

An interview with Jin-me Yoon

by Sheilah Wilson





Jin-me Yoon, *This time being*, 2013. C-print, 24 x 28.5 inches, courtesy Cartriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

While talking to students about the historic disavowal of pictorialism, inclusion of colour photography in the canon, or the photography as art struggle, I realized that we live in a similarly challenging time for photography. Once again, we are redefining our relationship to a medium famous for its changing and chameleon quality. This is the first of a new series investigating the relationship of contemporary artists to the medium of photography over the course of their career. It resulted from my own questions about where I find myself in relation to photography.

I am faced with the realization that what I learned in school with film and analog cameras is now largely obsolete—unless one consciously chooses to use those practices. There is a constant pressure to keep up-to-date, sometimes even experiencing the feeling of being helplessly at the mercy of *photography*, this most predatory of the arts.¹ In the midst of this acceleration, there is also a growing movement back into the darkroom, favoring older processes, direct engagement with the material, and in some cases experiencing the “last” of some of these materials² before they disappear completely.

On April 15, 2014, I called Jin-me Yoon at her home in Vancouver, and we had a conversation about photography, art, motherhood, speed and radical slowness. Yoon spoke about having to choose one’s position in relation to the technological changes, and in her case deciding that not choosing is the place of most productive tension. She recently finished a body of work utilizing a medium format camera, and is now working on a series with a scanner and cell phone images. She used the word ambivalence to describe her relationship to the current climate of photography. We spoke of the similarity with the ambivalence of motherhood.³ This was an interesting way to consider emotion and the body as ways of responding to a medium that is often mired in technical questions and ideas of mastery.

Photography could become of the body: instead of patrolling borders of purity, we could self-consciously pull from a place of ubiquity *and* slowness *and* direct engagement with materials *and* of the vernacular usage today. This proposal of moving between worlds, of being nomadic and porous in our use of photography, disavows mastery of one domain or the other. In fact, this kind of *and* proposal would release photography from being about the ubiquity or the preciousness of the image, but could indeed hold both within the same image. This brings the experience of photography back to the body as the primary source of experience, a way of interacting with the medium that I find compelling. It allows for body to become starting point. A multiplicity can inhabit and exit.

Sheilah Wilson: First of all, I would like to ask about what drew you to photography in the first place.

Jin-me Yoon: I’m not entirely sure, but if I had to think of a moment in my life, I would have to say it would be coming to North America as a child in 1968 and encountering photographs in advertising culture through junk mail brochures, catalogues for department stores like Sears, the fancy magazines at the doctor’s office and the like. Korea was still recovering from the Korean War, and photographic images did not circulate in the same fashion. I simply wasn’t exposed to these advertising images *en masse*.

Do you have an image that remains, one that changed your idea of what was possible with photography?

It sounds corny, but I still remember tearing out an image from the *National Geographic*. It was a tight profile

of an African man with a huge sun behind him. I remember I put it into my scrapbook where I kept collages that I was compulsively making—without knowing the history of collage or that it was art—because I was 11 or 12, still in elementary school. I wrote: “Everyman sees/but differently” on the sun, right on top of the reproduced image. Two separate lines. Certainly, the idea that photographic captions direct specific meanings that are not neutral was a realization. Essentially, at that point I had an inkling that photography is as porous semiotically as all languages.

So, how old were you when you started taking photos, when you wanted to direct that meaning?

I probably didn’t start taking photographs in a “serious” way until I started to travel to Asia, particularly India (1980), after high school, after a few years of a liberal arts education at university. I soon realized that I wasn’t comfortable taking photographs of people when traveling and that I preferred making my own images of what I noticed in my surroundings. The problem of exoticizing others and the unequal access to representation was first encountered through my own replication of National Geographic-ish types of shots. I realized how framing and the like sanitized the image and made the “other” beautiful and honorable. I realized this was the same kind of documentary impulse as the one to show the gritty reality of existence, often in impoverished material circumstances. Later, when I went to art school, these basic struggles and questions that I encountered while attempting to “make beautiful” traveling around Asia helped me think more clearly and theoretically about using representation to deal with the histories and problematics of representation.

I know you have been influenced by conceptual artists from the 1960s and 1970s. Are there any in particular that informed this early work?

