

Designboom.com December 2007

Do Ho Suh

do ho suh was born in seoul, korea in 1962. after studying oriental painting at the seoul national university, and fulfilling his term of mandatory service in the south korean military, do ho suh moved to the united states. there he received a BFA in painting from rhode island school of design and an MFA in sculpture from yale university. do ho suh's sculptures are architectural environments, beautifully and meticulously crafted. whether addressing the dynamic of personal space versus public space, or exploring the fine line between strength in numbers and homogeneity, he constructs site-specific installations that question the boundaries of identity. do ho suh represented korea at the 49th venice biennale in 2001. he has participated in group exhibitions at the baltimore museum of art, the museum of modern art, the guggenheim museum in new york, and the museum of contemporary art in los angeles, among others. major exhibitions of suh's work were held at the whitney museum of american art in new york in 2001, the seattle art museum and the seattle asian art museum in 2002, the serpentine gallery in london in 2002, the kemper museum of contemporary art in kansas city in 2002 -03, the artsonje center in seoul in 2003, the sackler gallery in washington in 2004 and the hermes gallery in Tokyo in 2005.

do ho suh lives and works in new york city. more info on the artist [gallery lehmann maupin](#), new york. the gallery represents do-ho suh and has shown his work in 2000, 2003, 2004 and 2007.

we met **do-ho suh** at his family home in seoul, on december 18th, 2007.

what is the best moment of the day? it's different from day to day. maybe it is right before I go to bed. I enjoy that quiet moment alone.

what kind of music do you listen to at the moment? everything really. in the studio my assistants listen to the radio for background noise. mainly korean pop music. but, when I am alone I listen to a lot of classic rock from the 60's and 70's. **do you listen to the radio?** yes, just in the studio. it's not what I want to hear, but what my assistants want to hear.

what books do you have on your bedside table? I have a lot of books that I read over and over again. one of the subjects I read about is fish - I was going to be a marine biologist before I decided to be an artist. when I was younger, it was the passion of my life. I still have books on fish on my bedside table. recently I bought a book called 'the deep'. it's about fish in the deep sea. I haven't finished it yet. right now I have three books on fish on my bedside table in new york. they are quite relaxing, and help me fall asleep too.

do you read art - and design /architecture magazines? yeah, sure. there are a couple of art magazines I regularly read like 'art forum', 'cabinet' and 'parkett' for example, and I do read architecture magazines. 'detail', 'architectural record' and 'dwell'. what else? sometimes 'domus', 'blueprint', 'metropolis' ... I like 'dwell' because they deal with and feature pre-fab buildings and low-budget housing. I think their angle is a little bit different than others. it's not totally architecture. it's more about accessible housing.

where do you get your news from? these days I pretty much get it from the internet, I hardly watch TV. there's 'channel 10, new york one', it's a local new york city news channel, and I actually watch that when I'm in NYC.

I assume you notice how women dress. do you have any preferences? umm, that's a tough question, I laughed when I read this one in your other interviews. I think we should skip it and come back to it later... (in a second moment) I think I prefer the traditional, the refined. I'm not interested in the big fashion houses. even though I have exhibited at 'hermes', and they do have very nice things, I don't really feel that I am a part of that. so my preference would be something very elegant but not brand name. in general, I prefer a minimal look.

what kind of clothes do you avoid wearing? that's another tough question... I don't think I wear nor have any leather items. I don't really have an occasion to wear ties, I'm an artist. I go to funerals sometimes here in korea, so I have a black suit and tie. Apart from that there are very few occasions where I dress up.

when you were a child, did you want to become an artist? no, like I said, up until the 11th grade, I wanted to study fish, so becoming an artist was a last minute change, right before I went to college in korea. although my father (se-ok suh) is an artist and has an influence on me, I wouldn't say he necessarily introduced me to the art world itself, but more his aesthetics. his taste definitely somehow influenced my aesthetics. he never directly explained his artwork to me, but to his students. they always gathered around my father, as if they were in a huddle, admiring an antique piece, drinking and having discussions. he had a group of followers and I always joined them and just listened in on their conversations. it was a very artistic environment, so I was definitely exposed to that. they would talk about painting, sculpture, architecture, and gardening. my father is very keen on plants and gardening.

