

Seung Woo Back_Real World

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Toy-town never has a wrong side of the railway tracks. If you choose what to build, you can also choose what to omit.

Seung Woo Back, a young Korean photographer now living in London, has found in AiinsWorld, Seoul, a place which omits on the grand scale. Everything is made to be photographed. Backdrops screen out the contemporary and the real, which might intrude. A whole world of different values is reduced to neutral constructions of zero cultural weight. A stepped pyramid, built for the greater display of human sacrifice, has precisely the same weightless presence as the Opera Garnier or the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Cleanliness and order reign. These are models in the ideological sense, too.

There are layers and layers of complexity here. You do not need to be a botanist to see that Korean vegetation, even when controlled as severely as on a golf course, looks odd at Mount Rushmore. Is that a giant bonsai outside the opera? At this scale, fact gets in the way. High above the Tibetan lamasery you can just make out the shadow of King Kong on the Empire State Building; King Kong, himself a giant model. What is happening when the big little skyscraper has a little big ape at its peak? And what is this whirligig collision whereby junks from the waterfront at Hong Kong have reached the foot of Manhattan, and St. Basil's Cathedral is built in the shadow of Ayer's Rock?

Seung Woo Back has refused to photograph this place as it was intended to be photographed. A steady even light flattens the model buildings and makes them share some of the insubstantiality of their own backdrops. By consistently looking from the 'wrong' angle, he has committed an act of mild rebellion. By avoiding the crowds who surely throng the place he has neatly sidestepped the temptation to be snide or condescending about the customers. Above all, the sureness of his composition stands as an unspoken rebuke to AiinsWorld's prepared angles.

To a well-advised and sceptical photographer, there is scope at AiinsWorld for charm and amusement. Seung Woo Back has indeed made delightfully light play of it all. Just see how easy it was (in spite of generations of worry) to put a stable concrete base under the Leaning Tower. Let's laugh at transposed geography and back-stage views, by all means. But Seung Woo Back's utter seriousness should not be missed under this wit. In a world where the heritage industry has become big business, this kind of aseptic travel-without-travel represents one kind of norm. Is AiinsWorld less informative than a whistle-stop bus tour of a wholly alien environment? It is frightening and expensive to travel, and the AiinsWorld (slogan: 'Enjoy a New World in a Day!') makes chilling sense. By reporting so coolly from AiinsWorld, Seung Woo Back has in fact neatly squared a circle. He has travelled to the home of non-travel and come back with a wonderful set of travel pictures.