

Seung Woo Back “Real World”

Anne Tucker

At a time when art critics are questioning the importance of national identities in contemporary art, Korean photographer Seung Woo Back has found a physical place that embodies the blurring of cultural boundaries and provides him a venue for pondering issues of both individual and cultural identity. A component of his complex series *Real World* is his photographs of the Ains World theme park in Seoul, which advertises that it can take visitors around the world in a single day and allows them to pose for snapshots at sites they may otherwise never visit. The sites, however, are reconstructed in detailed miniature versions. Back’s straightforward photographs of Ains World resemble post card views of world-renown architectural landmarks, but they also show how the theme park has taken dramatic liberties with the buildings. Here, the World Trade Towers, the Chrysler Building and the Brooklyn Bridge are now contiguous and there are Korean turtle warships, not tugboats or ferries sailing in the adjacent river. Back’s photographs heighten the park’s liberties with space and time. In clear, deep-space detail he records a “reality” that is disturbing in its compression of cultural heritage and stylistic periods. His perspectives align the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower and place Paris’s Notre Dame and Kuala Lumpur’s Petronas Towers in the same skyline. Seeing the world’s tallest building in miniature is amusing, but also disconcerting. The buildings are stripped of their original cultural context and reduced to being checkmarks in tourists’ itineraries.

In contrast to the theme park’s celebration of iconic architecture, Seoul’s real architecture, visible in the background of many of Back’s photographs, appears unremarkable and indistinguishable from that of other modern Western cities. The only distinctive Asian elements in these pictures are the park’s landscaping and the woven grass fences that separate displays as well as the names painted in Korean on a street-facing wall of Seoul’s buildings. Not only do the apartment houses and office towers convey nothing specific about life in Seoul or about Korean culture, but also these images show no signs of life: no people, cars, litter or billboards. Seoul is portrayed in crystalline detail, but little is revealed to differentiate it from other cities around the world with which it shares aspirations for economic growth and the appearance of global assimilation.

The second component of the “Real World” series records scenes that Back stages with toy soldiers invading private and public spaces. The figures march beside streets, across lawns, and line up on a kitchen window sill, where people inside are engaged in quiet domestic activities and seem unaware of pending threat. Again Back plays with scale. The toy soldiers are miniature, but powerfully evocative of the presence and the memory of war. In this case, the

memory of war is what concerns him the most. As a Korean in the West, he is repeatedly encounters people whose primary association with Korea is the Korean civil war of the 1950s --- people who know nothing of the country's ancient history or its more contemporary developments, aside from some of its exported consumer goods. Thus, this second segment of the *Real World* series also deals with issues of identity, but instead of cultural and economic identity issues, he addresses the indelible link that can be forged between a country and a specific war.

Like many Korean artists of his generation, Back studied art in Korea and abroad, receiving a graduate degree from Middlesex University in London. In a recent artist statement he described himself as "a dreamer endlessly floating in my own distorted world" and acknowledged that the *Real World* series "began with this disoriented view of the world." His approach has been to make pictures of fake realities and title them "real worlds." But as every dreamer knows, the merging of discordant images may seem more real than the apparent real world. In cool, dispassionate, finely executed photographs, Seung Woo Back conjures his own new reality and uses it to question, and challenge, modern perceptions of cultural and personal identity.