



The Chaos of Melancholy

Kyungmi Shin

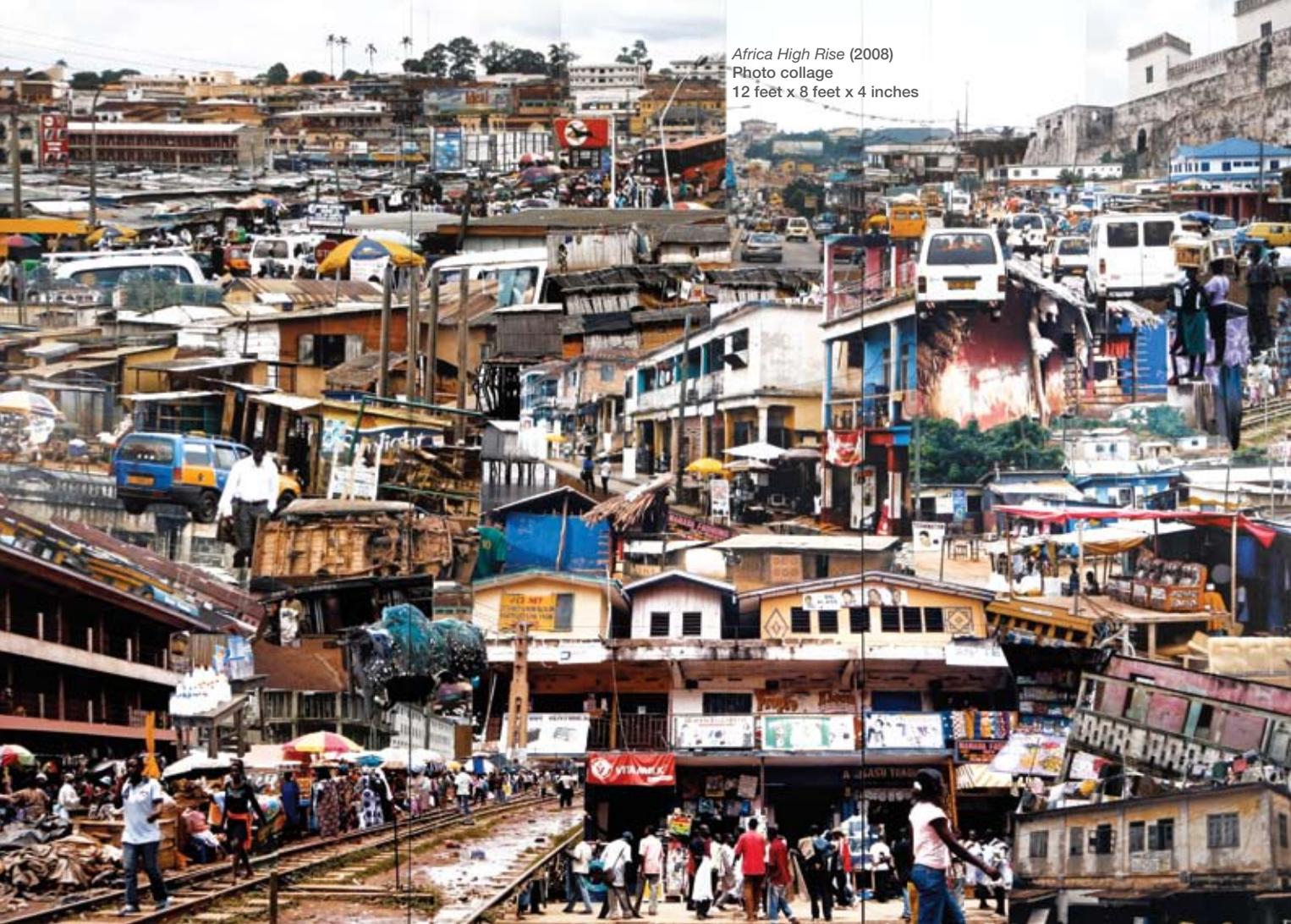
Nichols Gallery, Pitzer College Art Galleries, Pitzer College
July 16, 2009-September 11, 2009

