Rules of Disturbing Beauty

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The grandiose title "Real World" is given to photographs of curious miniature buildings at a theme park and toy soldiers placed on a quiet road-side. The game of Seung Woo Back begins as he names his pictures of fake models a "Real World." So what is the real world? The game, which commences as we look at the photographs, seems to have obscure rules and traps set here and there, leaving us with no clues how to understand it. While the photographs are placed in well-organized compositions with stability, the images they contain are unreal and surreal. *signifieds* float within the images and the meanings are busy spitting out their individual voices unilaterally, unable to establish communication. In short, his photographs are like joints with unfitting components. Set forth as a premise is the contradictory disposition of stability and instability between the composition of images and composing elements, and this leads spectators to a game of confusion going back and forth from the worlds of reality to non-reality. Here, confusion is not simply a combination of stages that mixes models and the real things, but an entrance to another world to which different rules apply. A game is usually thought to be something that replaces and organizes the disturbed reality with its exact rules, but that is only a fantasy. The game, which starts with such fantasy, requires choices combined with precise judgement and perception, due to the elaborately established game rules. Back's *Real World* also consists of confusing images composed with minuteness according to his own laws as if it were a sort of game. The viewer goes along with his traps and rules, but ultimately comes to enjoy the game with his/her own judgements and choices. That is the charm of looking at his photographs, made up of chaos and beauty.

The Impure Image

Seung Woo Back plays games with photographs, but humbly follows the rules when it comes to the medium of photography itself. He creates a photographic mise en scene through use of large-format cameras, long time exposure, large-sized images, perfect control of tones that do not miss any details, etc. Particularly, the super-size photographs he displays in this solo exhibition strongly reveal the artist's fetishistic tendency towards photographs. His serious attitude towards photography provides visual pleasure and temporary sense of stability by presenting the code of photographic beauty in the forefront of the image, prior to entering the game of disturbance. Such sense of stability seems to fool the viewers for a moment to put their mind at ease, but eventually throws them back into confusion due to the obscurity of the image and the original devices of the photograph, in which fantasy and reality are hard to determine. The transparency which seems to depict reality as it is, makes the elements of non-reality, non-time, mixed-up spaces, etc. held by the

subjects that appear in the *Real World*, look like they are real, consequently blurring the borders of reality and unreality within the picture-plane. The artist approached photography with purity, however, since photography itself is an impure medium, the game of confusion was already scheduled. That is because photography holds a dilemma that the higher the level of technical completion, the more room for confusion within the image. If so, what are the rules that are not revealed in his game? Let us look for some of his rules that are set like riddles or traps, beginning from his basic pictorial composition.

Placement of the Near and Far
The historical Korean "turtle ships" float on the water with the London Bridge in the background, the World Trade Center, which fell on 9.11, still stands, and the San Marco Plaza strangely neighbors U. S. skyscrapers. The Eiffel Tower of Paris and the Statue of Liberty in New York City appear in the same space, and the Seoul Metropolitan Loop Highway passes behind the Leaning Tower of Pisa. At this point, the spectator notices that everything is false. Decisively, the view of apartment buildings of a newly developed housing district in the background of the Loop Highway, which passes through the picture plane, makes the entire picture surreal, as it creates discordance with the buildings in the foreground. The mixed-up subjects disturb the order of time and space, however, the composition of Back's picture-plane takes a stable form according to linear perspective.

   In *Real World 1* the hybridity of mixed cultures of Korea is shown in visualized images, displaying visual contrasts according to the sense of distance. While the urban landscapes of Korea are composed stably with a carefully considered the focal depth of field, medium-range tones and linear perspective, the elements within the picture consist of images that symbolize confusion due to desire for or complex about Western culture, faultiness of the rapid economic growth in Korea, multi-cultural phenomena linked to the wave of globalization, etc. At a glance, the picture looks beautiful and peaceful, but inside, the buildings are all jumbled and the order of time and space are broken down. If we look into the *Real World 1* series, in the close range are mostly miniatures of Western architecture, while in the long distance are newly built Korean apartment buildings. The distance between the two categories of objects are as distant as the cultural difference between Korea and the West. Desire for Westernization is evident throughout various places in Korean visual culture, and this is portrayed as visual symbols in the form of crude and faulty kitsch, distorted by cultural inferiority complex. The models of world-famous architecture in Aiins World(A miniature theme park in Bucheon, Gyeonggido of Korea, which features 109 famous structures of 25 different countries in the world reduced to 1/25 scale.) also appear as visual embodiments of mimicry of the West. Mimicry is something that comes from the inferiority complex of the colonized subject. It is the psychology of the Other, who wants to

be like the subject of the West. But following and copying does not enable one to take the form of the Western subject. Mimicry is a partial achievement, and a gesture that merely takes after the exterior in a light, clumsy and vulgar fashion, inevitably bringing inner conflict. Our gaze that wants to be like those of the West begins with the faultiness of the model buildings in the foreground, and emerges as undeniable reality as we face the uniformity of the apartment buildings made of barren concrete material in the far distance. Our cultural identity wanders and floats between the nearby models of world-famous architectural sites and the far away densely populated apartment complexes in reality. Seung Woo Back places the buildings in the foreground and background of the frame with minute calculation, and it is in the space between these two areas that he throws to us the game of finding our positions of identity.