There are so many influential works that it’s hard to pinpoint one, but I remember seeing The “Mythic Being” series from 1973 by Adrian Piper, where she had these thought-bubbles with images of her performing a black male avatar of herself. When I found out that she circulated these images through ads she took out in the *Village Voice*, it was revelatory and had a big impact on me (given the above and how I first encountered photography as an immigrant kid). I also love Bruce Nauman’s *Fountain*, his use of his body and his sense of humour. Of course, Cindy Sherman, especially her “Untitled Film Stills.” Also the work of Tseng Kwong Chi bears mentioning. I didn’t know about his work until after I did “Souvenirs of the Self,” 1991, and I was quite taken aback by the similarity of our strategies. There are countless other artists but these three popped into my head first. Since I was trained in Vancouver, I was exposed to conceptual uses of photography early on. Mostly, I love conceptual performances for the camera.

What sort of performance for the camera were you thinking about?

Simply put, in the early work I was attempting to fight representational codes and their social strictures by tackling representation. The camera was an obvious choice in this regard, as photography is a depictive medium. My work has shifted over the years, but I think it’s best to leave that for others to speak about.

Has the movement away from the tangible object (be that film or printed photograph) made you feel





This time being, 2013. C-print, 24 x 28.5 inches, courtesy Cartriona Jeffries, Vancouver.



Beneath, 2012, Multi-channel video installation, running times variable, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

differently towards the medium, or changed your relationship to process?

I embrace the experimental attitude of using photography in the context of contemporary art to expand our notions of the medium and what constitutes a photograph. I see the move to digital and the multiple ways that the photographic images can be made, proliferated and circulated these days, as an extension of this experimental process in the hands of artists. Having said this, I recently made a contemplative and perhaps nostalgic photographic series entitled "This time being," shot on film and printed as modest-sized photographic prints. In retrospect, I see this as my way of mourning a certain relationship to making and then printing a photographic object that we can no longer take for granted. It was my way of slowing down and "thinking" at the back of my brain, through making. How do we cope with the overabundance of images, of

information? The sheer speed and relentlessness of it all! Generally, even though we have the capacity technologically, we are corporeal material bodies after all and therefore, we have limits.

Can photography do something radical now? What work have you seen recently that made you re-think the medium or our relationship to it?

As far as good art-making is concerned, I see the experimentation with photography as an extension of artistic curiosity. It's an exciting time, but that's not to say that I embrace all aspects, especially the proclamation that certain ways of making photographs are dead. I've been around too long to be swept up in another thing being dead. It's the artists who use various methods, technologies and tools to think and make that I'm interested in. For me, good art that affects me is transformative, not tied

down to a medium or a way of making. You know, now that I am thinking about it, I think that one of the most radical things you can do is to slow down; the need for slowness as a kind of radical gesture.

I think we are at this very intense moment, where nobody has a grip on what photography really is. The technology has just really proliferated the speed and the velocity of what is occurring. I think people have an accelerated sense of being swept up. I feel like we are on the edge of something. Usually, a big advance in technology precipitates something big; you know, from agrarian culture to industrial life. I don't want to embrace it or reject it.

A kind of productive tension?

Yes, in many ways it traces the ambivalence of where we are. That teetering from one way to another is kind of like that maternal ambivalence. For me, it is a kind of thinking contributed to by feminism and also eastern philosophy that refuses to binarize. It is the "and" moment that yields the most exciting results. There was a specific trajectory, and let's face it, it was already broken anyway (think about conceptual photography and the way that that broke with what came before), and now, it breaks again.

Sheilah Wilson was born in Caribou River, Nova Scotia. She is a multidisciplinary artist currently teaching at Denison University in Ohio.

Bibliography

1. Janis-Parry, Eugenia and MacNeil, Wendy, editors. *Photography within the Humanities*, Addison House, New Hampshire: 1977.

2. Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Norton, New York: 1986.

NOTES

1. Susan Sontag states, "In some way I would suggest that photography is not so much an art as a meta-art. It's an art which devours other art. It is a creation, a creation in the form of some certain kind of visual image, but it also cannibalizes and very concretely reproduces other forms of art..." (Sontag: 60)

2. Institute Contemporary Photography recent show, *What is a Photograph*, curated by Carol Squiers, had many artists engaging directly with the question of the materials of photography. Mariah Carlson and Alison Rossiter are two examples of artists using materials that either have, or will become shortly, extinct.

3. Adrienne Rich states, "My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alteration between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and the blessed gratitude and tenderness" (Rich: 21)



Rocky Mountain Bus Tour, from the series "Souvenirs of the Self", 1991-2000, transmouted C-print, 65 x 40 inches, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.