

Inversions: Hyung Min Yoon's "Heaven and Earth" installation

Ashok Mathur, director of CiCAC
Centre for innovation in Culture and the Arts in Canada (Thompson Rivers University)

Optically, philosophically, aesthetically, we are drawn to the questions and confusions of reflection. It quite literally turns our worlds upside-down and inside-out, and in so doing, captivates our imagination. In "Heaven and Earth," inter- and multi-disciplinary artist Hyung-Min Yoon's has designed a critically engaging and site-specific installation, currently floating in a pond at the Sun Yat Sen garden in Vancouver. Constructed of three-dimensional words form-cut from styrofoam, the installation floats on the surface of the water but also casts reflections on the viewers' perceptions, enticing as well as discombobulating. At first, the blocky letters look out of place, appearing to free-float but continuously jerked back into place by underwater tethers, and we have to perform some mental acrobatics to re-view the mirrored and inverted words. Four of them: a definite article, a pair of nouns, and a verb, encouraging interchangeability as would a child's set of wooden blocks. Is it "the earth reflects heavens" or "the heavens reflects earth" or something more disjunctive? Perhaps the article can come at the end or the middle, the verb at the beginning or end. But this perception only once the mind has been able to turn the blocks around so they make sense to our cognitive capacities. And only then does our gaze drift down to the subtle, always-there but somehow unseen reflection of those same words, displayed perfectly in the reflective surface of the pond.

Yoon draws inspiration for this piece from a Taoist adage from the 6th century B.C., a simple question of what begets what, and yet her re- and displacement of this poetic and philosophical concept is what so intrigues. Amidst the gardens, themselves a simulacrum of untouched nature but in actual fact a highly constructed re-creation, this installation carries with it both a zen peacefulness and a radical contemplation of contemporaneous culture. Just as the stone structures that grace the gardens are artifice, so too the styrofoam blocks are less and more than they seem. Undoubtedly, they reflect the tranquil nature of the pond, but they are the product of a highly industrialized process and product derived from the mixture of raw ethylene, benzene, and aluminum chloride in a highly-controlled laboratory environment. Indeed, the generic product we know now as styrofoam was first produced by Dow Chemicals around the time as WWII, feeding into and from a growing militarized and resource-driven economy. So, like many forms of illusion that surround us in new and old media, Yoon's contemplative and harmonious installation also reflects a much deeper and insidious history, much more than that which floats on the surface.



Photo by Chris Jones

Nonetheless, the beauty of this work is profound and affective, particularly as a full moon rises above the horizon and complements the artificial pools of light thrown and diffused from corner spots. Over the course of the evening, the natural daylight casting a certain type and quality of reflection gives way to a deeper, richer, and more poignant quality of light that allows viewers to see the reflection in transition, as it were. Seen as single objects or grouped together as a four-word sentence or phrase, the inverted text changes shape and form, and in so doing, causes us to reflect on the nature of our own reflections, cultures, and communities.

Yoon's work possesses that ineffable quality of layered multiplicity, not so much meaning different things to different people as it allows for a transient understanding of the surrounding world through our cognition of words. Indeed, in earlier works, Yoon has played with this sensibility, as with her 2009 website "Reverser," which interactively runs backwards any text entered into the site, or her 2008 "Backwards Metamorphosis," that runs the entire text of Kafka's renowned text from finish to start along a wall and as a book project. But as those earlier pieces touched on the linearity of text, "Heaven and Earth" further addresses the tactility and nuanced texture of language, creating a frame and forum well worth consideration.

Heaven and Earth is installed at the Sun Yat Sen garden pond (578 Carrall St, Vancouver) from Sept 2-25, 2011

Hyung-Min Yoon was born in Seoul, Korea and studied Fine Art at Korean National University of Arts in Seoul (BFA) and Chelsea College of Art in London (MFA). Yoon's works have been shown internationally in exhibitions such as *à ses parents – Variations autour de Le Corbusier* (Switzerland, 2006) and *The truth of Contradictions and exceptions* (South Korea, 2009). She has recently participated in art residency program at The Banff Centre in Canada (2009) and at The Association of Icelandic Visual Artists (SÍM) in Iceland (2009).