

Layers of identity

Artist Eun-Kyung Suh's multimedia installation explores adoptee stories | BY MARTHA VICKERY

With characteristic mystery, Duluth textile artist Eun-Kyung Suh has recently created a nearly monochromatic exhibit that seems devoid of detail, yet upon examination, is packed with information. The theme is the identity of Korean adoptees, and it is one in a series of this artist's exhibits exploring the subgroups of the Korean diaspora.

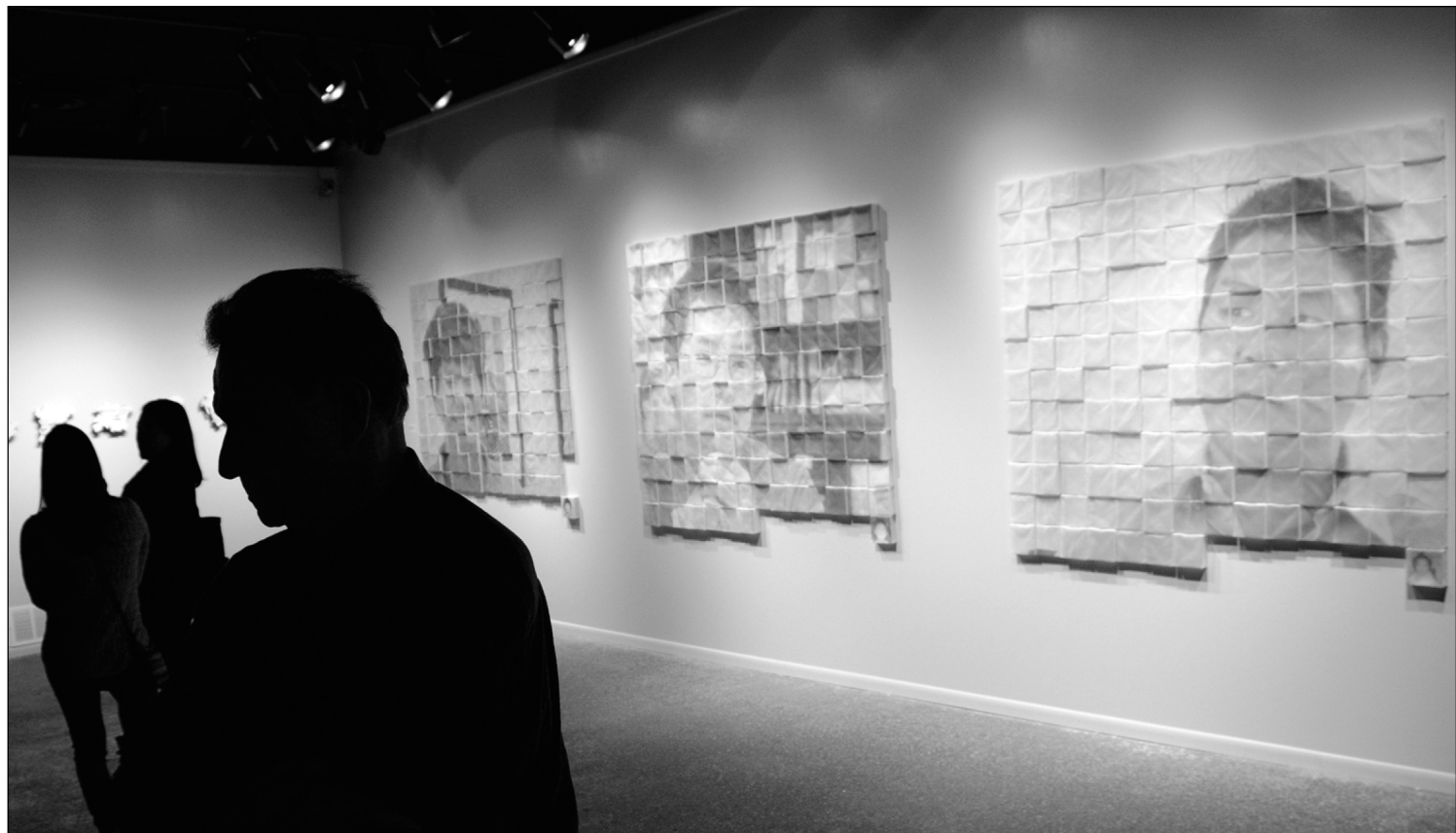
This multi-media exhibit, entitled simply *Diaspora*, was at the Catherine G. Murphy Gallery on the campus of St. Catherine University in St. Paul, and was on display through October 21.

