

POP Magazine Issue 27
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NEW MODEL ARMOUR

Sui He photographed
by Viviane Sassen



THE WARRIOR ISSUE

Deep & High with
POP icon Tina Turner

+

Art's Great Warriors:
Yayoi Kusama, Koo Jeong-A
& Sarah Lucas

+

The cult return of
Bernadette Corporation



POP ART – KOO JEONG-A



Words
JESSICA BRADBURY

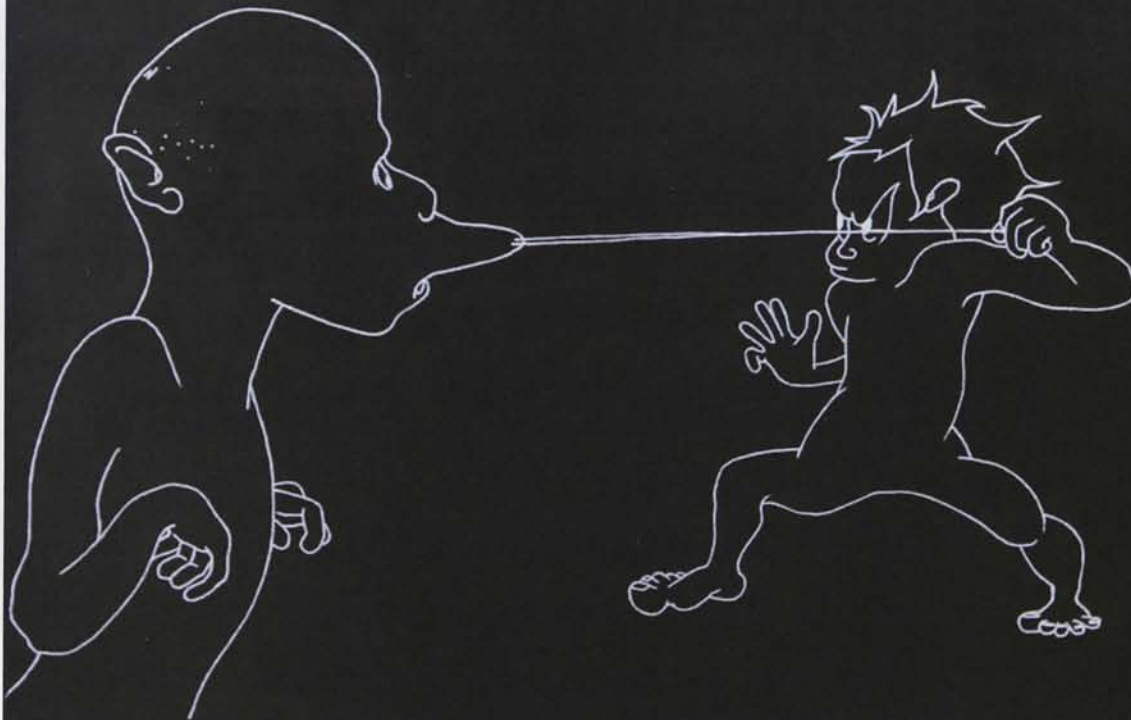
(Anti-clockwise)
Koo Jeong A
Mountain Fundamental, 2009
Tree in polyurethane,
motor

Untitled, 2005-2006
Mothball

Ki In Sang Bong, 2012
pencil drawing on the paper.