Babel:
The Chaos of Melancholy
Kyungmi Shin

Curated by Ciara Ennis

July 16 - September 11, 2009
Pitzer Art Galleries, Pitzer College

Africa High Rise (2008)
Photo collage
12 feet x 8 feet x 4 inches



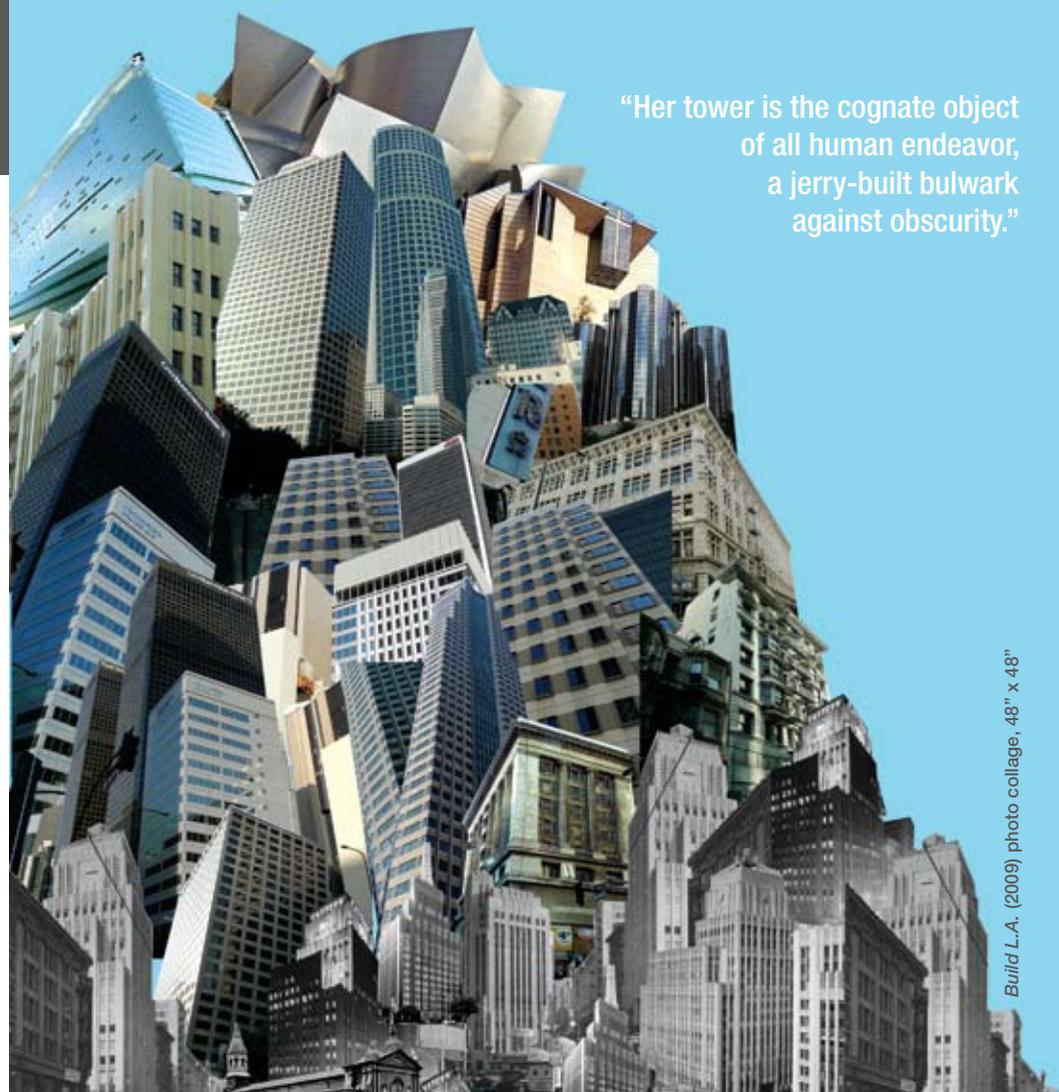
Introduction by Max King Cap
Interview by Ciara Ennis

Babel: The Chaos of Melancholy

The devotional experience of the Gothic cathedral is a masterstroke of stagecraft—the upward gaze darkening as it rises, the fading light from the clerestory, the stone columns, like great trees, of a diameter five men can barely encompass, the smoking censer, the glowing cassocks, the Ave Maria—all these are manipulations of the audience experience, all evocations of future memories.