Suh, an immigrant Korean American, collaborated on the research and materials for the exhibit with Jennifer Arndt-Johns, a filmmaker and Korean adoptee who has been working on an oral history project of Korean American Minnesotans of all kinds. One of the subgroups in the oral history collection are Korean adoptees, and Suh watched the entire collection of videos in preparation for doing her exhibit, ultimately choosing three of them for a video installation portion of the exhibit.

Suh said she also contacted some Korean adoptees through her own network and interviewed some of them. Of those, life stories and photos of three interviewees were used for the exhibit.

Suh said she felt uncomfortable at first approaching the prospective subjects of her exhibition. "I didn't have any close relationship with any of them, and it required me to ask a lot of questions about their personal history," she said. She decided on a multi-interview approach where she talked in a first interview about what she wanted to do, and invited them to a second interview if they wanted to move forward.

In constructing the exhibit, Suh used boxes wrapped with fabric. On a grid, she composed a large portrait photo made from textile boxes. The person's portrait photo was superimposed on the fabric. Upon close examination, however, a viewer can see that the darks and lights of the photos are made with Korean and English letters — the narrative of that person's story,



Opening night at the Catherine G. Murphy Gallery (top) and the artist in front of the oral history video (below).



written in English and Korean, is layered into the portrait.

The layers of fabric used to create the person's face are also story layers in this exhibit. Suh refers to it as a "mosaic" technique, where each piece of a larger picture also has an individual and different meaning. Suh explained that some of the boxes had an English version of that person's story as told to her, some had a Korean version and some are empty. "I wanted to show that they look to outsiders like other Koreans," she said. "Inside, they are American; but at the same time there is a Korean piece. And there are also some areas still unidentified. I really wanted to

show the mixed identity — unknown, Korean and American."

Another part of the exhibit used amorphous wooden shapes — they are geographical outlines of South Korea's nine provinces and three major cities — displayed in a straight line along one wall. A motion sensor trips a voice recording which says *umma* in various people's voices. This part of the exhibit is symbolic of adoptees' return to Korea in search of birth families.

The artist said she asked interviewees to simply say *umma* for the recorder. Some sound very "dry," she said, and the pronunciation is not technically correct, which is

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result of the cutting off of ties with birth family. "One woman practiced for it a lot, but it was very emotional when she said it because she had just found out her birth mother had passed away." She found out only after the person had finished the recording why the word was packed with such meaning for that interviewee, Suh said.

Suh used a textile treatment similar to *Diaspora* for her recent installation *Torn From Home*, which was at Metropolitan State University this spring, which used photos of Korean so-called comfort women, who were once forced prostitutes for the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. There stories also appeared in type on the sides of the boxes, and their photos on the fronts. The comfort women's stories was another in the series that

explores experiences of the Korean diaspora.

In the *Diaspora* exhibit, however, the text is more difficult to see. On the eyes, the text is more visible, the artist explained. But on the darker clothing part, there is more text, which is more disguised by the darker area.

Suh said the research for the exhibit informed her technical execution of the project. Making the stories hard to see was intentional, the artist said. "My purpose was to say 'you don't really see them,'" she explained. "You can't know their inner identity unless you really approach them and make every effort to know." ●

Suh is a professor of art at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, where she has taught since 2002. Her website is: www.d.umn.edu/~esuh.