(Overleaf)
Series of drawings taken
from Dr. Vogt, 2010





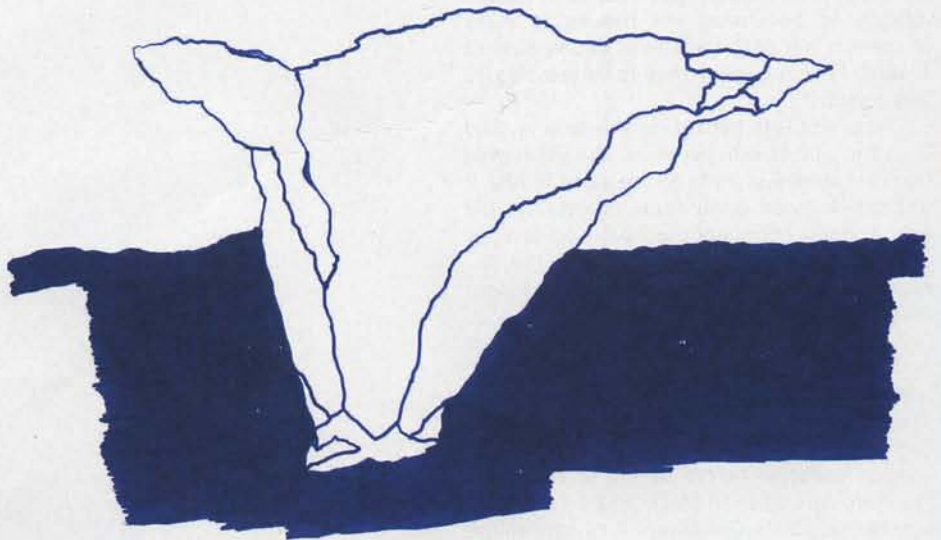
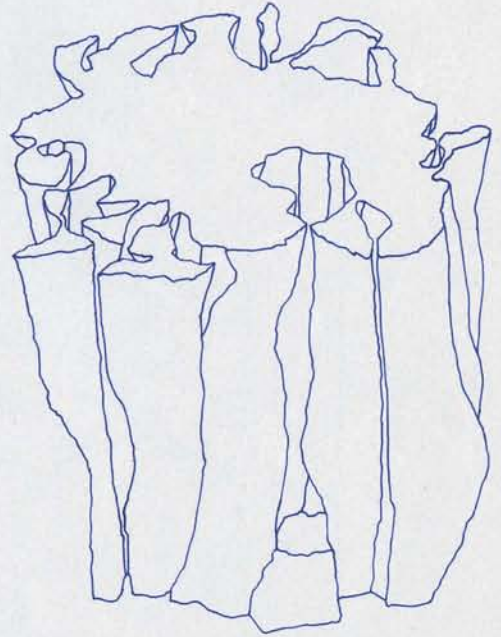
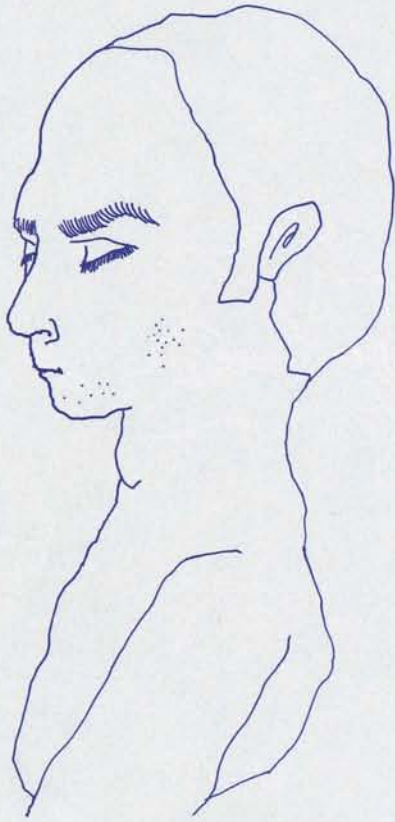
Koo Jeong-A is a reluctant interviewee. This should not endear her to an interviewer and yet somehow it does. Everything about her is understated. She wears jeans and an old green T-shirt, sits incredibly still, listens intently to questions, but replies to many of them in her soft voice with strong Korean accent, "I don't think that is interesting to talk about."

Yes, Koo lets her art do the talking. And from the tiniest whisper when she graduated from art school in Paris in the early 1990s, it has grown to be quite some chatter. As her first London show approaches, Koo already has MOMA, the Pompidou Centre, the Dia foundation and many other international landmarks under her belt.

Her London gallerist is Pilar Corrias. A force of nature in herself. She is stylish and eloquent and more convincing about her stable of artists than most of the new breed. But then she put in many years at major London galleries before daring to set up on her own. She started three and a half years ago with a single Christmas Tree by Phillippe Parreno as her first show.

"I put all my money into this one piece and I absolutely had to sell it if the gallery was to continue."





It is therefore unsurprising that Pilar and Koo are a good match. They may be Yin and Yang in personality but their strength of will is the same.

Pilar has a wonderful analogy to describe Koo's work:

"It's a bit like when you go into a dark room. At first you don't see anything, then you let your eyes adjust and you see lots of objects in the room."

