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DO-HO SUH

INFINITE POINTS OF CONTACT

*How the age-old tension between individual
and society drives installations that
embody humanity's awesome potential.*

By Christine Starkman



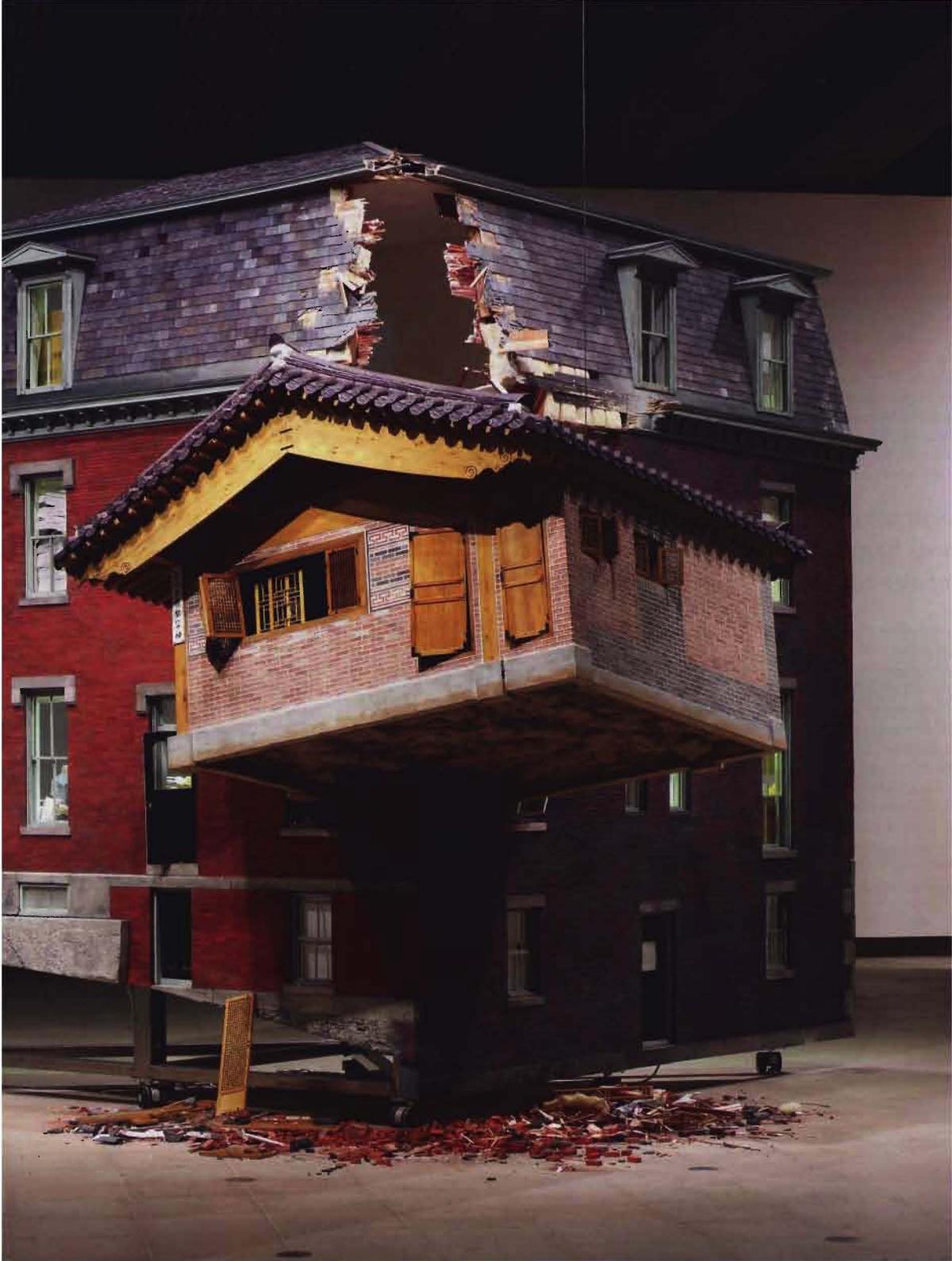
(Above) (Detail)
FALLEN STAR 1/5, 2008.