The photographs and installations of Los Angeles artist Kyungmi Shin follow a similar strategy. From her elegant and wretched 2004 work *WarCuts*, lacework made from excised images of military personnel from print reports (which itself is dying) to her 2007 *Paradise/Rich*, a color photograph, large and segmented, of a forested coastline vitiated with the hastily hand-inscribed word “rich”, a cataloguer’s brief pause before moving on to the conquest of other *costa ricas*, her inventions have recreated, juggled and restaged our essential relations to our cultural hallmarks.

The urge to remake our world is an effort, in essence, to remake ourselves, a drive as old as the fable of Adam and Eve willfully partaking of the fruit of knowledge. The bill of goods sold them by the wily serpent was becoming gods themselves, and the urge has been with us ever since. New York’s Central Park and Boston’s Emerald Necklace evince an Eden of our own—completely contrived imitations of the natural world. They are utopian fantasies, egalitarian parks designed to reassure the wealthy and uplift the poor. Cities were accused of coarsening society, and the faux paradises



“Her tower is the cognate object of all human endeavor, a jerry-built bulwark against obscurity.”

were considered the antidote. These parks, and other works of Frederick Law Olmstead, godfather of landscape architecture, are, however, unabashedly romantic views of paradise, an arcadia of the people that never quite lived up to their promise.

Shin makes no attempt to appeal to the image of our ideal selves. Her works are an unflinching view of the world as we have made it, chaotic, relentless and hostile to reproof. Her *Babel*, a two-story cataract of photographs, refuse and recycling, is provisional architecture of the kind we are drawn to create. Confirming the gated community and the favela as diametric twins upon the circular architectural continuum, just as today's McMansion is the verso of an A.M.E. church housed in a former synagogue, Shin's is a fourth dimensional architecture. Valued items are eventually discarded, refashioned, then eventually become fashionable again as a green commodity. The photos included in this construction (among many other ingredients) place the luxury construction in Dubai alongside of images of Ghanaian shantytowns, but without judgment, as equivalencies. Her tower is the cognate object of all human endeavor, a jerry-built bulwark against obscurity.

The opposite of Will Rogers's famous and naïve pronouncement, "A stranger's just a friend I haven't met," Shin's view of the valuable is as junk (and all of us eager pack-

rats), a view comparable to the falsity of freshly picked flowers— already dead but unwilling to admit it.

Max King Cap, June 2009

Max King Cap is an artist, writer and curator living in Southern California



Koreatown Dawn to Dusk (2008) photo collage, 48" x 18"



Ciara Ennis & Kyungmi Shin in Conversation

Ciara Ennis:

Published in 1621, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* was written in part to combat the debilitating effects of depression. How did you come across this book and what inspired you to use it as inspiration for your project, *Babel: The Chaos of Melancholy*?

Kyungmi Shin:

I came across the quote by Burton during library research on the Tower of Babel, and I was intrigued by the notion of looking at the failure of Babel as caused by a psychological depression rather than a linguistic confusion. The actual quote is "The tower of Babel never yields such confusion of tongues, as the chaos of melancholy doth variety of symptoms." I liked this introduction of human emotion in the discussion of the effects of utopia-building, because I felt that the emotional reality is the true barometer of the quality of life of an individual.

Untitled, Ghana Akwidaa village (2007) photograph

CE: The Tower of Babel parable carries uncommon socio-political resonance today, bringing to mind celebrity-architectural excesses of the past two decades as well as the idea of multiple tongues and cultures struggling to communicate. How does your work relate to these two issues?

KS: The initial inspiration for the installation at Pitzer came from my experience in Ghana. In Ghana, I was really surprised to see so many used products from the West and other developed countries. It was fascinating to see used cars from China and Korea being used in Ghana. The original Chinese or Korean writing was still left on the cars (like a kindergarden bus, delivery service, van, etc), and the cars are re-purposed for public transportation and other uses. In the outdoor markets, I saw piles of used clothing from the west sold to the locals at 50 cents or a dollar apiece, which is much cheaper than their own traditional clothing. It is common to see African villagers wearing T-shirts bearing logos of American sports teams and political campaigns, and I smiled often at the irony of my reaction and recognition of these logos versus their relationships to those images as pure visual designs. My initial amusement at seeing these global connections turned to apprehension as I researched further and found out that Ghana ends up with huge amounts of old electronic equipment from the West, and that they are salvaged for parts and material by hand—exposing the workers and the environment to large quantities of toxic material.