For Example Koo's installation at the Hispanic Society at Dia looked like an empty room on first entering. The floor was painted pink and the walls were white. Then suddenly a visitor would notice small steps going down into the floor. Koo's hand made spider webs in the corners and the smell of a forest wafting through the air.

"It's like science fiction to me," says Pilar. "Suddenly this room that looked like nothing became completely alive. Like discovering a different planet."

Koo's work can almost be compared to cosmology. A giant emptiness can suddenly become endlessly fascinating, with the tiniest details giving clues to a still unknowable wider universe. She loves to play with scale, making huge versions of small things such as a moth ball, making tiny details hugely important to a large space. She made 'mountains' from dust she had collected ten years previously for her recent, striking Dusseldorf show. For many the work has a fairy tale quality. Pilar imagines tiny elves going down the steps in Dia's Constellation Congress. For Koo, the big picture may remain mysterious but there is nothing left to chance.

"My position on my work has to be very clear but people see what they want to see and I want them to discover something for themselves."

Few artists work with all the senses in the way Koo does. She uses smell to great effect through her work with perfumer, Bruno Jovanovic. As Koo's work is so much about perception and memory this is an intense and ingenious addition as smell is so linked to feelings of nostalgia. Just the smell of the forest from Constellation Congress can recreate the whole magical world again in one's mind. It's all a kind of seduction. It pulls you in slowly and captivates. She worked on an opera by Phillippe Parreno and Hans Ulrich Obrist in Basel to which artists such as Carsten Holler, Douglas Gordon and Tacita Dean contributed performances. Koo's performance involved creating large trees that shook in the wind on stage and through the darkness the smell of the trees was blown across the audience. She is surely something of a magician this unassuming Korean.



Koo is interested in philosophy from Taoism to the French philosophers she read at university. But even Koo's personal philosophy is fairly opaque. Could there be a leaning towards constructivism? Koo will not be drawn on this. Pilar describes it in this way:

"She deals with the every day, the world around us. She uses materials that anyone could get hold of. It's fragile and intellectual. It addresses what it means to look at an object and makes you question what it means to experience an artwork. And your relationship to the world. You have to be aware."

So what exactly is this art? Where does it come from? Where does it fit in?

Koo denies vehemently that she is a part of any 'art movement'. It's intriguing to learn that she feels invisible in the Western world and is most comfortable that way. The work too seems to have an emotional remoteness. There seems to be a certain loneliness to these uninhabited worlds. Even Koo's favourite pass-times are fairly solitary. She likes to swim and draw every day. She does acupuncture and magnetic healing and is very in touch with her own energies.

Pilar can place her in the contemporary art world by explaining that she fits in just from her surroundings with Rirkrit Tiravanija and Philippe Parreno and Douglas Gordon.

"I would say she essentially has two identities. On one side she's part of this generation of mid career artists who started going outside the studio, working with the real world. Her practice is in the same vein as these. But she has this other identity in the fact that she's Korean. There's a kind of meditative aspect to the work, which I think

(Above)
Installation view
Mountain Fundamental, 2009
Tree in polyurethane, motor

(Opposite)
Installation view
Dr. Vogt, 2010

comes from her Asian background. A lot of Korean art today is very sensational and her work doesn't really fit in with the best-selling Korean art of the moment. She's quite an anomaly and yet there's still something very Korean about her."

Growing up, she liked both Korean and Western art and cherished her books on both. She describes the first time she came to Europe and saw the paintings from her books for the first time: "Seeing the colours of the expressionist paintings was a revelation. They seemed more dramatic in the book. They were darker, not so bright. And the first time I saw a Mondrian I was shocked that the lines weren't perfectly straight. I could see his hand, how he had created the work."

And for her next trick? Koo's first London show opens at Pilar Corrias in October and she's going to make the gallery shake. Visitors will walk in and think the gallery is empty. A big white room with nothing in it. Then having spent some time there they will realize that the walls are shaking intermittently. These walls will essentially be very minimal white paintings.

Koo Jeong-A is a fascinating artist and long may she remain reticent and mysterious and unique in this world. Somehow through the hustle and bustle of flashing neons and spot paintings and balloon dogs, her quiet voice is reaching an ever-growing audience. An audience prepared to slow down and look and listen and smell a whole new world.

