

Taejoong Kim: Nature Revealed

By Russet Lederman

Taejoong Kim is a wanderer. With the forest as his backdrop, he seeks photographic encounters that are in sharp contrast to the mediated and disjunctive experiences of contemporary life. His images of dense, brooding and deeply layered forests subtly illuminated by twilight are an attempt to reconnect with the present moment through his senses. Sound, smell touch—all are vividly conveyed to the viewer in photographs and video installations that metaphorically evoke self-discovery through a primordial experience with the natural world.

Despite his native Korea's breathtaking natural beauty—it is a nation surrounded by water and covered by dense pine forests—the landscape was rarely a subject in historical Korean photography. It was not until the 1980s that the landscape began to surface in “photographs as a metaphorical visual language or abstract form — a means of looking inside oneself, a means of expressing Korean thought.”¹ Like Taejoong Kim, many of the photographers who began to explore the landscape had studied abroad and returned to Korea after residencies in Europe and America. Their sense of place was shaped by both distance from and proximity to their mother country.

Kim, whose parents initially refused to acknowledge his artistic talents, received training as an exchange student at the Bauhaus-Universität in Weimar, Germany. There he discovered the Black Forest and began a practice of wandering the forests in search of a visual and spiritual sense of place. Successive artist residencies took him to Poland and France, with time in between dedicated to his undergraduate and graduate study in photography at Chung-Ang University in Seoul, Korea.

A lover of poetry and literature, Kim's forest wanderings in Korea, Poland, Germany and France are deeply influenced by the philosophical words and ideas of Hyeong-do Gi's *The Black Leaf in My Mouth*, Herman Hesse's *Narcissus and Goldmund* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. A

¹ Bohnchang Koo, “Contemporary Korean Photographers: The New Generation,” in FotoFest 2000 (Houston: FotoFest, 2000), 20.

meditative mystery that is simultaneously real and fictive shapes much of Kim's photographic process. His prints and video installations convey a visual and sensual experience that embodies the darkness of Gi's poetry with the magic realism of Márquez and the self-discovery of Hesse.

Kim's forest images gained personal and emotional significance in 2011 with his *Solitas* series, which was largely shot in the Black Forest. At the time, he was questioning his photographic practice and thought that these would be his final photographs. With little to lose and a desire to savor his last moments as a fine art photographer, Kim's creative approach encompassed his full being and initiated a performative process that is still at the core of his forest-related prints and video installations. In a combination of scripted and freeform actions, Kim traveled deep into the forest on daytime walks that could last 5 or more hours. He wandered in search of a location that was at once familiar and magical, similar to Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—an inspiration for the *Solitas* series—where the mundane had the potential to become extraordinary.

Returning to the selected location at sunset accompanied by a local individual, Kim took strobe-lit photographs of his model standing among darkened limbs and branches set against a waning day sky. Throughout the *Solitas* series, the eerie combination of light, space and color wrapped his models, whose faces are purposefully blurred, in visual mystery. Colors in Kim's unaltered images took on a subtle, yet highly saturated appearance as people were consumed by nature's dense tapestry.

Ultimately, nature transcended a visible human presence in Kim's work and his subsequent *Foresta* and *Foresta-reverse* series are devoid of people. In *Foresta*, begun in 2013, dark foliage rises from the earth, unsuccessfully obscuring the night sky. Human emotion is less palpable and the images from Kim's forest wanderings give way to a reality that verges on otherworldliness. Fact and fiction become indistinguishable in a multi-layered experience that pushes photography beyond the printed image and into the realm of video.

In *Foresta-reverse*, Kim's images come in pairs as he sought to extract the space "in between." Kim continued to wander deep in the forests of Poland,

Germany and Korea, but this time he photographed his selected location from both front and back perspectives separated by 180 degrees. Working with a DSLR camera on a tripod, Kim took on the role of a shaman-priest who illuminates his forest scene at various distances with hand-held strobe lights as he moved behind his remotely controlled stationary camera. The results are prints and video installations that capture two sides of a forest scene through a dance that merges the camera and photographer's eye into a meditative tool at the intersection of spiritual and natural worlds.

Always exhibited in pairs, his *Foresta-reverse* prints are unaltered views. In contrast, the video installations that coexist with and are an integral component of the *Foresta-reverse* image production process are highly manipulated. Projected upon a large format black and white composite image of paired front and back views are sequenced color images of the same scene photographed in Kim's strobe-light production dance. The resulting videos reveal flashes of Kim's strobe-lit forest scenes in tandem with audio from his movements. The video's ominous lightning storm effects expose an eerily lit fantasy world with roots grounded in real time and space. The viewer becomes a guest in a spirit-summoning séance that invites a rethinking of one's experience of place.

Similar to the character Goldmund in Herman Hesse's *Narcissus and Goldmund*, Kim's forest series are evidence of a wandering existence in pursuit of life's meaning. Through a photographic practice that combines the familiar with the supernatural, Kim finds voice in exposing unseen spirituality at the edge of human existence. The beauty and meditative power in his complex photographs offer a timeless contemplation of direct experience.