

Kim Joon at Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Korean artist Kim Joon has an enduring interest in the idea of hidden desires. He regards the tattoo expressed on the body's surface as a metaphor or symbol for a deeper aspiration or sentiment, which is clear in the works that make up his show entitled *Tattoo and Taboo*.

Using animation photography Kim makes templates of three-dimensional human figures, which he then embellishes with bright tattoo designs. The tattoos and various skin tones are grafted on to his digital bodies; the resulting work is presented either as a piece of

video art or large-scale digital photograph. Born in Seoul in 1966, Kim Joon's work has a particular resonance in Korea where tattoo art is illegal. As a result there is a deep taboo at the heart of his practice.

There is a striking visual quality to Kim's work that owes a great debt to his training as a painter. His compositions often condense several bodies into one picture plane and focus only on one section. The result is a sea of barely identifiable body parts, whether arms and legs, or torsos and thighs. Kim cultivates his carefully composed pieces with vivid color schemes

and magnified sections of skin. Closer inspection reveals incongruity: for instance, male skin complete with hair is grafted onto a slim female calve.

Kim's enduring interest in tattoo and taboo began prior to his art career when he served in the Korean military for three years. Tattoos have long been associated with servicemen; they provide a means for self-expression in a culture where individuality and personal desire are repressed. Having adorned several of his friends with homemade tattoos using a needle and Chinese ink, Kim extended the practice into his art. Prior to the technique the artist employs today, Kim made replicas of tattooed body parts from latex and sponge.

The cultivation of a contemporary digital practice has extended Kim's work, allowing him to emphasize the body as an extension of the canvas. His sections of bodies are always shown flat, thus drawing parallels between traditional forms of human expression on the painted canvas and self-expression on the body via tattoo art. Furthermore, the use of digital technology heightens the potency of the issue of the tattoo in Korea. No one in Kim Joon's artworks is real, no one bears a tattoo, and no one tattoos another in accordance with South Korean legislation. Instead he adorns anonymous digital models.

Since 2005, Kim has in-

corporated brands and logos into his tattooed surfaces, drawing attention to the way in which consumer culture affects individuality and identity. By appropriating motifs and images from fashion and popular culture, Kim cultivates a narrative about our globalized age. Works incorporating luxury fashion branding start to resemble advertisements; bodies become billboards for a corporate brand, drawing attention to the blurred line between high art and luxury goods. By using well-known icons of sport, fashion, and power, he shows cultural consumerism to be a form of social tattooing.

By appropriating these predominantly Western brands and fusing them with Asian decorative motifs, Kim Joon also tackles a predominant theme in contemporary Korean art, the fusion of Western and Eastern concepts and aesthetics. By expressing the meeting of the two cultures in the form of skin tattoos, he demonstrates the repressed underlying tensions of the relationship. However, his work is not simply a critique of the West: in many senses Kim brilliantly straddles both cultures. Twenty-first century trends and pop culture feed his work, and though informed by strong Eastern elements, it is compelling in its unique contemporary technique.

Kate Bryan

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