

Fantasy and Confrontation

in the work of Hye Rim Lee

By Rudolph Hudsucker

Diving into new reality then floating in virtual space, cyborg superhero TOKI – the creation of Auckland-based Korean inter-media artist Hye Rim Lee – provokes, teases, manipulates and performs. Ever evolving, ever confounding, TOKI moves through an ever expanding digital universe. In a radical critique of proliferating boy game computer culture, TOKI refuses to conform to any fantasy other than her own. Lee's cyber world is one full of possibilities but fraught with the dangers of a technological society intent on the idea of instant purchasable transformation - the promise of beauty, perfection, economy and fulfillment.

The Myth of TOKI

First arriving on the scene as a computer-manipulated character, played by a human actor, in "Hello Toki ;)", 2002, at Auckland's Moving Image Centre - Lee's 2003 exhibition, "The Birth of TOKI", at Starkwhite, expanded on her creation myth. TOKI is conceived through a process of animation rendering, revealing a multiplicity of faces and aspects to her personality. She can be cute, but she can also be evil. TOKI does what ever she pleases, presumably, being a cyborg, remaining immune to rules or ramifications.

TOKI has developed – in non-linear fashion - through childhood, through adolescence and into a highly sexualized adult, ever growing in sophistication and her power to inform or deceive. TOKI has been projected on to walls of public spaces. She has appeared in short videos. She has been mass-produced into a plastic inflatable doll, as in "Mini TOKI" - smiling Zen-like in a post-consumerist trance, or conspiring to gather in an army of miniature clones. In an age of mass conformity, TOKI is only too aware of how easily replicable her status really is.

Lee first moved to New Zealand from Korea in the early 1990s looking for a fresh start after the double tragedies of losing her parents to cancer and her singing voice in an operation to remove her tonsils; Lee had been a professional soprano, following in the foot-steps of her late mother, a famous opera singer. In Auckland Lee began studying painting at Unitec but after a return visit to Seoul, which exposed her to the artistic innovations happening in new media, she turned to a new direction.

In Korea inter-media or multi-media art was everywhere. It's presence reflected a culture that had long embraced technology and a society that had been in a state of rapid flux and constant change, following the economic reforms of the early 1960s, which saw growth rates of at least 7 per cent for the next twenty-five years. Driving the boom were electronics companies like Samsung and Goldstar, producing electronic products and investing heavily – aided by government spending – in research and development.

At the same time Korean artist Nam-June Paik, along with a handful of other innovators in Germany and New York, was creating the new art form of video art. Paik - now recognised as one of the most influential artists of the late twentieth century - would relentlessly continue breaking new ground. Having been the first artist to make sculpture out of televisions, he was also among the first to question, challenge, resist and interfere with the accelerating numbers of programmed and indoctrinating - often subliminal - commercial messages being rapidly transmitted through the new medium. Paik attempted to make interactive what was an increasingly dumbed-down, passive or even pacifying form of entertainment. Despite his anti-establishment views, his success is celebrated by Koreans and a new generation of artists has been inspired by his work.

Upon returning to Auckland, Lee enrolled in Elam's Inter-media and Time-based Arts department that had recently been founded by Auckland artist Phil Dadson. Lee graduated in 2002 and her career has quickly taken off. Leading a team of technical engineers, her work is gaining in complexity while the artist is sharpening her focus. In 2004 Lee received Screen Innovation Production funding, a partnership between Creative New Zealand and the New Zealand Film Commission, to make five new works on DVD to be used as part of a series of installations. The first work "Powder Room" has already been completed and was exhibited earlier in 2005, alongside previous video work, "Super Toy", at Auckland's The Gus Fisher Gallery.

Confronting the Technological Environment

Lee is creating her work in a time, she says, when for many Korean women, getting plastic surgery is as casual an act as getting a haircut. With the rise of new technology and personal wealth has come the rapid adoption of Western consumerism. Traditional Confucius concepts of the Korean woman's body as something to be protected or hidden are quickly giving way to the notion of a woman's body as a sexualized desirable object, to be used to sell products, including beauty itself. Contemporary Korean youth

culture is increasingly saturated with images and notions of Western beauty.

Iconic media theorist “prophet of the electronic age” Marshall McLuhan wrote extensively, in the 1960s, on the new technological environment and its psychic and social consequences. In “The Medium is the Massage” McLuhan writes: “All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered.”

