

Art

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Sung Hwan Kim
installation view

Sung Hwan Kim

Tate Modern London 18 July to 28 October

Sung Hwan Kim was obsessed with maths as a child. He speaks of his fascination with the language of maths and its ability to operate as a narrative that draws exclusively on logic and aesthetics. This seems mostly to relate to the notion of proving: something that is not commonly associated with the arts, which are usually considered to have a greater founding in subjectivity and speculation than evidence and empiricism. But Kim explains that 'proving is a story, but it's not a story based on drama, it's a story based on logic and rules'.

This expresses an important factor in Kim's working methods. His work is about experimentation and exploration. Using the structure of logic and rules, repeated motif and metaphoric imagery, Kim pushes his audience into a totally unexpected experience of narrative, avoiding drama altogether. This Korean artist, living and working in New York, moved into performance and video art after having attended a class by the legendary Joan Jonas. Before this, maths, architecture and engineering dominated his ambitions. He is most forthcoming about explaining how he believes these interests translate so directly to the act of making art and his work seems even more ready to make these translations. Kim is essentially an abstract storyteller whose work flits between poetics, visual metaphor, the structures of loaded gestures and loaded imagery.

In Kim's current installation in Tate Modern's brand new oil tank spaces, he uses the vast, eerie chasm of the East Tank as a sort of allegorical Plato's cave of intrigue; a mystifying space in which to present a series of different narrative experiments, all disparate yet all intricately interwoven. Entering the East Tank, one can see almost nothing. The darkness is all-consuming, accentuated by the extreme brightness of the sporadically arranged pinpoints of light coming from intermittent video works. Strange lights and shapes are dotted around the space which upon further inspection transpire to be plywood screens, sculptures and objects concealing bulbs pressed against sheets

of reflective material in their folds. These cast rainbows across the floor and walls around them. Tinsel curtains adorn far-off corners and the whole space feels dangerous and unfamiliar. More plywood has been worked into bizarre seating arrangements and obstacles, some placed in front of videos, others in patches of darkness separated from the gravitational pull of specific works. These inexplicable trip hazards are felt on top and have gradients or steps that invite interaction. Kim directs you with just about enough guidance through the space using carpeted areas and the glare of the coloured bulbs to advise you where to stand, sit or walk until your eyes fully adjust.

The centrepiece of the installation is Kim's latest filmic project *To Temper Clay*, 2012. Taking its title from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the video is projected on a large frameless screen in the centre of the space. *To Temper Clay* explores a dual landscape, jumping between the artist's family Hyundai apartment (*hyundai* meaning modern in Korean) in central Seoul and a country home. The piece is narrated from the perspective of Kim's nanny, when she was 17 and new to the position in the 1970s. As with all of Kim's works, these elements create points of reference within a vast web of social, political and historical citation. This web is developed, according to Kim, through an interest in history propagated by family experience. Through the distorted voice-over of the nanny and cutaway shots of ritualistic actions – a hand mops up a spillage in a circular motion, a boy swings a burning can on a chain – Kim explains to his audience the significance of property to the turbulent past of Seoul.

Kim worked on the soundtrack collaboratively with the US composer and musician David Michael DiGregorio (*dogr*) using avant-garde techniques to create a score of both music and ambient sound. This soundtrack was layered and cut into the video footage as it was edited, so that a lively and dynamic dialogue emerges between the visual and aural elements of the piece. The film is shot in black and white, which compliments the nostalgic nature of its narrative, yet this is immediately undermined by the crispness of its high-definition production, which seems hyperreal in the monochromatic darkness of the space.

Other pieces that punctuate the echoing East Tank are the visceral *Washing Brain and Corn*, 2010, *Dog Video*, 2006 – in which Kim disciplines a dog played by his aforementioned musical collaborator *dogr* – and *From The Commanding Heights*, 2007. The latter is shown in a screening room with a separate entrance to the main installation. A darkened glass window makes it easy for those viewing *From The Commanding Heights* to observe the main room, while those in the main room can only see obscured shapes moving behind the glass.

The whole installation is analogous to this one-way glass: Kim presents us with an awareness of the larger picture but only allows us to view the finite elements which he deems most beautiful and significant. Kim has transformed the East Tank into a seemingly endless landscape of illusion and mystery that creates a hunger for more that cannot be satiated even by multiple visits. ■

NICHOLAS WARNER is a curator and writer.

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