

Time Out New York
July 3-10, 2002

Homecoming: Do-Ho Suh takes up residence at Lehmann Maupin
BY JANET KRAYNAK

In his latest installation at the Lehmann Maupin gallery, Korean artist Do-Ho Suh has created an elegiac rumination on the contemporary home. *The Perfect Home II* is a life-size replica of Suh's small studio apartment in New York, the building's hallway and staircase, and the floor of the apartment and corridor above. Hand-sewn from delicate, translucent fabric, Suh's abode appears as a luminescent box of color and light. Each section bears its own hue—the apartment itself is silvery blue, the hallway a pinkish lavender, and the upstairs floor light green. With-in its walls, one encounters a delight of detail and close observation: windows, vents, moldings, light fixtures, radiators, an intercom—complete with tiny answer button and buzzer—are all carefully fabricated and then stitched into the weightless scrims of walls and floor. Recalling Claes Oldenburg's hand-stuffed sculptures of common household objects, Suh's transformations render the mundane mildly erotic: a sagging toilet, limp showerhead and drooping door handles conjure bodily, even phallic associations.

Like many contemporary artists, Suh (who moved from Seoul to the United States in 1991) leads a peripatetic existence, endlessly traveling the international circuit of biennials and art fairs. His New York apartment serves mostly as a crash pad: a place to stop between shows. But given our current global economy, Suh's nomadic lifestyle is hardly unique; nor is his displacement—leaving his native country to live between cultures and “identities.” In Suh's work, “home” is not just a physical location, or even a timeless metaphor; rather, it is a symbol that resonates with the sense of transience (and attendant psychic alienation) that is now a common feature of everyday life.

Here, as in all of Suh's best work, such a seemingly abstract notion is powerfully embodied in sculptural form. In *The Perfect Home II*, the obsessive attention given every crevice, nail and light switch is not so much poetic or nostalgic as it is poignant: an almost perverse attempt to anchor what has become an inherently unstable place and idea. Similarly unsettling is the sheer beauty of Suh's willowy structure: From a disconcerting vision of a home whose flimsy, transparent walls leave its occupants vulnerable and exposed, the artist has crafted an object of tremendous visual seduction. The instability of his “perfect” home is further reinforced by its mutability: First, Suh made an installation titled *The Perfect Home I*, which consisted of only his New York apartment, sans hallway and staircase. The work was then re-exhibited (still bearing the name *The Perfect Home*

I), but this time it included a white replica of Suh's childhood home in Seoul, attached by a pink corridor. Now comes another realization, *The Perfect Home II*, anew work in which the theme of the perfect home is again revisited.

If the notion of home is, for Suh, a complex metaphor, it evokes not so much a personal as a political meaning—and serves less as a means of reminiscing about the past than of confronting the realities of the present. In today's art world, globalism is often celebrated as a newly inclusive embrace of once-marginalized cultures, as well as a recognition of the hybrid and fluid nature of contemporary identity. Yet such a cultural ideal of globalism overlooks key features of the larger phenomenon of economic and political *globalization*. As philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in their much-read tome *Empire*, globalization may allow for the free-flowing movement of culture, money and technologies across national borders, but it remains, like the imperialism that preceded it, a system based on exploitation, on social and economic inequity. But whereas imperialism was grounded in territory, the empire of globalization is as described by Hardt and Negri, "deterritorialized" and decentered: a non-place" impossible to locate and, as such, almost impossible to combat. According to the authors, the only effective way to resist globalization's pernicious effects is to construct a counter-empire: a parallel and equally elusive non-place.

To stretch the analogy, Suh's home, in which inside and outside, privacy and publicity, merge and collapse within its translucent skin, might be a perfect embodiment of such a "non-place": Portable, changeable from site to site, it is established nowhere but may be found anywhere. Rather than expressing a longing for a secure place, Suh's definition of home is perfect precisely because it isn't meant to be rooted in any particular location. Suh's serial production of multiple "perfect" homes, their reconfiguration from exhibition to exhibition, the ultimate indecision as to where home begins and ends, all reiterate this theme, leaving viewers to anticipate the artist's next move, where home will always be remade.