In late May, Do-Ho Suh unveiled his *Fallen Star 1/5 Scale* (2008) in the exhibition "Psycho Buildings: Artists and Architecture" at the Hayward Gallery in London. The exhibition featured artists who construct dwelling-like structures and environments that invite viewers to experience interior spaces mentally, emotionally and even physically and to reflect on the active relationship of the body and memory with such spaces. *Fallen Star 1/5 Scale* is a large, full-color architectural model of Suh's New England apartment, where the artist lived in 1993 while studying at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in Providence, physically colliding with a model of his Korean childhood home, in the style of a 19th-century scholar's retreat. In an April email message, Suh described the title, *Fallen Star*, as "a 'star' that falls from outer space. If there were a living being on that star, that being would be alien to us—a visitor from another world. The title implies the notion of 'displacement.'"

Fallen Star was Suh's fourth major installation and commission within the past seven months on three continents: North America, Europe and Asia. For an internationally exhibited artist who splits his time between New York and Seoul when he's not installing his work elsewhere, the idea of displacement speaks not only to his personal story but also to the demands of his chosen career. With a life in both Korea and the US, Suh has a

FALLEN STAR 1/5, 2008.
ABS, wood, ceramic,
glass, honeycomb board, paint,
LED lights, resin, styrene,
PVC sheets, 131 x 145 x 120 in.
Courtesy the artist and
Lehmann Maupin Gallery,
New York. Photo
by Stephen White.







unique relationship to his place of origin. Vacillating between the nostalgic and autobiographical, and the impersonal and political, Suh's sculptures—always monumental in scale—are born of the artist's removed perspective.

Born in 1962 in Seoul, Suh earned his BFA and MFA in oriental painting at Seoul National University, and pursued a second BFA in painting at RISD, graduating in 1994. He added an MFA in sculpture at Yale University in 1997. He is best known for his fabric dwellings that trigger awareness of the ambiguous boundaries between personal and public spaces. Seminal works from the late 1990s include semi-transparent recreations of his childhood home, as in the celadon-colored silk installation,

Suh recalls that in his dream, he was haunted by the clicking sound of dog-tags as he walked. . .

Seoul Home (1999), and a pink nylon version of his apartment in New York, *348 West 22nd St., Apt. A, New York, NY 10011* (1999). Applying the exact measurements of the original dwellings, Suh created the sculptures at life-scale by sewing pieces of fabric together with the help of master seamstresses in Korea. The choice of medium was due to its lightness and transportability; *Seoul Home* fits into two suitcases, perfect for an artist on the move. As installations, both replicas are suspended from the ceiling like canopies to resemble three-dimensional houses. *Seoul Home* is hung so that it floats in the air, whereas *348 West 22nd St.* is positioned so that the ground is level to the floor of the house. In the case of the latter, viewers are welcome to enter and explore the interior space which, in addition to walls, ceilings and doors, includes details such as bookshelves, sinks, light switches, sockets and doorknobs made entirely of fabric.

After graduation from Yale, a number of group exhibitions—notably, a show at downtown hotspot Gavin Brown's enterprise in 1997 and the PS 1 Contemporary Art Center roundup of local talent, "Greater New York," in 2000—helped Suh gain purchase in the New York scene. This culminated with his first US solo show at Lehmann Maupin gallery in 2000. Concurrently, Suh was also exhibiting at prestigious venues in Asia such as Gallery Hyundai, Artsonje Center and Rodin Gallery in Seoul and Tokyo's Shiseido Gallery.

With a growing reputation on two continents, Suh entered





(Center) *SOME/ONE*, 2001.
Stainless steel military dog tags,
steel structure, fiberglass resin,
fabric. Courtesy Lehmann Maupin
Gallery, New York.

