

TUSSLE

review by Calla Bai, July 3, 2024

Sunlight diffuses gently inward, but it's enough to pierce red through my eyelids. They flutter and shudder open to find that I've kicked half the sheet off the bed, the rest has embossed my skin with its crinkly folds. I like to try to remember my dreams at this moment – meeting an old friend, spontaneous visions of things I read or saw awake but didn't fully process, sometimes flying, being chased by a monster unseen and unvoiced. But the memories are far from clear, rather they are shrouded in the sleep that lingers in my eyes and head, or strung through a tight neck or knotted back if the dreams were of a more anxious variety.

A haze of light lures one into *Memories, veiled*, an exhibition of photographs by Sun Young Kang at Yi Gallery in Brooklyn. It's the same haze that leaks into your sleep, causing you to press your feet into the ground of your dreams before pushing gently off, drifting to the coldness of reality until the world left behind is but a kite with uncatchable tails. Kang masterfully harnesses such sensations with white organza, a soft and transparent fabric that fills the small sixth-floor space in Industry City, a large business complex in Sunset Park. The fabric obscures all but four photographs; several are tautly wrapped, with the excess uncomfortably bunched and pressed between the dark frames and the wall. Others are separated and surrounded by long loose curtains, forcing you to win their clarity by obscuring the world from which you came. These works are inlaid to deep wooden frames, and painted with a stain mixed to match the darkest shade of black in the photographs. But just as the darkness seeps outside of the picture plane into their materiality, so too does the light.

Taken at Yaddo, a famed artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, the photographs depict doorways, windows, bookshelves, and countertops covered in white sheets. The sheets, both virtual and present, are one of a series of gestures Kang has made to her mother throughout her career, this time as an exploration of the alienation caused by her onset of Alzheimer's during the pandemic. Most of them are only partially visible – the frames are more like boxes, in which Kang bends the photographs so that only certain passages, like a single window or shadow, are pressed up against the taut organza for our ease of viewing. The rest trails off deeper into the frame, and thus too an indistinguishable glow. Kang's background in bookmaking distances this show of photographs from the flatness of photography; the mutability of their surfaces allows for her manual vignetting of what we are licensed to see.

Some photographs are suspended on wires, floating around eye level over a few square feet of ground quarantined by the sheer fabric. As they are enveloped in the fabric, Kang no longer selects what we may see clearly, rather it is up to us to fumble to find the break that might allow us some relief from the hospital-like privacy curtains. They quietly turn as if by some ghost, or perhaps the air conditioner.

Her large installation work, *Within the void: reaching for memories III*, is the most striking of the show, as the organza separates the viewer from what otherwise appears to be the only typically installed room. There are no more frames suspended in mid-air or works tucked into sheets, just photographs on the walls with the curtains falling between us. The pictures are barely visible, and the viewing is vexing. As the vinyl lettering on the ground spelling out “Please do not touch” suggests, we are not invited to look closely, thoroughly, or scrutinizingly as most other exhibitions would; instead, a rippling moire emerges where the waves of the drapes overlap. The fineness of the mesh is amplified by its interference with our vision. I find myself mesmerized and already forgetful of what photograph I saw prior. In all the self-activation required by the sheets, Kang collapses our bodies with hers as she walks through Yaddo, pushing aside dusty sheets while focusing her camera with singularity. She also collapses our minds with her mother’s, as frustration rises while we venture into the haze.

Despite the primacy of photographs and drama of exhibition design, *Memories, veiled* does not work toward the ends of immortalization; there is no epistemic play or fiction to distinguish it. It is, however, generous in its invitation. Kang shares with us not only her sense of frustration and grief but also the anguish and isolation of her late mother. Its resonance makes known our collective anxieties and beckons the release of our untraceable dreams into the light.