how much did the korean society influenced you? a unique part of my father and my growing up was actually his practice, although he was a professional painter, he was pretty much the last sort of scholarly painter in korea. he is a renaissance man. it is a tradition from the past - in the far east - and a scholar must master poetry, literature, calligraphy, painting and things like that as part of their virtue. you have to study everything. he lives that tradition. my grandfather was also a scholar. even though my father had a modern education he still writes his poems in classical chinese. those were the main influences... my mother also loves art. she's a housewife, but is also very involved in preserving korean heritage and culture. she has a tremendous amount of knowledge about traditional art, costumes and architecture. so I'm not just influenced by my father.

where do you work on your designs and projects? I have two studios, one in

new york and one near seoul. that is where I make my work, where I give form to my work. the conceptualization part happens in-between places, when in transit, like in an airport, on the airplane or on the train - those in-between places. I think I have more inspiration when I don't actually make something. in the beginning, I didn't like traveling too much. but now it's part of my job. I have to travel a lot and I sort of developed a habit to use that time for more creative things. for example, instead of reading, I actually do a lot of sketching during a flight. I carry a very small sketchbook. that has been the same format since my college days. I travel light too, so I always carry those little things and make sketches.

in your work I can see a lot of social criticism, did you have periods in your life characterized by rebellion? maybe, my work has social criticism, once in a while... but it doesn't come from any sort of rebellion. I'm a slow starter. I can't be reactionary as fast as others. It takes some time for me to digest things and show my thoughts and opinions in my work. by the time I do that, it is not criticism any more...

new york influenced you a lot? my work started from that slippage or discrepancy, the crack. the difference between my mother tongue and foreign tongue. I think new york city allows me to relate to myself in a different way. whenever I come back, I come to korea quite often, it is always different. it's not the same place anymore, once you leave your home. it's quite an unsettling experience, because you feel like you don't belong anywhere. I guess we don't really need to belong to a place in today's society. that is what I like about new york. it's not perfect, but you can have pretty much anything there. it's a tough city, but I think it's the perfect city for strangers, because pretty much nobody is from there.

do you discuss your work with other artists? not in the sense of the turn of the century european tradition, proust's gatherings and all of the paris salons. I do have a few people, a few artists in new york, or in seoul, that I discuss my work with.

could you compare the current art scene in new york and korea - any preferences? there are a lot of good contemporary artists in korea. but new york, in terms of art world, is a much bigger place. I personally have a lesser personal attachment to things in new york, and the friends that I made in new york, I made them relatively later in my life. in korea, I have childhood friends and memories. there are more complicated relationships in korea. some times it's suffocating because of this tight web of relationships here. for art making, I prefer new york because I feel freer and more independent.

describe your style, like a good friend of yours would describe it. this is another tough one... if my friends would say anything about my work, it's that 'he is good with space, he deals with space very well.' (and I would agree with this too).

what project has given you the most satisfaction? those you've worked on for a long time? I think it's almost the opposite. it doesn't really come from the amount of time that I spend on a particular project. the most satisfactory ones came really fast, in the conceptualization stage. there is one piece, it's called 'who am we?' it's a wallpaper piece. I really like this kind of work because it looks very simple and subtle. a lot of people would miss it so easily. it's still one of my favorites. I'm surprised every time I look at it. how was I able to come up with that idea?

who would you like to create something for? it is always for me at the beginning. but then my art becomes for others. oddly enough, people from different cultures... for someone who is not familiar with my ideas. so hopefully my work can blur boundaries.

is there any artists from the past, you appreciate a lot? felix gonzalez torres, he is one of my favorite artists. there is also one chinese painter from 19th century, ch'ing (qing) dynasty. his name is ba-tai-sar-ren.

and those still working / contemporary? there are so many! ann hamilton, robert gober, matthew barney, kara walker, bruce nauman... you name it.

what advice would you give to the young? keep your sanity! ha ha ha... I think it is a key for the survival of young artists. because being an artist is very difficult like all other things. having fun while making art is important.

what are you afraid of regarding the future? global warming and its consequences. but I am not that pessimistic. It could be a beginning of new cycle on earth...