(Opposite) (Detail)
SOME/ONE, 2001.

the international art limelight at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001, where he represented Korea and the US at both the Korea and Italian pavilions. In the Korea Pavilion, *Some/One* (2001), invited viewers to walk across a shimmering metal floor made of approximately 100,000 military dog tags linked together and engraved with randomly assorted numbers and letters. As they progressed into an interior room, viewers discovered that the “floor” was in fact an absurdly long train extending from a larger-than-life coat of armor, standing nine-feet tall with its back to the entrance. Circling the ominous, hollow effigy, viewers found an opening in the armor which, lined on the inside with mirror sheets, cast back their distorted reflections.

Inspired in part by Suh’s two years of mandatory service in the Korean army, the work is a powerful meditation on identity, group dynamics and individual responsibility in the shadow of what is still a heavily-militarized international war zone. Using the mechanisms of sensation and exploration, *Some/One* asks viewers to recognize something about themselves by going through an alienating process as they are confronted with unfamiliar terrain. Suh recounted in an interview with the PBS television series, *ART:21*, that his vision for the installation actually came from a dream in which he found himself walking across a football stadium in which the same coat of armor and train made of dog-tags covered the entire playing field. Suh recalls that in his dream, he was haunted by the clicking sound of the dog-tags as he walked over them.

Some/One also developed strategies apparent in an earlier work included in the Italian Pavilion, *Floor* (1997-2001), which startled viewers with a seemingly empty room. As they walked across the room’s glass-panel floor, viewers realized that the floor was held up by 180,000 miniature figures made of PVC material, their arms and palms raised in a supporting gesture. Stunning and full of wit, *Floor* combined Suh’s technical finesse with his



(Right) *KARMA*, 2003.
Urethane paint on fiberglass and
resin. Installation view at The
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
Collection of Robert, Jerome,
and Holland Chaney. Photo ©
MFAH, photo by Thomas R.
DuBrock. Copyright the artist.
Courtesy Lehmann Maupin
Gallery, New York.



(Left) CAUSE & EFFECT, 2007. Acrylic and stainless steel, aluminum frame, 363 x 1016 x 1168.4 cm. Courtesy Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York.



interest in defining the intersection between individuals and the public sphere. Together the two installations at Venice embodied Suh's dueling, twin themes: culture as represented through a subjective standpoint (his own memories and dreams) and culture seen from an objective remove, in which individuality is eclipsed by the volume of individuals participating en masse.

The appearance at Venice was the culmination of an almost decade-long transformation for Suh, who comes from an artistic and scholarly background. His father, Suh Se-Ok, a famous ink painter who established the Mungnimhoe art movement in the early 1960s, promoted modernism in Korea using traditional materials of ink, brush and paper. Suh, along with his younger brother, grew up learning the Korean traditional scholarly arts: painting, poetry and calligraphy. Consequently, Suh followed in his father's footsteps by majoring in oriental painting and exhibiting his contemporary ink paintings in several shows in Seoul in the late 1980s.

Suh was already following a successful trajectory by the time he moved to the US to pursue a second BFA in painting at RISD, having been included in the 1989 São Paulo Biennial and surveys at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Kwachon, and Kiev City Museum in 1990. Yet RISD changed the course of his life and career. While there, Suh, in a last minute attempt to fulfill a required non-elective studio course, signed up for a sculpture class after the glass-blowing class he first selected was unavailable. One of the assignments given in the sculpture class required students to create a sculpture using clothing to address identity. Attaching 3,000 military dog tags to the liner of a standard-issue US military jacket, Suh created *Metal Jacket* (1993), which later became the basis for *Some/One*. After completing the requirement, Suh made a conscious decision to stop painting and continue making sculptures.

Since then, Suh's early work with clothing and notions of identity in relation to space has evolved to include abstract



(Center) **THE PERFECT HOME II**, 2003. Translucent nylon, 279.4 x 609.6 x 1310.6 cm. Courtesy Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York.

(Opposite Bottom) (Detail) **THE PERFECT HOME II**, 2003.

(Right) Do-Ho Suh, standing in front of **REFLECTION**, 2004. Photo by Alis Atwell / ArtAsiaPacific.

