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Koo Kyung Sook @ Sac State

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by [Julia Couzens](#)



Markings 18-4, 2018 (detail), relief woodcut and collage, 38.75 x 229.5 inches

To confront the panoramic expanses of Koo Kyung Sook's relief woodcuts is to be embraced by a fully orchestrated opera of gesture, touch and materiality. In this exhibition, titled *Markings*, mural-scale woodblocks and manipulated digital prints span the walls in roiling, bubbling, layered aggregates of ink: leaking, translucent stains sunk deep into the richness of mulberry paper, a material long lauded for its enduring strength.

The show is composed of the series of works Koo has been developing since she underwent extended medical treatments in 2004, undertaken to counteract the effects of direct bodily exposure to photo chemicals. Those treatments became the lens through which she came to view human biology as a syncretic system of abstract, collaborative layers. This synchronicity is the conceptual premise and metaphorical backbone of her work.

Invisible Torso 3 – red (2005) is the earliest work in the show. It represents Koo's shift from sculpture, which had been the focus of her practice, into two-dimensional graphic works probing the biological lexicon of the body. *Invisible Torso 3 – red* is a spectacle of cell-like

configurations that appear to rise, fall, and cluster into an armless torso. To create the totemic, monumental form, Koo repeatedly imprinted her body over sheets of bubble wrap soaked in photo chemicals. Developed from the fragmentary sequence of these imprints, the piece was digitally printed and assembled in a grid of 16 sheets of mulberry paper. Anchoring one end of the gallery, the work is a gigantic haunting spirit body, a touchstone for the entire exhibition.

To address her desire for a more sculptural method of image production, Koo, in 2013, consulted master printer Yun Yeo Guel who introduced her to woodblock printing, a technique that in Korea dates to the 8th century CE. Koo's version of it begins with a digitally

assembled composite of her body traced onto medium-density fiberboard. The image is then carved into the board with a power tool. For the deepest cavities she used a router or a computer numerical control



Invisible Torso 3 – red 2005, digital print on mulberry paper, 122 × 97 inches

(CNC) machine. Over these she applied layers of mulberry paper, which she then glued and pounded together by hand to construct the paper relief.

The result of this process is a curious micro/macro duality, one in which the cosmos, the body — and even psychic conditions — are represented as living organisms. The relief topographies of *Markings 17-1, 17-2, and 17-4* (2017), for example, read as quivering, twitching entities — manifestations of things that are as resolutely physical as they are ephemeral. As with the ethical and spiritual writings of Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld, from which Koo takes her



Markings 17-2, 2017, relief woodcut on mulberry paper, 77 x 35 inches

titles, themes of being and nothingness circulate throughout the work. The rivulets and plateaus of her surfaces appear to swarm in a state of perpetual, unsettled motion. Fragments of images, freighted with associations, bob up then slip away, embodying the contingent nature of corporeal experience. In these works, the features of a woman fade in and out of perception, their fragmentation calling to mind to Antonioni's great existential film, *Blow Up*, wherein a photographer uncovers a murder by closely analyzing blurred photographic details. Like the film, they play upon our propensity to construct images and create meaning from abstract shapes.

The most insistently figurative representations appear in a suite of woodcuts, *Markings 14-1, 14-2, and 14-3* (2014). To make them, Koo wrapped her head in plastic bags soaked in developer, which she imprinted onto photographic paper. Working from hundreds of such impressions, she digitally created wholly new entities, the forms of which are positioned like portraits on plain white backgrounds. In them we perceive what appear to be heads, profiles and expressions;

but in fact, they are only traces of the artist's circuitous, laborious process.

Markings 18-1 (2018) is the single largest piece in the show. At just under 20 feet, it spans an entire wall, and represents the current direction of Koo's work. It is a tour de force of process and physicality. Here, figurative references are subsumed in archipelagos of red, green and black — stacks, eddies and thickets of recycled print fragments glued atop a gridded base. Brimming with textural incidents, the hollows, cracks, and fissures form an ambiguous "landscape."

Combined, these works make for an epic investigation into existential presence and a pulsating ode to life.

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"Markings": Koo Kyung Sook @ [University Library Gallery](#) Sac State, through May 17, 2019.

About the Author:

Julia Couzens is a Sacramento-based artist and writer whose work has been widely shown. Her hybrid objects, which were most recently on view at [Patricia Sweetow Gallery](#), are held in museum and public collections throughout the U.S. These include the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts; Berkeley Art Museum; Oakland Museum; Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina; and Yale University. She lives and works on Merritt Island in the Sacramento River delta.

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