

*Enshrined Memory*

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Memories are ephemeral. As treasured as they may be, memories transform and fade over time. It is the shared humanity of cherished memories that forms the source of Eun-Kyung Suh's artwork, shown recently at the Kansas City Artist's Coalition.

Originally a metal smith and jewelry maker, in 2008 Suh made a shift to fiber, which she perceives as a second skin. There was a cultural component to this change. Suh is from Korea where the historical tradition of *Bojagi* began. As Korean costume does not have pockets, *Bojagi* was originally created out of scraps of cloth for wrapping and carrying. They became canvases upon which women, generally with no art training, embellished the surfaces with techniques such as embroidery, painting, dyeing and quilting to reclaim and transform the cloth into beautiful containers.

Drawing on this tradition, Eun-Kyung Suh sews individual boxes with meticulous craft. She attaches one patch of fabric to another, echoing the vertical and horizontal structure of cloth itself, layering colors, patterns and stitches to incrementally construct vessels in which she enshrines the printed, partially faded photographs of relatives, friends and strangers.

For many of her pieces Suh has chosen to work in organza (*nobang* in Korean) because of its translucency. She learned through experimentation that, when she prints photographs on the *nobang*, about half of the image prints, while half will not. This imbues those images with a sense of ephemerality and passing time. The gathering of these images is an important part of the process. They come from family photo albums, her own as well as those of acquaintances, garage sales, estate sales and thrift stores. Suh believes that things we discard somehow do stay with us and the cumulative effect subtly speaks of the universality of family memory and the power of shared experiences that transcend time, culture and geography. Seldom has organza been so poignantly deployed.

This particular iteration of the exhibition was comprised of three installations in a quiet, somewhat secluded gallery that was, for the most part, ideal. The individual boxes of *Red* and *Blue*, each with its own window, were installed in a straight line across the walls approximately at eye level. Moving past the boxes it soon became apparent that in most cases, a photograph of a person was within, looking back out. It was surprising to be greeted in this way because from a distance, the initial impression of the boxes was that they held something private and intimate and that looking within would constitute an act of voyeurism. But instead, the interiors were revealed to be remarkably welcoming, even seductive. In a few of the boxes the image of the person was not conveniently visible and occasionally not there at all. The desire and curiosity created by that elusiveness or absence was intriguing. Viewers could be seen twisting around and peering intently to make sure they hadn't missed anyone, eloquently expressing the evocative power of the work. Suh related seeing parents lift children up to peek inside the boxes in order to share the moments of discovery. While she prefers to install the works in what she calls a "rhythmic" fashion so that they can be more widely accessible, this installation was very effective.

*Red* and *Blue* are two parts of a larger five-piece installation, the colors of which symbolize the Five Elements: Fire, Earth, Water, Air and Wood. Blue is East and Spring, Red South

and Summer. As the Kansas City space was relatively small, Suh could not show all five. While the entire composition would be wonderful to see, these pieces stand eloquently on their own.

The third work in the exhibition, *Fragmented Memory*, is actively engaged in a constant articulation of memory. Suh collects old fabric and photographs during her travels to create boxes that read almost as pages of a journal. At every new destination, including Kansas City, she is collecting materials and the work will continue to grow with each newly discovered place, person and experience. In this way the work is looking forward as well as back.

Sensitive installation of artwork, particularly work this subtle and nuanced, can be challenging. The secluded quiet of the Coalition gallery and meticulous installation of the artwork created an environment respectful to the intimate encounters this work inspires, but harsh lighting created shadows that appeared to have symbolic meaning not intended by the artist. Michelangelo's phrase "Speak Softly Here" appropriately expresses both the work and the environment in which it should be seen in order to fully perceive its quiet, elegant stories.