

Skinning: The Art of Kim Joon

By Rachel Baum

[T]he soldier has become something that can be made: out of formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed:1

– Michel Foucault

You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit...you're already on it, scurrying like a vermin, groping like a blind person, or running like a lunatic...it is already under way the moment the body has had enough of organs and wants to slough them off, or loses them.2

– Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

Skinning, skin wrap, skin morph, implicit surface, global illumination, hypersurface: These are the provocative, allusive terms that describe various techniques and situations within digital three-dimensional image making. It is as if the practices of cartography and cosmetic surgery have merged, and in a way they have. The sui generis creation that 3D animation programs propose would seem to eliminate all constraints on representation because it is beyond all the limits of nature. The paradox is that the aim of this purely virtual production is simulating and recreating the appearances and behaviors of objects in the lived reality of the material world. The pressure of this paradox is at its greatest in the rendering of the human figure. Korean artist Kim Joon finds his subject within this tension, in the working of immaterial flesh.

The model is a manifold concept in figurative art and the larger culture. Traditionally, it means a sitter that poses, a studio presence that the artist depicts from life as portrait or prop. Modeling also refers to the illusion of depth and curvature in painting, the volumetric shading that simulates three dimensions on the picture plane. It can also mean an archetype, a canon, as in defining beauty. Within the advertising industry, the model is a creature of display, an idealized animation of the commodity. In digital image programming, modeling means the structuring of forms, the armature of virtual spaces and objects. Kim Joon's artwork incorporates all of these meanings of model, from muse to facsimile, construction to spectacle, body to machine.

In biographical context, Kim's navigation of various conceptual and visual surfaces

makes perfect sense. He describes his creative development as shaped by the fantasy and artifice of imported American commercial culture, from rock music to Hollywood. The significance of this foreign media presence following on a wartime presence is not lost on the artist. He recalls the impact of listening to American military radio as a youth in Seoul and internalizing the new global identity of “pop”—U.S./R.O.K, capitalism as ally, consumerism as shared identity. Within this historical environment, it is fascinating that a clash between self-fashioning and the power of the state should form the primary theme of Kim’s work as an artist: the tattoo.

Conscription in the military is required of all South Korean young men. However, there is a separate division for those deemed unsuitable or disabled. The artist was relegated to this subordinate rank and began exploring what the state defined as the disqualifying conditions that precluded one’s classification as passing standard. He found that those with tattoos were categorized as unfit for duty in the main service. While a tattoo is not a physical impairment, from the point of view of military authorities it is a symptom of social and psychological deviance that threatens the disciplined conformity of the troops. In a recent interview, Kim describes the terms of this marginalization:

If you… have a large amount of tattoos on your body you cannot even be in military service. The regular duration for men to serve in the Korean military is three years—that is the official army service that men have to observe. But there is this other type of service that comprises all the rejects from the regular service. These are people who might not have good eyesight or fall into a lower category of body weight, and also people who have tattoos covering large parts of their body… There were people with some kind of tattoo, physical dysfunctions, or some kind of lack. It is a place the secondary male citizens went.³

The artist’s response to this identification as subnormal was to reinvest the stigma by tattooing his fellow soldiers. Using a simple needle and Chinese ink, Kim multiplied the forbidden marks, reinscribing them as signs of subversive pride.

Kim sees tattooing as a manifestation of the conflicting forces of all identity formation, which is a process of both determination and agency, the effect of internal and external forces that often signify on the skin, as race, gender, normality or dissent. Kim’s interpretation of tattoo is a case study in what Michel Foucault terms the “repressive hypothesis,” that whatever enters social discourse through prohibition will in fact proliferate and expand, colonizing our consciousness and spreading across our vision of the world. This dualism of proscription and obsession is clear in Kim’s account of tattoo as, on the one hand, expression, desire and self-creation and, on the other, “compulsion, coercion, duress and constraint—what Foucault describes as a “game of powers

and pleasures.

