



Sung Hwan Kim Queens Museum of Art New York

Breathy and quasi-confessional modes of address have been a constant in video art since the late 1960s. Sung Hwan Kim's work is indebted to this heritage, and particularly to his mentor Joan Jonas, notably in his poetry-infused exploration of the self as a fulcrum for politics and personhood. But he pushes beyond that tradition with ambulatory and fragmented spoken narratives that encompass strains of fantasy, magic realism, science fiction and tongue-in-cheek ethnography. In the latter sense, Kim's work parallels contemporaries such as Ben Rivers, Charlie Tweed, The Otolith Group and Pablo Pijnappel (to name a few), but his work is also close to the shaggy-dog aesthetic of Laure Prouvost and the newly popular-again John Smith. Now based in New York, Kim has recently exhibited at the 5th Berlin Biennale in 2008 and Manifesta 8 in 2010–11.

For his exhibition 'From the Commanding Heights...' at the Queens Museum of Art, Kim installed plinths, panels of tinsel and little squares of green and white bunting strung above projections of two of his video works. Chalked onto the walls were outlines of trees, which seemed to operate as eldritch logos for Kim's organic working process. *Dog Video* (2006) was made in Amsterdam and bounces back and forth between memories of his time there and his former home in South Korea. Kim tells us in clipped stanzas: 'Also there in my old house I had a dog / This dog it died bitten by another dog of ours / There I had a dog who didn't like me / I made him sleep with me.' Two men sit in an apartment with tall Dutch gables, wearing masks and engaging in a slumberous series of manoeuvres suggesting dominance, homoeroticism and bestiality.

Rather longer and more substantial, *From the Commanding Heights...* (2007) features a narrative based on a rumour about the machinations of a South Korean dictator of the late 1970s (presumably the then military

ruler, General Park Chung-hee), who would regularly turn off the power to an entire neighbourhood so that he could visit his mistress under the cover of darkness. Kim's family lived in these apartments too, and his mother recalls secret agents coming to her door intimidating her to silence. Framing this narrative is another about a protean female who may or may not be the dictator's mistress: she is variously a famous actress living in the apartment block, a woman with an ear on her head (it fills with water when it rains), and a woman whose throat is filled with snakes (she bites their heads off, but the bodies remain lodged). Kim appears on camera as storyteller, filmed from beneath a transparent surface on which he sketches outlines of snakes, trees and rain showers onto sheets of clear acetate.

It's all very charming. On the flip side, wistful dreaminess can easily be read as belaboured quirkiness, which can be irksome. Certainly, a tendency towards self-indulgence shadows these videos' rambling any-old-bits-of-footage permissiveness: for example, *From the Commanding Heights...* features about 15 minutes of shaky recordings of nothing much (a cake shop, a hyena in a zoo), and an obvious devotional segue to Jonas' *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972). However, for me, these aspects are offset by moments of sheer inventiveness. Kim unfurls intertitles onto the screen using his fingers (and mouth), intercuts underexposed and overexposed footage, and deploys vertiginous camera angles (in *Dog Video*, the camera is positioned at floor level as if we are spying from some hidden vantage point.) Also impressive are the insistent musical soundtracks by Dogr (a.k.a. David Michael DiGregorio), a New York-based musician whose plaintive ballads compliment Kim's flights of visual experimentation. So long as he steers beyond his doubtful tendencies of kookiness and durational excess, Kim's videos promise to inject some new life into the venerable tradition of first-person experimental moving-image work.

Colin Perry

Sung Hwan Kim
'From the Commanding Heights of the Earliest Natural Fortification to the Architectonic Innovations of the Watch Tower the Development of Observation Balloons Satellites Surveillance there has been No End to the Enlargement of Field of Perception Whether I Know You or not Matters Less than How You Appear to the Objective Eye'

2011
Installation view