

KIM BEOM

RANDOM LIFE

Korean conceptual artist Kim Beom claims that “what you see is what you see” and “what you see is not what you see”—which, for viewers, is a good reason to approach his works with strong doses of imagination and complicity. The artist’s curious forays into materialism and existentialism are present in his assemblages of found objects. For example, *An Iron in the Form of a Radio*, *a Kettle in the Form of an Iron*, and *a Radio in the Form of a Kettle* (2002), redefined essence through visual assumption. Kim’s 2010 installation *Objects Being Taught They Are Nothing But Tools* offered a surreal apologue on the nature of being. If existence precedes essence, as the artist’s works suggest, there is no predetermined nature to be found in, say, an iron. When Kim erases visual context from innocuous items such as a bottle or a pepper grinder by shrouding them in paper pulp, he further implies that they exist only insofar as we imagine them.

In “Random Life,” Kim’s first solo exhibition in Singapore, the artist presented new works created during a 2016 residency at STPI, which continued his scrutiny of the slippage between imagery, perception and language. Kim gathered 14 ambiguous sculptural forms from the “Paper Wrapped” series atop a white table. His creations resemble primitive ceramics with thick dollops of gray, black and cream, but they are assorted containers that once held soap, noodles or coffee, smothered now in thick “glazes” of monochrome paper pulp. By concealing identity and function, the artist transforms these objects into outlandish symbols, conjuring the fantastical contours of a dinosaur in *Paper Wrapped (Stain Remover)*, and the figures of Rodin’s famed *Burghers of Calais* (1884–89) in *Paper Wrapped (Dishwashing Soaps)*. Kim blankets his throwaways in paper to contemplative effect, relating their muted tonal variations and pulpy facets to the aesthetics of Suseok viewing stones, valued for their subtleties of shape and surface.

Other works at STPI included several cyanotypes and Vandyke brown contact prints, stencil-works and lithographs. The stencil-based series “Interior Items for Tyrants” comprises decorative works such as Kim’s jaunty tessellated *Rats and Bats* wallpapers, while *Triumph of Evil* is a wall-work of wooden tiles stenciled in arrogant black-and-white goth motifs of chains, skulls and bones. The standout was Kim’s elegant, untitled series of lithographs. Each of these 11 large abstractions depicts massy black-ink fields—some subdued, others loosely graphic, all reminiscent of dense velvety collages—on off-white paper. On each, Kim scrawls intriguing “captions,” which are flipped owing to the reverse printing process, while lithographic plate borders and tape marks remain visible, reflecting the artist’s intent to



underscore the printing methodology itself. Kim’s delightfully surreal subtitles kindle the inked forms’ essence: *Nose of a Pig Smells Accelerator*, *Front Toe of Lion Standing on a Miniature Axe that Was Lost by a Tourist from Hawaii*, and *A Man in Subway Talking with His Fist the Dot at the Top Right Is Nothing* all acquire pictorial esprit. Furthermore, they brook no off-script conceptual improvisation, unlike the open-ended sculptural discourses of “Paper Wrapped.” These are the artist’s imaginings, not ours.

Throughout his practice, Kim utilizes sparse mediums to gently prize form from language. He invites uncoupling between what is clearly observed and what he tells us to observe, and these tricky gaps are where mischief lurks. Kim engages them via witty titles, pulp-layered cup-noodles and helpful instructions: *Untitled (Trees)* is a pair of dignified but nebulous paper-pulp forms of pure white, one of which is accompanied by a pencil-written note that reads, “From 9AM to 5PM, it is exactly the thing whatever you think it is / From 5PM to 9AM in the next morning, it is a tree.” In “Random Life,” the artist’s contextual didactics are engaging as ever; yet even without his philosophical teases, the expressive physicality of Kim’s cocooned pulp-works and the vigor of his graceful lithographic compositions are in and of themselves coherent. It is their eloquent nature.

MARYBETH STOCK