So I began to think about the relationship between developing and first world economies, and that was the inception of this idea of building a large sculptural structure that is inspired by both what I saw in African shanty towns and the ambitious city-building that is happening all over the world, but especially in places like Dubai and Shanghai where this building seemed to be occurring almost overnight. I wanted to create a sculptural form that somehow showed both the optimistic feeling about “building” a utopian future and the reality of building a house for the majority of the world population. So I looked at the Tower of Babel as a metaphor for this utopian vision as well as the failure of that vision.

CE: Built as it was to honor great works of man, previous representations of the Tower of Babel have focused on the tower’s architectural brilliance, sophisticated engineering and supreme elegance as typified by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and the numerous artists who have interpreted the subject. Although structurally complex and multifaceted, your installation eschews traditional notions of sophistication in favor of a junk-pile asymmetric aesthetic—comprised as it is of multiple and diverse materials in an erratic form. How is the myth altered when your work’s physical manifestation articulates a form contrary to the conventional Babel?

KS: I wanted to use the material that the majority of this world population is limited to because of their lack of economic resources. What does it mean to build an architectural structure when you only have access to scrap wood, earth, leaves, cardboard and some nails?

In addition to the Tower of Babel, I am also thinking about iconic towers such as Eiffel Tower and the unbuilt Tatlin Monument. So I see my structure as a prototype of a monument or an anti-monument based on a variety of archetypal structures like the Coliseum, Empire State Building and Burj Dubai, currently the tallest building in the world. But the more powerful archetypes at which I am looking are ones existing outside of mainstream architecture, the shacks that people outside the castle live in and the shocking poverty that inspired Buddha to abandon his palace life. I am looking at the photographs of shanty towns in Accra, Lagos, Caracas and Cape Town.

Another major influence on my work right now is the work of architect Lebbeus Woods, whose work deals with designing systems in crisis. His architectural drawings and models, all unbuilt, work with an existing chaos and crisis and create structures that are built in harmony with existing forms.

I think of my construction not as a demonstration of a depressing and deprived process, but rather a creative process of building an alternate monument.

CE: The video of component of *Babel: The Chaos of Melancholy* merges footage from your recent trip to Dubai with views from your sea-side studio home in Ghana. Both are representations of paradise, one fabricated the other natural. How does the ersatz waterfall that you are creating represent these two vastly different worlds, and do you see your structure as a bridge between the two?

KS: Your description of the videos as “waterfall” is inspiring me to project the video vertically! I think the videos function as snapshots of these two different worlds. These two videos don’t necessarily capture the most shocking or poignant compilation of images. Rather, I wanted to use these videos as a way for the viewer to experience the everyday of these two extreme examples of societies. I literally experienced these two drive-throughs one day apart. The first one in Dubai on New Year’s Eve and, 24 hours later, I was being driven down the streets in this small African village. The juxtaposition was really jarring.

Video Stills, *Dubai Drive-By* (2009)



Video Stills, *Dixcove*, Ghana (2009)



Can my structure be the bridge between the two paradises? In reality the bridge between these two worlds already exists in their intimate intertwining of economic exchange. The cheap labor pool for construction in Dubai comes from the poor countries including Ghana. Belgian chocolates offered in the 7-star hotel in Dubai starts with the cocoa beans in Ghana, the largest producer of cocoa. The gold jewelry worn by beautiful women in Dubai also could have come from Ghana, one of the largest producers of gold. Ghana's neighboring country, Nigeria, is one of the largest producers of oil. Yet Nigeria's general population does not benefit from the profits, and it's a curious fact that Nigeria is a center of email scams. So the lives in two paradises are already intertwined intimately with one another once we look beyond the surface.

