

Dazzled by Do Ho Suh

The artist experiments with printmaking at STPI

By Laura Bales



Hanging silk artwork by Do Ho Suh; Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home/L.A. Home; photo courtesy of Do Ho Suh

Guilty as charged – I have a crush on Do Ho Suh. Passionate, thoughtful, down-to-earth creator of art that resonates on multiple levels... what's not to like?

I first encountered the Korean artist in 2002 while working at the Seattle Art Museum where we mounted his first survey exhibition in the United States. His work struck me immediately as smart, witty, incredibly detailed and purposeful. Look at *Some/One*, a suit of armour made of thousands of shimmering army dog tags or *Floor*, a work composed of thousands of tiny men and women literally holding up a glass floor you can walk upon, and you'll know what I mean. Whenever I see these pieces, I can't help smiling.

Do Ho is perhaps best known for his sculptures that comprise numerous identical objects. Through this

repetition of forms, the artist makes reference to the complex relationship between the individual and the collective, a theme influenced by his Korean culture and upbringing.

The artist is also known for his sheer silk and nylon architectural installations based on full-scale sections of the interiors of homes in which he has lived, both in Korea and the US. Imagine my joy when I learned that his spectacular celadon-green fabric sculpture (modelled on his childhood home) would be floating above my wedding rehearsal dinner, held at the Seattle Asian Art Museum.

Flash forward eight years and I find myself in the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) nervously waiting to interview Do Ho, surrounded by partially completed prints and a computer slide show of his work, while a crew

completes a video documentation of the artist's residency at STPI.

Born in Seoul in 1962, Do Ho earned his Bachelor and Master of Fine Arts degrees in Oriental Painting from Seoul National University. After fulfilling mandatory service in the South Korean military, he relocated to the US to continue his studies at the Rhode Island School of Design and Yale University. Do Ho leads a globetrotting life installing exhibitions, creating art and moving between his family home in Seoul and his working life in New York. Catching him for an interview was not easy.

Do Ho said he first learned of the STPI Visiting Artist Programme when he attended a show of Ashley Bickerton's work in New York that happened to include pieces created at STPI. "I was impressed and my gallerist said STPI expressed an interest in working together, but it took two years just to schedule a brief visit."

Impressed by the facilities, the high standards, familiar tools and a highly professional staff that pushed the boundaries of printmaking, Do Ho asked, "How big is your press?" And when he heard about the 'Elephant', a 500-ton press custom-made by Ken Tyler similar to the presses used in scrap yards to crush automobiles, he exclaimed, "I want to do that!" with the excitement of a kid being introduced to a really big toy.

The not-for-profit STPI is an international publisher and dealer in fine art prints and works on paper. The highlight of STPI activities is the Visiting Artist Programme, which generates a majority of the monthly exhibitions. Every year, six established international artists (many of whom have never tried printmaking before) are selected for residencies of four to six weeks. During their residencies, artists explore print and papermaking techniques, pushing their art to 'higher levels of development' in collaboration with skilled printers and a master papermaker. Each residency culminates in an exhibition plus artist-led gallery tours to explain the pieces, process, challenges and breakthroughs.

Every artist-in-residence at STPI finds the experience both challenging and rewarding. Typically, artists are lone creatures who may not be accustomed to collaborating with others or to creating on a schedule. Their time at STPI is defined by both and that can be unsettling.

Do Ho's artistic experience, conversely, is "by nature collaborative," he says. Normally, he works with a trained team of people in Korea to execute his vision.

"I found that here, too, it (the collaboration process) is crucial to the work. However, I had to adjust because the staff does so much for you – they look for the best solution to create the artist's vision, they don't just take orders. It's a good balance. I've been spoiled."

The challenge for Do Ho was "to completely trust their knowledge." He learned printmaking in college, but it was not his main medium. He wanted to do something different with his time at STPI and experienced lots of trial and error. "I felt nervous," he explained, "Like I was wasting time, and papermaking was totally new. I wish the process could be more direct. Drawings are more simple initially, but then forms (through printmaking) become more complex."

The experience turned into a marriage of the artist's needs and vision with STPI's technical expertise. The reward? Without hesitation, Do Ho stated, "A fruitful, successful time; a short, intense period."

Like all artists who spend time at STPI, Do Ho tested many techniques: photo-etching, digital technology, traditional etching, lithography and papermaking.

After much experimentation, 'drawing' with thread became the breakthrough moment when Do Ho saw "the quality of lines made with water and gravity; a 2-D space



Do Ho Suh's work Floor made of PVC figures, glass plates, Phenolic sheets, polyurethane resin; photo courtesy of Do Ho Suh



Do Ho Suh working with thread drawings on STPI handmade paper; photo courtesy of STPI

becomes 3-D." Related to his fabric architecture, Do Ho created thread forms on organza which were applied to wet paper pulp. To complete the works, an army of 22 people, including hired interns and art students, worked with surgical precision to pull off the organza, tape and other debris to create beautiful thread drawings in complex pulp stratas.

Karmic Juggler, completed during the residency, includes 100,000 concentric circles drawn using wooden spools. Do Ho said, "They were all done by hand and had a life of their own." He added that the piece "relates to the Buddhist practice to not say bad things. I am capturing people's spirits and their essence; everyone is related."

As an STPI docent, I am always curious about how the intense programme affects an artist's future work. Do Ho said that between each residency period, he was inspired "to go back to old sketch books and continue working, creating a whole new body of work." He may not always use the same medium, but might expand on the new themes.

That's the essence and hope of the programme, one artist at a time.

I am still in awe of the amount of patience and concentration Do Ho's work takes to complete. And I still smile each time I think about his work. Having a crush on Do Ho Suh – I can think of worse fates.

Laura Bales was Managing Editor of *PASSAGE*. She has lived in Singapore for three years and has been a member of FOM nearly as long.

Do Hoh Suh, 9 April to 7 May
Singapore Tyler Print Institute
Walkthrough with Do Ho Suh, 9 April 2:30 pm