Yet in his artwork Kim Joon does not leave real scars on skin. He declares, “It’s not body art, because technically no body is used in the image.”⁶ That his pictures are composed of many entangled and overlapping images of bodies does not contradict this claim because they are entirely invented, rendered out of the virtual-made-visible substance of algorithmic commands. Trained as a painter, Kim describes his process on the screen as an extension of the canvas. One can trace the collapse of the concepts of screen and canvas to the early 1960s and Andy Warhol. In complex ways, Kim’s digital surfaces are an evolution of this mediation by the silkscreen. While the screen is no longer a fabric mesh, it is a mesh of code. The medium is informational rather than physical, but the manifestation of the image is still a passage and transfer through a screen, even if it is now an electronic matrix rather than a material one. In contrast to Warhol’s deskilling of painting by relying on photography for the image, Kim’s process is closer to traditional painting in that forms must be carefully built up and finished with what can only be described as digital facture.

Warhol is also a direct source for the use of brand logos, even as tattoos. In 1955, he created a calling card for his commercial design business that featured a drawing of a Victorian-era circus performer with a plumed hat and acrobat’s costume, her limbs covered in tattoos of corporate trademarks, including those of Chanel No. 5, Dow Chemicals, and Wheaties breakfast cereal. Thereafter, the appropriation of iconic advertising designs became a defining feature of Warhol’s art. What does the fusion of marketing and tattoo imagery mean in Kim’s images? The corporate emblems are embedded in the swirling, linear forms of traditional decorative Asian graphics, from woodblock prints, textiles and ceramics. The classic motifs of clouds, dragons, waves, flowers, birds and fish flow in patterns around major corporate symbols such as Intel, Puma, Bentley, Starbucks and Gucci. Is this a circular commentary on fine art as a luxury product, along the lines of Takashi Murakami’s mutual branding with Louis Vuitton? On one level, the interlocking naked bodies bearing trademark emblems create the impression of an orgy in an airport Duty Free store. Even the consistent absence of heads—the cropping of each figure at the torso—gives an impression of serially manufactured commodity bodies.

Initially, these hyper-designed bodies in Kim’s artwork appear to conform to the fantasy standards of advertising. The figures themselves—even “beneath” the colorful surfaces of undulating ornamentation—seem to have the Photoshopped perfection of magazine models.

We’re accustomed to the airbrushed purity of digitally smoothed and sculpted bodies, a cosmetic uniformity that suggests we’ve left behind the damaged

containers we inhabit irl (“in real life,” the techno shorthand for actual lived experience). Art historian Christiane Schneider explains, “The physical body in the technological information society has become interchangeable material... a negligible quantity in the face of virtual forms of existence. Identity is no longer found or even looked for in the body. The deconstruction of the body into electron-microscopic units [is] the result of mechanization.

However, the closer one looks at Kim’s figures, the more flaws and distortions one finds. The skin we expect to have the synthetic beauty found in advertising seems to tear open in places or include disturbing grafts. Areas of masculine body hair may be transferred to a slender, idealized female leg. There are areas of rough and raw skin, appearing painfully shaved or marred by rash. Female pubic hair is exposed—framed by the clean outlines of the “body paint,” it seems messy and ungroomed by the conventions of contemporary fashion/pornography. There are conflicts of scale between body parts, with overlarge hands next to seemingly undersized torsos as well as hands with the chapped, ruddy knuckles of a female laborer or working-class housewife. These uncanny discontinuities within the depicted bodies serve to make their artificiality even more vivid. Kim Joon uses a program called 3D Studio Max. The marketing for this product claims to let users “create organic objects” on which skins “can be controlled.”⁸ Gender theorist Judith Butler has defined erotic desire in terms evocative of Kim’s figures, describing “the...vacillation between real and imagined body parts”⁹ and how “bodily surfaces” become “sites of transfer” for features “that no longer belong properly to any anatomy.”¹⁰

Kim Joon uses the technique of “skinning” against perfected illusion and toward an erotic but uncanny dislocation. In doing so the artist undermines the value of conformity in both embodiment and consumption. These bodies are not sealed packages, they are uneven surfaces reflecting our conflicted self-creation—in the artist’s words, “multi-layered composites of desire and will, emotion and action, pain and pleasure of self and other... a complex system of complicit activities.

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