting, 1998

large-scale scenes of this regrowth, taken with a 4X5 field camera portray both the minutiae of detail as well as the sweeping sense of scale and force of nature. Like abstract expressionist paintings, it's easy to become absorbed in the imposing compositional structures and the textural patterns that the artist has framed. In an artist statement about the work, Brooke notes that she "began to think of this park as an extension of the urban transformation found in the endless grid of changing architecture that surrounds the park...[and of the] Los Angeles history [that] changes through constant rewrites and new edits." Landscape here doubles as a surrogate or a prism for the urban and human drama, where a gnarled tree limb assumes human posture and emotion.

The title of Allan Sekula's photo series, "Seventy in Seven" is attributed by Sekula to "left-wing South Korean intellectuals" and is cited in his exhibition book, *Fish Story*, as, "Seventy years in Europe is equal to seven years in Korea." This is also the general view of Korea's economic miracle, that even after the dismal economic plunge of the late 90s and the IMF bailout, Korea bounced back quicker than expected and is now Asia's second largest economy. A recent *LA Times* article about Korea's growing fascination with the Internet referred to two often disparaged Korean traits—impatience and the love of gambling—that are ironically ideal for the plunge into e-commerce and may also be a factor in understanding the accelerated pace of its economy. Sekula's images of a fishing village faced with the encroachment by the nearby Hyundai shipyard of Ulsan are emblematic of this rapid pace of



Allan Sekula, from *Seventy in Seven*, Chapter 4 of *Fish Story*, color photograph, 1993

The atmospheric spectacle which in the days of yore may have been part of the Lucy-in-the-Sky-with-Diamonds haze nowadays takes on an ominous reading, that this residue of some missile safety net may ultimately harm more than protect. Finally, these images are devoid of people, successfully achieving a heightened sense of quotidian alienation and displacement.

A similar sense permeates Joo Kyung Yoon's photographs which depict the artist *with* landscapes almost as backdrop scenery as opposed to being *in* landscapes. Her image, "A Woman with a Red Flag at Monument Valley," recalls a well known one, "Parade - Hoboken, New Jersey" by Robert Frank of a figure standing at a window whose body is partially obscured by the stars and stripes. Frank's photo is B&W and presumably of a captured moment while Yoon's color image seems carefully staged. Both convey an iconic quality perhaps conferred by the signification of a flag. In Yoon's image however, it's not evident what the flag symbolizes or what allegiance the bearer of the flag

holds. The equally iconic and monumental setting of this desert landscape contributes to this sense of alienation. The Asian face revealed in the third image of this triptych becomes the lynchpin for the tension between the landscape and the figure. Like other artists such as Black British artist Ingrid Pollard and Canadian artist, Jin-me Yoon (no relation to Joo Kyung) who have brought to bear the assertion of difference within landscapes inscribed with nationhood and exclusionary patrimony, Joo Kyung Yoon has, with great symbolic eloquence, staked a claim to a land and a place that dares not declare her name.

Rheim Alkadhi presents a sculptural tableau in which a single channel video is a key element. With a meditative and mesmerizing cadence, a slow pan scrutinizes every square inch of photographs of females in school uniform accompanied by an equally-paced audio narration by the artist herself. The photos were taken by her Anglo mother in 1977 in Baghdad, Iraq when teaching at a girl's school in the artist's father's native country. The closely framed images are of a school assembly commemorating the anniversary of the founding of the Arab Socialist Party. The artist has written of this video work that, "I am drawn to them, as strange scopophilial desire once-removed: the place where my mother's eye and the patrilineal Iraqi nation coincide in the nineteen-seventies. I am an observer of my mother's frame of vision, of my symbolic father, of the pictures now in view. I am also aware of the discord I here offer the viewer: what precisely are the politics of eroticizing picture-documents of a pre-war nation?" What indeed. From our vantage point in a nation that continues to impose what many decry to be genocidal sanctions against Iraq and the persistent colonial attitudes regarding Arabs, can Alkadhi's portrait of desire generate more than a tentative link over the profound lacuna that exists between us and them?



Joo Kyung Yoon, from triptych, *A Woman with a Red Flag at Monument Valley*, color photograph, 1996

Mark Greenfield's images attract, then bite. These recent works are from a series of serigraphs and painted photocopy images on paper entitled, "Blackatcha: Behind the Grease Paint and Burnt Cork." We may not recognize the individual faces in the history of blackface minstrelsy, but the "look" has been branded in the American psyche with the legacy of slavery and the relentless currency of black stereotypes. The original images were taken from Greenfield's collection of late nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs of vaudeville and minstrel show performers who characterized blacks as "buffoons and tricksters, as inherently lazy and immoral and perennial children who were dependent on the paternalism of our 'masters' for survival." Mindful of the potency of these images and of the dangers of reiterating and perpetuating these negative stereotypes in his artistic appropriations, Greenfield has manipulated the original images with seductive accents of color and other compositional elements and most powerfully with the playful yet spare use of text that pack a punch. In some images, words are spelled out in descending size as in a vision chart, emphasizing the very act of "reading." The implication being that viewers need to decode or decipher these images, images that cannot and should not be taken at face value. An apt coda is offered in one work: "Authenticity implied, not guaranteed."

The following two artists have in common the deployment of grids with color and pattern as their primary pictorial elements. The importance of scale is a distinguishing feature of Yong Sin's work. Her canvases or wood panels may be of varying size but the figures that populate these bases are tiny. So tiny that you need to get within inches of the work to discern them fully. And then it becomes apparent that the figures, which are collage elements, have no faces. These are people you don't really know but they sure look awfully familiar. It's uncanny what little detail or body gesture is enough to distinguish one from another. These figures tease at our stereotypes. As suggested by the title, "Being and Nothingness" of the work reproduced here, the work operates with vital tension or perhaps duality between anonymity and recognition of the forms. In spite of the labor and patience that is inferred in its production, Yong Sin effectively projects a playful and witty posture in these works.

With this brand new work, Steve Appleton has created an interactive computer projection installation that revels in a dazzling display of faces. Using video technology for capturing images in tandem with pattern matching and recognition programs, faces of viewers in the gallery are captured, ordered and sorted. Viewers engaged in the act of looking at a work placed on a wall become themselves subject to and a subject of the work, thanks to a hidden camera. These "captured" faces are then processed through a complex aforementioned program that the artist himself developed, and finally projected onto a screen in a colorful grid pattern. There is an implication of racial categorization here but one which is determined with apparent "innocence" by each face match to the 256 grayscale tones. Appleton considers this work an experiment in surveillance which raises concerns about the ethics of developing technological applications that produce a semblance of social engineering. This work, as with others in the exhibition, reminds us that there is always an ethical and political dimension to aesthetics, no matter how charmed we may be.

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This exhibition is part of "Fall Exhibition Launch," a collaboration of five Korean galleries in Los Angeles.

The curator gives special thanks to the artists, Director Park and staff of KCCLA, Allan deSouza and IW Design.