

Atta Kim

Water Does Not Soak in Rain

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Understanding Atta Kim's oeuvre does not so much require an understanding of his projects, methods and subjects, as it demands an appreciation for the South Korean artist's philosophy. Atta Kim is not a contemporary artist in pursuit of aesthetic or post modern concerns, but we can perceive his work more within the context of, for example, Medieval art: inseparable from the spiritual ideals held by the practitioner. The extent of the union between the artist (born Seok-joong Kim), his work and his Buddhist philosophies is evident in his adopted alias, Atta, which are the Korean characters for "I" and "other".

This retrospective monograph that collates Kim's work from the 1980s to today chronicles his various projects which are divided into several chapters. Each of these denotes the artist's particular philosophical epochs, almost as if they were different levels of wisdom and understanding of his ongoing preoccupation with, to put it simply, *being*. This format is of course necessitated by the biographical nature of this publication, but it lends itself well to Kim's particular manner of making and developing his work and exploring concepts. With that said, inspection of the dates of many of his photographs would suggest that rather than simply completing a body of work before moving on to another stage, all of his projects are essentially ongoing. Most of the chapters in the book are introduced with a mantra or poignant anecdote by the artist that gently sheds light onto the proceeding images without demanding a prescribed interpretation from the viewer.

More in the manner of a pilgrim than an artist, Kim's practice seems to have been punctuated by particular, isolated events or encounters. One of his earlier revelations occurred whilst working in a psychiatric hospital in 1985 when a patient demanded that he ate a chess piece that was covered in a layer of dirt. Kim's astonishment at the pure, whiteness of the object (which was

actually made of rice) that had been cleansed by his saliva made him realise that he had been looking at the world through a filter of preconceptions: “*The chess piece was not just a ball of rice, but a ball of wisdom.*”

Shortly after that incident, and following a conversation with an aged monk whom Kim photographed for part of a project to document individuals considered by the state as “Human Cultural Assets”, Kim devoted himself to a type of “image training”, whereby he led a nocturnal existence for a year. Throughout this extraordinary exercise, Kim resided outdoors between the hours of 7pm and 7am, in an attempt to ascertain an holistic understanding of the relationship between all things animate and inanimate. Dedicated to the writings of Martin Heidegger, the material outcome of this exercise was his series *In-der-Welt-sein* (1990 – 92), which consisted of monochrome images made over periods of at least two hours. The long exposure method – necessitated by the conditions in which Kim was operating – represents, and perhaps objectifies, Kim’s own meditations. The resulting images are far from spectacular; boulders, paths, a simple crack in the earth; it is difficult to appreciate the extent of this remarkable process from his modest images alone.

The human figure has been a feature throughout Kim’s practice. At around the same time as *In-der-Welt-sein*, Kim began his *Deconstruction* (1991 – 95) series, which explored Kim’s thoughts on human emancipation of body and mind. This was realised through documented performances of naked figures, draped, laid, scattered and otherwise surreally distributed – apparently free of consciousness – across various landscapes. The incongruous juxtaposition of the naked human form developed throughout the 1990s under the umbrella title *The Museum Project* (1995 – 2002). A shift to colour photography and the use of other props, particularly Perspex display cases in which to contain the nudes, defines this diverse collection. In the making of this work, Kim required the permission of a Buddhist abbot to photograph at temples and other sacred sites. After lengthy negotiations and theological discourse, Kim’s wishes were granted on the condition that, like the monks, he had his head shaved, which he agreed to, and then shaved the heads of all of his models. The controversial subject matter and provocative imagery of the *Museum Project*, such as the intravenous-fed crucified nudes in *The Jesus Series* (2002), seem entirely removed from the quiet, contemplative meditations of Kim’s previous work.

The subversion of the photograph as referent to a single, isolated moment in time has preoccupied Kim's more recent works, although it is unlikely that Kim would see it in such pedestrian, photographic terms. His *ON-AIR Project[s]* (2002 – present) involve long exposures (of eight hours, in each instance) and multiple exposures or multi-layered, digitally combined images. Notable amongst these separate bodies of work are his eight-hour exposures made in major cities throughout the world. Unlike most images made over time in urban environments, the typical, melodramatic streaks of vehicle headlights are reduced to modest specks on the film emulsion. Instead of appearing urgent and commanding, the vehicles become tiny traces; bits of angel dust floating like spirits through the conurbation.

Kim perverts the concept of the photograph as a depicter of singular moments to an extreme in the *Indala Series* (2007). In these works, he digitally layers as many as 10,000 different photographs of a city (the source of these images is not disclosed) to form a single image. Needless to say that the resulting images, which he has made all over the world, are little more than a mass of greyness, however, to even attempt to describe them seems somewhat beside the point.

According to the interview with Kim that is transcribed in this volume, these works, and the other eight-hour exposures, attempt to define an identity for each city, which is much more fragile than we might expect. By layering so many different still frames together every aspect of pictorial detail is obliterated, which Kim sees as an opportunity to draw our attention to the fact that our existence can only ever be temporary. In Kim's own words; "*... it is about my devotion and effort to redirect and reconfirm the precious value of every existence before its eventual, but inevitable, encounter with the fate of disappearance.*"

Water Does Not Soak in Rain is a comprehensive and handsomely produced introduction to a fascinating and prolific practitioner whose work seems refreshingly free from Western cynicisms.