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ideas rendered in three dimensions. *Karma* (2003) is a massive fiberglass sculpture of two legs dressed in suit pants and shiny oxford shoes that extend in mid-stride from floor to ceiling. Recalling the Venice *Floor* installation, a cluster of tiny figures supports the weight of the hind foot, while others run into position under the other foot as it descends to the ground. The big authority stepping on the little people is a popular reading of *Karma*. Suh, however, sees the work as depicting interdependence, with the giant and the little people symbiotically supporting each other. The strides of a nation are supported by its many citizens.

Karma remains an important concept for Suh, whose recent work includes the installation *Cause and Effect* (2007-08), first created for a solo exhibition at Lehmann Maupin gallery in late 2007. In this work, thousands of interlocking figures made of transparent resin, colored in a gradient from red and orange to white hues, are suspended from the ceiling to form a swirling vortex. In early 2008, Suh revisited the work in a permanent installation for the inauguration of the Towada Art Center in Aomori province in Japan. This new version plunges from the art center's 30-foot high ceiling into a blood-red, attenuated spike. Ringing the centerpiece is a transparent curtain of white figures. With the compositional figures hunched on each other's backs, *Cause and Effect's* dichotomy between individual and collective takes on transcendent dimensions. Visually, the work is breath-taking, but it remains uncertain as to whether this sublime force of nature represents humanity's destructive or creative capabilities.

Coming full-circle from grand, cosmic themes to intimate concerns, the Hayward Gallery installation, *Fallen Star 1/5 Scale* (2008), marks the beginning of a 13-chapter narrative entitled "Speculation Project," an autobiographical series addressing Suh's experience of moving from Korea to the US. Suh began creating works for the "Fallen Star" series while he was an artist-in-residence at Artpace in San Antonio in 2006. The story begins with *Fallen Star: Wind of Destiny* (2006), in which





(Left) **FALLEN STAR: EPILOGUE (1/8TH SCALE)**, 2006. Wood, resin, ABS, polycarbonate and PVC sheets, glass, paint, 193 x 299.7 x 307.3 cm. Courtesy Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York.

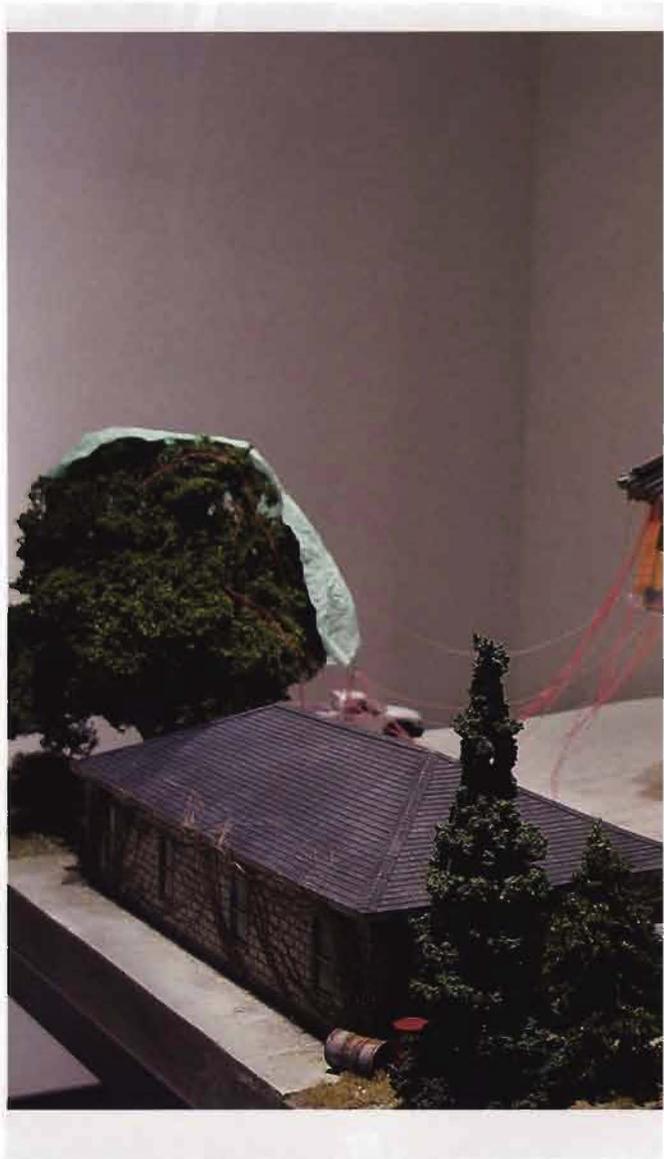
(Center) **FALLEN STAR: NEW BEGINNING**, 2006. Wood, resin, ABS, polycarbonate and PVC sheets, glass and paint, 76 x 121 x 118 in. Photo by Todd Johnson. Courtesy Artpace, San Antonio.