So thinking about my piece and how it functions in relationship to these two worlds, I have to be really pragmatic and say that at the end of the day what I'm creating is an art object that is inspired by these two extreme manifestations in the world. I am creating a structure that is an anti-monument, a structure that tries to celebrate the material and the aesthetics that are unique to poor, deprived economies. And I am creating a sculptural form that derives a lot of inspiration from a host of other artists who worked with the material from life, Robert Rauschenberg, Ed Kienholz, Hannah Hoch, Kurt Schwitters, Jason Rhodes and Dieter Roth.

CE: The materials used to create your cascading tower—building scraps, corrugated metal, colored Plexiglas and used aluminum—have much more in common with the shantytowns of Ghana and favelas of Brazil than the multi-billion dollar follies of Dubai—built by immigrant workers earning under \$38.00 a week. While referencing the extremes of wealth and poverty, the pop-colored waste products included in your construction are distinctively festive. What is the viewer to infer from this paradox?

KS: Perhaps a presentation of paradox is a good thing. I believe in the power of a good question in the education of a mind, and perhaps the paradox in my piece can serve as a question in the viewer's mind? Ultimately, I am interested in making a piece that raises questions rather than provides answers, and if I can create a piece that can present a paradox, and engage the viewers with more questions than answers, I would be delighted.

CE: The recent building boom in Dubai has resulted in fantastical construction projects such as Palm Jumeriah—an artificial island built in the shape of a palm tree with each frond extending a mile into the sea, The World—an island in the shape of a global map—and the Universe—an island that mimics a solar system. Are these islands a horizontal Babel, a hubris-doomed folly?

KS: Definitely! Rumors have it that the Palm Jumeriah has already sunk a few feet, and The World project has been halted after the market crash of late 2008. What's really interesting to me is that even though these projects might end up as failures, it won't stop another city or country or an investment firm from trying to create another fastastical project, another tallest tower. The endlessly sinking Venice is still here. I find that really fascinating.

CE: Your recent curatorial project "Building Paradise" explores notions of paradise from a fantastical, utopian and positive perspective. Would it be fair to say that *Babel: The Chaos of Melancholy*, suggests a much darker scenario?

Untitled, Kumasi Market, Ghana (2008)



Video Still, Dubai Airport (2009)



Video Still, Dubai Airport (2009)

Untitled, Takorati, Ghana (2008)

KS: I am definitely wrestling with the darker side of utopia-building in this piece, if we were to define "darker" as the poorer societies. This piece deals both with the hopeful and playful idea of building a future as well as the reality that a majority of this world's population face day-to-day. Using shanty town-esque material is a way for me to deal with this complex and challenging reality. The scenario I am creating in *Babel: Chaos of Melancholy* is one that is replete with elements from the real world and real fantasies.

Biography

Kyungmi Shin lives and works in Los Angeles
M.F.A., Sculpture & Installation, University of California, Berkeley, 1995
B.S., Biochemistry, San Jose State University, 1986
Kyungbook National University Medical School, Korea, 1982-1983

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2009 *Babel: Chaos of Melancholy*, curated by Ciara Ennis, Pitzer Art Galleries, Pitzer College, Claremont, CA
Project Room Installation, Sweeney Art Gallery, UC Riverside, Riverside, CA
- 2008 *Rich*, 18th Street Project, curated by Tyler Stallings, Los Angeles, CA
Blue, LAX Airport, Terminal 3, 200 ft wall installation, Los Angeles, CA
Many Waters, 7+Fig Art Center, downtown Los Angeles, CA
- 2006 *Kyungmi Shin*, Winslow Garage, Echo Park, CA
- 2004 *Chewing Gums and Candy*, Pasadena Public Library, One Person Installation, Pasadena, CA
Blue Eyes: Kyungmi Shin, Pasadena City College Library, Pasadena, CA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2009 *Sister Cities*, Instituto Cultural Cabaña, curated by Mark Greenfield, Guadalajara, Mexico
Building Paradise, 7+FIG Art Space, Los Angeles, CA
The Brewery Capstone, video and performance night, The Armory Art Center, Pasadena, CA
- 2008 *Twenty Years Ago Today*, Japanese American National Museum, curated by Kris Kuramitsu and Rita Gonzalez, Los Angeles, CA
Projections on Lake, curated by David Bradshaw, Pasadena, CA
The Long Weekend, Phantom Gallery, curated by Joe Santaromana & Nancy Buchanan, Pasadena
- 2007 *PIX*, Torrance Art Museum, curated by Kristina Newhouse, Torrance, CA
Kunstkammer, Berkeley Art Museum, curated by Stephanie Cannizzo, Berkeley, CA
Txt Me L&R, Houston Center for Photography, curated by Ebony Potter, Houston, TX
Pillow Talk, Ruth Bachofner Gallery, curated by Mery Lynn McCorkle, Los Angeles, CA
Exquisite Crisis and Encounters, P/A/P Institute Gallery, New York University, curated by Yongsoon Min, New York, NY
Torrance Art Museum, *Drawing Residency*, curated by Marcy Freedman, Torrance, CA
- 2006 Palos Verdes Art Center, *Photography*, curated by Scott Cauty & Phil Lohmann, Palos Verdes, CA
Photodisruption, Kristi Engles Gallery, curated by Meg Madison & Kristi Engles, LA, CA
Watermark, Arena Gallery, curated by Angela Diamos, Santa Monica, CA
- 2005 *Passerby*, Vox Populi, curated by Cassandra Coblenz, Philadelphia, PA
Korean American Museum, curated by Yongsoon Min and Susan Choi, catalogue essay by Malik Gaines, Los Angeles, CA

