

**Interni Magazine**  
**October 2003**  
**No. 535**

**Do-Ho Suh**

Is the home a habitat or a habit (garment)? For Do-Ho Suh it's a second skin, soft and transparent, explicitly sensual and seductive. It's a double defense, a place in which to live and move, but also to establish a relationship of fantasy with one's identity. Something that represents profound possession, regarding memory as much as the present, for an epidermic translation of the darkest messages of being. His 'homes', that of Seoul or that of New York, express a cutaneous condition through the splendor of diaphanous material, silk and translucent nylon, based on the artist's experience. His first 'construction', Seoul Home, 1999, evokes the memory of his childhood. It is a house 'without thickness', with moving walls in the oriental style, in green silk, symbolizing the fragrance of an adolescent's life in the home of his parents. A soft, floating energy animates and swells the place, as if constantly shaken by a trembling, a whispering of quiet, ritualized gestures. It is a carnal rind, reaching toward spirituality, speaking of the manifest and the concealed, the tender and the heartbreaking, of caresses given and received. It makes the memory of the early years of life dance. It is interesting to note that the father of the Korean artist, in the 1970s, recycled materials from an imperial residence - built in 1828 by King Sunjo of the Yi Dynasty - to build a house that was a replica of that of the 17th century. Do-Ho Suh continues, in the Zen tradition, the infinite reconstruction of the house, replicating all the details - from the wooden structures to the rice paper walls-but the whole is airy, transportable, almost as if to indicate the passage from a static to a nomadic culture. A fragile curtain that is both a nest and a retreat, a space experienced and a space imagined. While his father made a 'historic' space, the artist adds a vital, subjective interpretation. What he describes is no longer a cultural rooting, but an emotional root. A space that surrounds him, flows, expands and vibrates with energy. A territory that is like air, transparent and very light, with the possibility, through mobility, of extending to the ends of the earth. So much so that Do-Ho Suh can transport it in his travels and his shows, transforming it into an accumulation of experiences and relations to the spaces of museums or galleries, from the Museum of Contemporary Art of Los Angeles to the Seattle Art Museum: *Seoul Home / L.A. Home / New York Home / Baltimore Home / London Home / Seattle Home*, 1999. Assembled and stitched in keeping with the Korean crafts tradition, thanks to its lightness and transparency the house revives something organic, a relationship with the outside, retracing the ancient methods of oriental architecture. The insignificant is eliminated and the assembly process simplified, for complete integration of the parts, now in a single

material: silk. Here again all the membranes of the structure are visible inside and out, the structure is simultaneously functional and decorative, the material is natural, selected and prepared by craftsmen who are artists. Each detail is simple, direct, economical, forming a perfect unity, something as immutable as the beauty of medieval architecture. Alongside the historical and cultural reminders, the aim is to underline the fact that the space of the home is not neutral, but a garment attached to the person, encircling and protecting, creating connections that repel and attract. Therefore it is a substance, impalpable and transparent, that everyone carries around. It maintains its identity, but it becomes the identity of its inhabitant. Something undefined that echoes in life, that after appearing and developing in Seoul at a certain moment moves to New York, giving lived value to another habitat: *348 West 22nd St. apt A, New York N.Y. 10011, 2001*, is the reconstruction in nylon of another spatial womb, that of the adult and the artist. Here the space is an extension, articulated through a logic divided into zones: kitchen, corridor, bathrooms, studio, bedroom. It reflects an occidental mentality, if not precisely American, also in the choice of the material, translucent nylon, an artificial fiber, constructed and produced, like the context of the city.

Do-Ho Suh presents it as space for living, divided into different types of activity, so much so that the rooms are defined by colors, each with its own characteristics. The ensemble is not a whole but a sum, not compact nor unified, based on fragmented identity. Therefore it is ideal for representation of a 'fragmented' life, due to the move from a country of origin to a country of work. Nevertheless, the home is constructed with the same attention to detail, as if it were necessary for the artist to control the tactile quality of the whole, which is more geometric and therefore more measured, quantitatively larger than the home of his father. In fact, this is a space of possessions and social and professional advancement, requiring more control connected with strategies and abstractions. In time this too becomes a space of memory and emotions, like the *Seoul Home* is transformed into an environment colored by subjective, personal impressions connected to real life situations, and taking on a global dimension typical of the work of this artist: *348 West 22nd St. apt. A, New York N.Y. 10011 at Rodin Gallery, Seoul / Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery / Serpentine Gallery, London / Sydney Biennial / Seattle Art Museum, 2001*. Both the 'homes' are made in transparent, airy material, making it necessary to underline the fact that the thickness makes consistency and inconsistency coexist, public and private, obliging the object to stand up to the simultaneous exercise of incompatible movements and realities. For a nomad these opposites continuously coexist, because moving in uncertainty it is not possible to hold one or the other still. Thus the home is something fluid that thrives on the vertigo of movement. A form of disjunctive synthesis that must maintain the plurality of senses, basing itself on demarcation. The artist too, in order to exist, must de-marcate himself, venturing into places and processes that are uncertain and ambiguous. He must never

know where the linguistic adventure begins or ends, he lives in equilibrium, on a border zone, in a trembling situation, grappling with opposing, complementary terms. This is why all the work of Do-Ho Suh addresses marginal zones, of the body and of society, where the figures are reversed, as in *Floor*, 1997-2000, and *Doormat: Welcome (Amber)*, 2000, in which hundreds or thousands of little figures, almost a human tide or a mirage, evoking ancient medieval armies, supports, through glass, the weight of another figure, a human figure that crosses the mat or wipes its shoes there. Both works can be seen in cultural terms, as the reflection of a mass oriental culture, religiously based on quantitative, collaborative impact, and an individualistic, egotistical culture that thrives on domination. Or we can see an inevitable dialectic, in which one cannot exist without the other. The repeated elements, moreover, form a block in time and space, suggesting a sedimentation and stratification that is more powerful than the rapid, though gigantic, passage of the other figure. One mass is the column of the other, they are joined by separate, one is the extension of the other. The material, polyurethane rubber, of the small figures supplies their identity, an elasticity, while their transparency and emptiness makes them an unpredictable fullness, impossible to grasp. A power of self-generation and capacity to move is the true enigma of the work. A bass that sustains, with its harmonic thickness, the arrival of a new condition. A euphoria of the anonymous, of everything that is common substance and notion of today's culture. This is the weave that interests the Korean artist, who makes *Who Am We?*, 2000, and *Some/One*, 2001, the first a wallpaper with the reproduction of a motif of thousands and thousands of faces, the second a kimono composed of stainless steel dogtags. An infinite variety of human beings and identities, that combine to give rise to a form of surface and volume that is impressive, potent. A grouping that structures, becoming an ideal, democratic place where relationships are equal, but become more important when grouped, enriched by a unifying motive, incorporating eminence and result. The whole of Do-Ho Suh lives, therefore, on the systoles and diastoles of the elementary structures of our spatial habitat. Feeding on an aspiration of 'otherness', a desire for the beyond, creating a relationship between the familiar and the universal.