

© Dr Catherine Harper

Review: Do-Ho Suh at the Serpentine Gallery (23 April – 26 May 2002). *Embroidery*, July 2002

How would it feel to be held in position by the rigid cruciform of Do-Ho Suh's *Some One* (2001), a regal, ancient armour-form, laboriously layered from so many thousands of military dog tags?

How would it feel to inhabit one of the sixty identical military-style tunics of *High School Uni-form* (1996), stitched closely shoulder to shoulder, sewn front to back, mounted life-like on a caster-frame to create one dark mobile regimented form?

Both works, materially different, filled me with a kind of heaviness. They image erasure of individualism, replacing the personal 'one' or 'I' with the collective, with multiples, and with a kind of resolute and determined craft.

Do-Ho Suh fills two of the other Serpentine galleries with three apparently lighter textile works, scale replicas in translucent silk and nylon of interior spaces of his homes in Korea and New York. Details – the shower faucet, light switches, radiators – are each formed through the meticulous stitching of diaphanous fabric, each element suspended, still, and slightly sagging. That slight sag is significant for my reading of this work: there is a curious quality of melancholy, even weariness, here.

The work is painstakingly made, beautifully coloured (jade green, baby blue, soft pink), and in a different register might even be quirky. But the tiny reduction of scale resultant from the process of pattern-cutting real interiors, then stitching them, plus the careful staging of the fabric works as permitting entry or alternately denying access, coupled with the heavy resonance of the other works (*Some One*, *High School Uni-form*, and others), is highly affective...

Do-Ho Suh maintains that his work is "about carrying the personal space of my childhood memories with me, and taking my nostalgia into the space where I currently live", and certainly the textiles allow rich evocations of memory and nostalgia in many practices. It seems to me, however, that the exquisite crafting, the controlled aesthetic, and the literal measuring out of cloth, of uniforms, of dog-tags, does not conceal or erase the tension apparent in this body of work. The artist asserts the Western ideal of individualism – these are his homes, spaces he inhabits as an 'I'.

Yet the struggle for that individual expression comes at a price – the textile spaces, fabulous as they are, are tired, they sag, they droop, they smother, they reference the rigidity, formality, regimentation of a kind of heavy collectivity. If they work to create memory-rich, nostalgic, personal spaces for Do-Ho Suh, then those remembrances are not entirely blissful.