- 2004 *Whiteness*, Virginia University Art Museum, Charlottesville, VA
Digital, Carl Berg Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Optic Nerves, Scott White Gallery, San Diego, CA
Close Calls, Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA
- 2003 *Whiteness: A Wayward Construction*, Laguna Art Museum, curated by Tyler Stallings, Laguna Beach, CA
Pink Sisters, Art Church, performances organized by Todd Gray and K Shin, Los Angeles, CA
Shouts, Whispers and Cheers, Saint Mary College Art Gallery, Angeles, CA
- 2002 *West Coast, Art Affairs*, curated by Carl Berg, Amsterdam, Netherlands
LA/ Amsterdam, Kausaustralis, curated by Carl Berg, Rotterdam, Netherlands
MEDIA, At the Brewery Project, exhibit of video art, curated by Joe Santarommano, LA, CA
The Game, curated by Christine Kim, Korean Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA
Reactions, Exit Art, New York, NY
I-Camera, I-1 Gallery, curated by Dimitri, Los Angeles, CA
Beauty of Diversity: Young Korean Diaspora, Seoul Arts Center, Seoul, South Korea
- 2001 *Saturation*, At the Brewery Project, curated by Kyungmi Shin and Ryan Hill, Los Angeles, CA
LA-CA, Newspace, curated by Dimitri Vorvolakos, Los Angeles, CA
The Mural Show, Irvine Art Center, curated by Carl Berg, Irvine, CA
On s'en fout!, Gallery 207, West Hollywood, CA
- 2000 *Carpooling from LA*, Asian American Art Center, curated by Tam Tran, New York, NY
Koreamericakorea, Artsonje Museum, curated by David Ross, South Korea
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Decmocratic National Convention Committee Show, curated by Davis and Davis, Los Angeles, CA
Spiritual Practices: Rituals, Icons and Faiths, Korean American Museum, curated by Yong Soon Min, Los Angeles, CA
- 1999 *Daydreaming*, Georgeis, curated by Leonard Bravo, Los Angeles, CA
My First Work: Origins and Experiments, Pasadena City College Art Gallery, curated by Alex Kritsellis, Pasadena, CA
- 1998 *License*, Hollywood DMV, curated by Brent Zerger, Los Angeles, CA
While U Wait, Hollywood DMV, Los Angeles, CA
One Night Stand, Abel Joseph Gallery, curated by Leonard Bravo, Brussels, Belgium
- 1997 *Prop*, Korean Cultural Center, curated by Yong Soon Min, LA, CA
CA: One Night Stand, Farmeris Daughter Motel, curated by Leonard Bravo, LA, CA
LA, CA: 1997 Los Angeles Juried Exhibition, Watts Towers Arts Center, LA, CA: Scene 9, Korean American Museum, Los Angeles, CA
- 1995 *Introductions*, Terrain Gallery, San Francisco, CA
University Art Museum, MFA Thesis Exhibit, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA
LO-CAL, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA
Hide and Seek, White Room, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA

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Africa High Rise, (2008) photo collage, 12' x 8' x 4"

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