

Located between identities, Jin-me Yoon's practice pivots on the axis created by converging constructions and representations of the body, gender, nationality and ethnicity. Yoon's work examines the insufficiency and instability of labels, revealing their unfixed boundaries and false containments, calling on her own hybrid identity (which includes, not exclusively, woman, artist, mother, Korean-Canadian, teacher) to question the stasis of such categories. Yoon sets up, complicates and deconstructs categorization through autobiographical stagings, using her own body and its extensions (family and community) in photographic, video and installation work.

Yoon's on-going series of works entitled *Intersection*, examine the processes of convergence, overlap and cornering, engaging a dangerous humour to reveal and subvert the prescribed relationship between female reproductive biology and the social imperatives surrounding the working woman. If identity is viewed as a palimpsest, it is continually re-mapped and re-written as intersections create new meanings from past histories, current beliefs and future expectations. Personal histories shift and morph as a result of intersecting individual milestones (education, profession, marriage, childbirth), cultural (im)migrations, national identifications and global ubiquities.<sup>1</sup>

Significant to this discussion are the binaries of home and exile, "twin forces which turn the engine of culture."<sup>2</sup> In the *Intersection* works, the ideas of home and motherhood are intertwined with the notions of displacement and banishment. The geographical and cultural displacement Yoon experienced in her own past (emigrating to Vancouver when she was a child) contrasts with the notion of Canada as a birthplace for her children, their motherland, or at least their geographical, if not psychological, home.

*Home is an appropriated space; it does not exist objectively in reality. The notion of 'home' is a fiction we create out of a need to belong.*<sup>3</sup>

The search for *home* in a world which has gone economically and culturally global calls attention to the binaries which concern Yoon and are reflected in her exploration of the professional working woman/mother binary. Crossroads can be sites of simultaneous dislocation from *home* and discovery of *home*, places where the self (as artist, professional, etc.), finds opportunity to be reborn.

Yoon's *Intersection* works are contained within a conceptual and formal axis, playing with converging binaries around maternity. Mothering has its own history, contained within other histories such as feminism, and has its particular social arrangements which problematize the sense of self. Contained within the structure of motherhood are binaries such as poison and nourishment, the experience of lack and of plentitude, power and powerlessness, and a desire to protect one's children, while at the same time wanting to be rid of them.

Giving rise to exilic concepts around the ego, the body and geography, the child initially finds home in the mother, while the mother can lose a sense of individuality, the self displaced by the child. The female body houses another life, then banishes it into the world where the ties that bind mother and child become increasingly psychological rather than physiological. A sense of home is both created and destroyed in the process of motherhood and birth, and home takes on geographical and cultural import as the mother and child (re)gain separate senses of self.

The terms intersection, ambivalence and binary hold within them the key concept of the *encounter*. The *Intersection* works identify crossroads, wrestle with the psychological implications of ambivalence - in which opposite feelings such as love and hate coexist toward the same object or situation - and recognize that binaries, like ambivalences, are mixed notions in which positive and negative components sit side by side while remaining also in opposition.<sup>4</sup> For *Intersection*, Yoon has employed the photograph as a material idiom, referencing advertising tactics, the history of photo-conceptual practices in Vancouver, as well as photography's documentary nature to illustrate the encounters found both in content as well as in formal and aesthetic communicators.<sup>5</sup> Two of Yoon's recent works are large scale photographic diptychs of staged scenes on saturated colour backgrounds. The third is a video projection/installation which marks a departure in Yoon's approach to the *Intersection* project. Extending notions of maternity, these new works play with (mis)identity, inserting an element of volatility and venom into the scenes, finding humor in the tensions of potential hormonal violence.

*Intersection 3*, a deep blue diptych, focuses on the working mother, positing a conflation of traditional masculine and feminine roles. Set into a corner, as are all the *Intersection* works (crucial to the idea of

convergence and cornering - the corner being both a crossroad and a trap), the cropped hair, make-upless figure in this work is essentially androgynous. The left image depicts a testily unsexed Asian figure seated on an office chair in a plaid bathrobe. The figure holds an incongruously Caucasian infant, while clutching a computer mouse - the cord trailing up between splayed legs, slippered feet resting in small puddles of milk. In the dark scene, the figure's face is dramatically illuminated as he/she stares glaze-eyed past the child to some unfixed point. The child is grabbing the figure's robe as if wanting to feed, putting the physical and psychological sex of the figure blatantly into question. In the accompanying photograph, a figure is dressed in a dark suit, striving toward a seriousness of androgyny. The figure's arm is raised in a blurred gesture of anger and implied violence (à la Jeff Wall's angry factory manager in the 1989 *Outburst*) and from her mouth spews an angry stream of milk.<sup>6</sup> Complete with severe glasses, briefcase (left on the ground in a pool of spilled milk), and hand-held slide projector changer, she epitomizes the professional mother.