The Invisible Gaze
In the question of identity presented by Seung Woo Back , the focus of discussion is not on the state or nation. To the artist, who studied and has worked in the West, the terms of "Korea" and "Korean" are titled and imprinted on him whether he likes it or not. Back uses such signifieds in his works, not as absolute elements of identity, but as something that automatically follows the course of introducing the socio-cultural phenomena of Korea. The toy soldiers that appear in *Real World 2* reflect the thoughts of Westerners who link Korea with wars, but are not Back's intention to touch upon the issue of identity politically or ideologically.   His interest lies not in the abstract concept of state or nation, but the appearance of subjects within the actual phenomena of contemporary society, culture and politics, and in the search for the position of himself inside that society. Seung Woo Back experiences shocking scenes of cultural clash and conflict every day, and metaphorically portrays this situation in *Real World 2*.   In the photograph, the soldiers enter the housing area quietly and secretly like invaders. The invasion, which takes place during the peaceful and retired time from around midnight to daybreak, seems to be trying not to interfere with the order of the given space, undertaking the operation silently and privately. As the soldiers are so small, they are easily missed if one does not pay attention, however, the space of daily life seems strange and gigantic thanks to their presence. With the invasion of the miniature troops, the image escapes from the real world and is turned into a non-realistic space. The camera gazes upon the soldiers that infiltrate the strange environment as invaders. However, there is another omnipotent gaze which dominates the entire picture-plane. This gaze is hidden, and is separated from the perspective of the camera as well, like the gazes of the spectators of a movie. That could be called the power of the media, which reminds us of our cultural situation—controled by the gaze of the Western subject—and brings confusion between our daily lives and virtual reality. Whatever that is, Seung Woo Back assumes an omnipotent gaze within the

picture-plane to incapacitate the individual's will and transform the world of reality into a virtual space. It is like the panopticon structure, which was used to control prisoners in the 18th century. In other words, the surveillance tower in the center is hidden in the darkness and cannot be seen but can see everything, and the cells circling it are exposed to the light so that they can be controlled and monitored. It is in the same context as the role of the "moon" in the film *Truman Show*, where the moon is the control room. The question raised here is "What is 'Real'"? The limits of one seeing with his/her eyes, and the controlling eyes, which one is unaware of turn the reality into a virtual world. In such non-realistic space, the game of disturbance continues, as we ask "Who am I?", "What am I seeing?" and "Is the world I live the real world?"

Talking Back

Consequently, the ultimate destination in Back's game is the issue of one's identity in a reality, which seems unreal. However, the artist does not deal with the issue of identity that is introspective and burrows into oneself, but attempts to visualize the reality of the subjects connected to vivid cultural, social, political and economical phenomena through photography. Such awareness has formed the major framework of his work, and is evident in his other series called *Blow Up*, as well as *Real World 1* and *2*. Interestingly, his attitude of dealing with a clearly consistent theme is not so serious. A socio-cultural approach towards the issue of identity can be heavy and trite, however, Back's method of dealing with the issue is quite cynical. First, the fact that most of the subjects of the photographs are fake models is presented in the forefront. His strategy is not to be truthful, not to be heavy, not to look straight, but to say things in an awry way. Such cynical attitude corresponds with the method that contemporary intellectuals use to critically write back or talk back to the central authority. To Back, the photograph is neither a record of serious history, nor a manifestation of sublime beauty. Furthermore, even though he follows the rules of the photographic medium loyally and completely, he refrains from expressing transcendental artist-spirit based on subjective emotions. He looks at the subject with the attitude of a researcher, and produces sensualized knowledge through his photography. Contemporary knowledge is expanding to ways of thinking and talking, and is no longer confined to positive academics. Such forms of knowledge have led to criticism of established knowledge structures of the West. Photographs have also emerged as sensualized knowledge of the contemporary age. Contemporary photography is no longer something that relies on intuition and private experiences, but has come to illuminate the legitimacy of how the photograph medium should be linked to a cultural-critical perspective. Thus, photography is combined with the perspective of reflecting on society and culture through a certain long-term research project. Such types of work have been carried out by

contemporary Korean photographers. Seung Woo Back also takes the approach as a cultural critic, who talks back to the disturbed contemporary Korean society through his photography, with a self-examining perspective towards our society and culture.