Speaking to “Playboy Magazine” in 1969, McLuhan was less circumspect: “I call this form of self-hypnosis [mass media culture] - Narcissus narcosis, a syndrome whereby man remains as unaware of the psychic and social effects of his new technology as a fish of the water it swims in. As a result, precisely at the point where a new media-induced environment becomes all pervasive and transmogrifies our sensory balance, it also becomes invisible.”

Perhaps Lee’s work casts a weather vane into the currents of an invisible field of electronic meaning and movement. One thing that Lee hasn’t been afraid of is confronting change. Unlike the work of Japanese artist Mariko Mori - who’s earlier work shared, with Lee, a critical re-negotiation of the traditional roles of Asian women, but whose more recent projects seem headed into some kind of new age, sensational, utopian mental oblivion – Lee’s is a critical present, future and past that will either be dealt or coped with or not. It suggests that the future – though it may not be so worry-free, spiritually united, connected or one as Mori, in her studies of brain wave science, would like to engineer - it could at least be better, freer, more equal, more fun.

“Art’s task is to contribute to evolution, to encourage the mind, to guarantee a detached view of social changes, to conjure up positive energies, to create sensuousness, to reconcile reason and instinct, to research possibilities, to destroy clichés and prejudices. Most people don’t see it that way” - Pipilotti Rist

e-mail interview, October, 2005

Hi white fungus I am really sorry. I've just got home. Hope it's not too late. But if it is, don't worry we can do it next time. It's really late but I tried my best. Cheers Hye Rim >

Is this the second time you will have exhibited in Wellington? the first time was part of the prospect

show? can you tell me a little about that?

Yes I was a part of Prospect 2004 and my work BOOM BOOOM: super heroine super beauty was installed at Mediaplex, NZ Film Archive.

when did you make 'Super Toy'?

I made it in December 2004. Super Toy was premiered at the Break/Shift exhibition at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery

'Super Toy' deals quite explicitly with plastic surgery and the idea of transformation. What is the significance of these things here or in Korea?

Super Toy is a part of the ongoing series TOKI/Cyborg Project: game, pop and cyber world, a project which focuses on character modeling. It also considers how boy game culture encourages the fantasy of the perfectly constructed female body. This exhibition seeks to investigate ideas about the relationship between beauty, perfection, and technological progress.

Beauty is now is a mass-produced commodity that can be purchased. This project explores the motivation, driven by mass media and advertising, that propels such a huge number of women to undertake invasive surgical procedures. Magazines and television show the objectification of femininity, co-modification of beauty, and the manipulation of insecurity about self and status.

I investigate the issue of changing perception of Korean women's constructed beauty, plastic surgery and the suggestion that this is an acceptable practice in order to construct ideal beauty and desirability. Plastic surgery techniques promoted to Asian women also include the process of 'vaginal rejuvenation' for cosmetic purposes and, of course, breast enlargement.

When you have spoken of TOKI before you have said that she has very different aspects to her personality, she isn't just one thing like "good" or "bad." Can you tell me more about TOKI and her personality?

The Birth of TOKI: hundreds and thousands is one series (2003) in a body of work that develops and manifests the cyborg character TOKI. The series of prints proposes the moment when TOKI is born, drawing on all the implicit associations of genealogy, race, gender and breeding long associated with the notion of birth.

I explore the process of identity exploration in relation to how an adolescent explores and develops their own identity. I produced 9 portraits of TOKI's close-up face suggesting 9 traits of personality, or 9 stages of the conception of birth. Through the process of rendering 9 times, she reveals herself with 9 different faces. She is multi-dimensional and able to shift from being cute to feminine, sexual, angelic or evil.

How was the experience of doing your show at Gus Fisher?

Great opportunity to explore the spaces. The whole proposal and idea were generated from utilizing the space. Great sponsors to work with. Thanks to all the sponsors and the Gus Fisher Gallery's support to make the show happen.

What are you working on now?

Preparing AK CBD project: I am commissioned to produce the 1st public moving image DVD projection in AK CBD area. Project due next June 2006. Preparing a new project for artist residency in Seoul (my project needs at least 6 months to finish so I have started the project already) Preparing my solo show for next year at Starkwhite.

Are you going to Korea next year? if so, what will you be doing there?

I have been awarded a 3 month international artist residency at SSamzie Space Studio Programme in Seoul Korea. I will be producing a new project and have an exhibition at SSamzie Space Gallery.

I'm also involved in an international group exhibition, Fiction@Love: Ultra New Vision of Contemporary Art at MOCA Shanghai in January 2006.

Rudolph Hudsucker, 'Fantasy and Confrontation, in the work of Hye Rim Lee',
White Fungus, issue 5, 2005, pp.22-27