In *Intersection 5*, a potent pink diptych, the intertangling of sexes is left behind and the poison of motherhood is explored. In the prone image on the left, the artist is portrayed as octopus/mother, multi-limbed, housing squirming children beneath her "little black dress." Wearing a stunned look, milk seeps out of her dress neck, oozing past her collar and bourgeois pearl necklace. The accompanying image is of two topless children seen from the back. They sit in an expansive milk puddle while one of them spits forth a fountain of milk. The spout harbours both charm and danger, ominous in that the children may have sucked life from the prone octopus figure and in spitting it up into the air are frivolously wasting it. Lying in the pool of milk are the pearls, a final sign of the consumed mother.

Moving away from billboard-esque photographic stagings which use the graphic language of the consumer world, *Intersection 4* explores the issues at hand using video, both found footage and staged performance. The silent video projection has three components which include a dominant scene of floating jellyfish, a smaller projection of the artist's head as she struggles to stay awake, and on the joining wall, a shockingly visceral projection of kimchi-making. Yoon's move to video marks a new direction, video serving as a freeing device in process, cost, methodology and conceptual result. Artist and critic Catherine Elwes writes about a

freedom found in video: "...I was free to evolve a more poetic visual language embracing ambiguity, contradiction, and the still unresolved ethical question of exploitation in relation to the imaging of other - in my case the object of my maternal gaze..."<sup>7</sup>

The slow rhythm of the jellyfish projection sets the tone for the piece and anchors the three new *Intersection* works. The opening and closing of these seemingly unsexed floating creatures enhances the idea of unstable boundaries and categories, while the watery scene formally picks up on the dominant colours of the two other images. Despite their androgeny, the jellyfish are sexual in movement and form. Seemingly soft and sensual, they are, in fact, potentially deadly, which works to push the binaries crucial to the parameters of the project as a whole.

Projected beneath the jellyfish is staged footage of a figure's head and shoulders fighting sleep. The figure's eyes shut, slowly re-open, lilt to one side, attempt to focus and circulate in a free-floating rhythm.<sup>8</sup> In this staged exhaustion the ethnic identity of the figure becomes important as the viewer focuses on the eyes, whereby a narrative begins to unfold. This narrative could include tiredness as a result of motherhood, cultural assimilation, or from sleep deprivation caused by professional demands, whether artistic or otherwise.

The most hard-hitting of all the images in the *Intersection* project to date is the projection of hands in latex gloves making kimchi (a Korean staple - a common comfort food that is eaten as a significant condiment). There is a sharp viscerality of color and movement in the imagery, yet the rhythm of the kimchi production relates to that of the jellyfish and closing eyes. The gloved hands caress and open the layers of cabbage, coating the vegetable in a chili paste the colour and texture of fleshy blood which, in short, recalls a birthing experience of sorts.

The *Intersection* project converges masculine and feminine domains within the content of the work while the form - the large scale photographs and video - complicate the artistic preserves of the sexes. Technologically complex works have been a male domain and Yoon works from within this masculine territory to defeat the performed femininity traditionally seen in advertising, on television, etc. Interestingly, video has become a low-tech domestic medium, present at family functions to capture both the momentous and trite details of daily life, giving new voice to the mantra that the

personal is still political. In her subversion of societal sex roles, her use of technology and problematized binaries, Yoon speaks to the psychology of motherhood, to its unstable ambivalences and to the new voice found in the potent encounter.

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#### Footnotes

1 \*Jin-me Yoon's references to community and filiation in the context of nationalism lead to a consideration of diaspora, which is emerging as a privileged term in recent discussions of displacement. Part of a larger semantic field that also includes exile, diaspora bridges the contradictory dimensions of exilic alienation and immigrant assimilation, while containing within it elements critical of both globalism and nationalism."  
Nemiroff, Diana, ed. *Crossings*, National Gallery of Canada, 1998, p. 28.

2 Papastergiadis, Nikos. *Crossings*, National Gallery of Canada, 1998, p.43.

3 Mofokeng, Santu. *home*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1998.

4 Parker, Rozsika. *Torn in Two: The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*, London: Virago, 1995, pp. 5-6.

5 *Intersection* 1 and 2 were made in 1996.

6 This also brings to mind Wall's work *Milk* (1984) in which a down-and-out character holds a brown bagged bottle while sitting against a building on the sidewalk. From the bottle milk copiously and unexpectedly splashes while the viewer considers substance abuse, addiction and general dependency.

7 Elwes, Catherine. *Video Loupe*, London: KT Press, 2000, p. 12.

8 This psuedo-documentary of sleep has a reference to Rodney Grahams' 1994 video work *Halcion Sleep*, further entrenching Yoon's work within a Vancouver context of art production.