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## 'Charm Offensive' at the Korean Cultural Center

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he title for the group exhibition Charin Offensive was, according to curator Yong Soon Min in an accompany-

ing essay, extracted from articles that appeared in the Los Angeles Times this past summer. These articles discussed the unprecedented (in recent times) cordial meeting between North and South Korean leaders. The phrase referred to the radical departure from a hostile presence to the ingratiating posture recently assumed by North Korean diplomats as they court capitalist favors. She compares it to the adage "peace offensive," applied to the Soviet Union's initial, nubile movements toward détente. These points of reference having been clearly marked, Min leaps from international diplomatic maneuverings into art world politics to effectively link the two examples of beguilement by suggesting that Kantian pleasure (a much touted model response to an art encounter) is the result of a charming visual experience.

To further bedevil this telling title, the phrase charm offensive, like peace offensive, brings together two words with contradictory connotations. This formal device, termed "defamiliarization," is an effective poetic and visual strategyideally capturing and holding the attention of an audience. And, amazingly, the artists in this exhibition employ (each in their own way) the device to produce works that, as a result of this common ground, mesh almost seamlessly with the curatorial premise. An example would be Kim Abeles's re-presentation of two landscapes: The Hunter by Asher B. Durand and The Canal by Albert Ryder. This installation is a continuation of Abeles's Smog Collectors series. In this instance she has made stenciled copies of the original paintings and exposed these to smog for thirty days. The result, on uninitiated first take, is an experience of yes, charming, landscape paintings. However, as the narrative that drives the work is revealed, the offensive is divulged. These are wolves in sheep's clothing. The piece evolves into a stinging

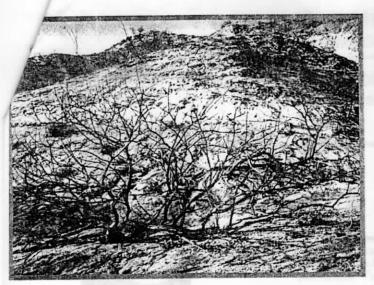
disclosure of the disparity between romance and reality.

Kaucyila Brooke takes another tact. She shows mural-sized landscape photographs. The subject is Vermont Canyon in Griffith Park-an area that burned after a lightning strike in 1997. Brooke has for a year documented the explosive regrowth of vegetation fueled by an ensuing rainy El Niño season. The poetic intimacy and clarity of these seemingly straight recaps of reincarnating natural phenomena is belied by the title of the series: Burned.... She, like Abeles, is charting the reciprocal connection between urbanity and the other by showing a seductive though tenuous natural beauty that, when carefully considered, gives way like a false floor to reveal a view of an animated sprawling grid of city growth.

Several of the artists in this exhibition use figurative visual stratagems to attract engagement with difficult issues. Steve Appleton's complex video presentation involves hidden cameras that film viewers' faces as they look at the show. He screens these images using a self-written program that sorts the portraits using a complex of 256 gray-scale tones and projects each in a grid. The visitor is initially charmed by a view of a colorful selfimage appearing on the monitor but this pleasure quickly dissipates as issues of racial categorization and surveillance become apparent. Also using the soft asymmetry of flesh in contrast to the rigidity of a grid is Yong Sin. Tiny figures are arranged in a pattern across pan-

Mark Greenfield, *Mrs. Dah Point*, 2000, mixed media on paper, at the Korean Cultural Center, Los Angeles.







Left: Kaucyila Brooke, Untitled from the Burned ... series, 1998-2000, photograph; right: Allan Sekula, from Seventy in Seven (Chapter 4 of Fish Story), 1993, photograph, at the Korean Cultural Center, Los Angeles.

els of varying sizes. These project an introductory playfulness in part because of their decorative look but like other works in the show, charm fades as additional information unfolds. Recognition that the figures are faceless and an awareness of the title, Being and Nothingness, rewrites first perception of the rendezvous.

Joo Kyung Yoon, another photographer, combines figure and landscape in elegant images that present an Asian female in a backdrop of the American desert. At first take these photographs seem pleasurable, self-contained and self-referential images. But the details contradict this assumption. In one image the figure is partially obscured by a red flag. The body seems pasted on the background and the red flag is a nonspecific banner. An aura of displacement and alienation overwhelm the formal grace of the image. In a similar manner, each work in Charm Offensive refers back to the premise of the exhibition and augments the other presentations. This is a rare exhibition in which all of the pieces work together to become a single cohesive presentation that is charming on a formal level while offering a rigorous, tough and challenging offensive message.

Korean Cultural Center, Los Angeles. Other artists included in the exhibition were Rheim Alkadhi, Mark Greenfield, Connie Samaras and Allan Sekula.

Charm Offensive closed October 12 at the

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