Suh makes architectural environments that reflect on the history of specific buildings, materials, processes of fabrication...

a miniature Korean traditional house constructed out of white resin sits precariously on top of a vortex made of carved white Styrofoam pieces. Suh suspended the work from the ceiling and viewers, following the rise of the powerful twister, could discern a model of a Korean traditional house perched on top. The work is about Suh's sudden and chaotic departure from Korea and the unknown future ahead.

Subsequently, in *Fallen Star: New Beginning (1/35 Scale)* (2006), Suh visualizes the violent collision of the wooden Korean house—a representation of his family home—with his three-story New England apartment, this time with the structures at 1/35 of their original scales. Suh meticulously copied every detail of both houses, complete with the paper window shades, red brick façade and gray-tiled roof of the New England house and the ceramic-tile roof, wooden doors and windows, and even the Chinese calligraphy written on vertical sheets of paper and wooden panels of the Korean house. Commenting on the “Fallen Star” narrative, Suh imagines the Korean house flying across the Pacific Ocean, colliding with the New England house and coming back to earth with a parachute to ensure its safe landing.

Both houses increase in size as the narrative progresses. *Fallen Star 1/8 Scale* (2006) shows the Korean house becoming part of the New England house. Scaffolding is visible underneath the Korean house and new bricks have been placed around the point of contact between the two structures to indicate the process of assimilation, corresponding with the period and



(Left) **FALLEN STAR: A NEW BEGINNING (1/35TH SCALE)**, 2006. Wood, resin, ABS, polycarbonate and PVC sheets, glass and paint, dimensions variable. Courtesy Artpace, San Antonio.



(Right) **FALLEN STAR:**
WIND OF DESTINY,
2006. Styrofoam, resin,
138 x 112 x 32 in.
Photo by Todd Johnson.
Courtesy Artpace,
San Antonio.



process of adjustment Suh underwent while a student at RISD.

The most recent installment in London, *Fallen Star 1/5 Scale* (2008), is more than 12 feet in height, with the interior furniture, objects and architectural details also growing in size along with the buildings. Viewers can see in greater detail the interiors and exteriors of both houses.

Suh began his career using silk to recreate life-scale architectural interiors that contained deep emotions and meaningful memories. As with the other artists selected in the Hayward exhibition, including the provocative Austrian collective Gelitin, known for assembling junk and scraps into dysfunctional communal spaces, and the Japanese architects Atelier Bow-wow, who conceived the concept of “pet architecture” in response to the extreme constraints on urban space in Tokyo, Suh makes architectural environments that reflect on the history of specific buildings, materials, processes of fabrication and the social, cultural and political meanings attached to architecture.

Having accepted a prestigious artist-in-residence program in Berlin, Suh plans to focus on the next chapters of the “Speculation Project” there. The future architectural installments will again invite the audience to experience directly Suh’s vision and personal references, and at the same time renew social, human and spatial relations.

Do-Ho Suh’s *Fallen Star 1/5 Scale* will continue in exhibition in “Psycho Buildings” at the Hayward Gallery in London through August 25.

Christine Starkman is curator of Asian art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

