

Time, family and memory at the MIA

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The list of materials used in Eun-Kyung Suh's "Black" is short and evocative: "silk organza, thread, my daughter's childhood clothing." It is several dozen swatches of black fabric folded and sewn into limp cones that cluster like sleeping bats on a wall of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program gallery at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The piece is dedicated to Suh's father, Byung-Hee Suh, who died in April and around whose absence the delicate, sheer fabric is wrapped. Like Mayumi Amada, whose work fills an adjacent gallery, Suh muses on the fleeting nature of existence and the threads of memory linking generations. Both Suh, born and raised in South Korea, and Amada, whose family is from Japan, bring an Eastern sensibility to those subjects, honoring ancestors while accepting impermanence as a defining feature of life. With "White," Suh inverts the form of "Black," sewing pieces of silk organza into light, blossom-shaped pillows. Small squares of her father's shirts and neckties nestle in the center of each silk puff. Silk, which Suh uses in all of the pieces for this show, is commonly chosen by makers of traditional Korean bojagi, cloths used for wrapping or decoration, sometimes in the form of colorful patchworks. Suh's bojagi are sewn into small boxes of varying dimensions, most containing black and white photographs visible through tiny, rectangular windows. A set of red boxes contain photos that might be found in a typical Midwestern family album — parades, family portraits, winter scenes, shots of the lake cabin — and when the boxes turn blue the images change, too, to scenes that might come from Suh's native Korea: more family portraits, elephants in a ring, a young pregnant woman with two small children. These are memories — maybe Suh's, maybe not — treated with care and compassion, each swaddled in its own cloth container. In the notes for the show, titled "The Voided," Suh is quoted saying she creates the vessels as "a metaphor for human emotion, memory and experience." She combines tradition, a kind of cultural memory, with personal memories in a practice that is part artistic act, part ritual. Entering Amada's half of the exhibition forces viewers between two circular mirrors that face each other, creating a version of the common optical illusion of an infinite, repeating space. She places the viewer not just in the context of one person in a long string of generations, as Suh does, but as one point in a much vaster, difficult to imagine realm: infinity. Amada makes her point clear with the phrase "OUR LIFE ON EARTH: A BLIP IN ETERNITY" sliced precisely into a white tarp suspended from the ceiling in the darkened gallery. Still, there is no losing oneself in boundless time and space here; Amada won't allow it. She, too, celebrates the connections we forge during our lifetimes and the impact of the individual on eternity, however small. Amada transforms humble, disposable materials into beautiful objects. Flowers softly glowing with blue, LED-generated light have, on closer inspection, clear plastic petals cut from the rounded bottoms of one- and two-liter bottles. Her "Bouquets from Grandmas" have thin slices of aluminum sheeting for stems and for blossoms more slices of clear plastic curled into tight layers. The plastic flowers cast limpid shadows on the gallery wall. Left alone, Amada's creations would far outlast their natural counterparts. Or they could be recycled, their blip in eternity passed.