

Silicon rubber body parts within *Structure of Shadow* installation.

Bohyun Yoon

By Mara Hoberman

Bohyun Yoon is gifted at creating startling optical illusions by which he artfully disassembles and reconfigures the human body into a variety of arresting and provocative formations. Using diverse techniques and materials including mirrors, live nude models, cleverly edited digital video and simple shadow play, Yoon illustrates an acute disconnect between body and soul. The recurring imagery of bifurcated, discombobulated, amalgamated and otherwise reshaped bodies in his work is initially shocking, disconcerting and even repugnant. Upon closer consideration, however, it becomes clear that Yoon's ostensibly violent, Frankenstein-esque motif belies a heartening utopian philosophy. In Yoon's depiction of the human experience, body and soul are visually separated out in order to expose the triviality of superficial distinctions such as race, gender, class and age. Expanding on this point, Yoon's work emphasizes the existence of a metaphysical connection unifying all mankind. Though quite different in terms of style and medium, two of Yoon's most recent works—*Structure of Shadow* and *Reforming* (both 2009)—are both persuasive evocations of a profound spiritual bond that supersedes physical, political and social identifications.

Structure of Shadow is an imposing four-tiered metal scaffold off of which Yoon has hung hundreds of miniature silicone-cast doll parts. Discombobulated arms, legs, torsos and heads

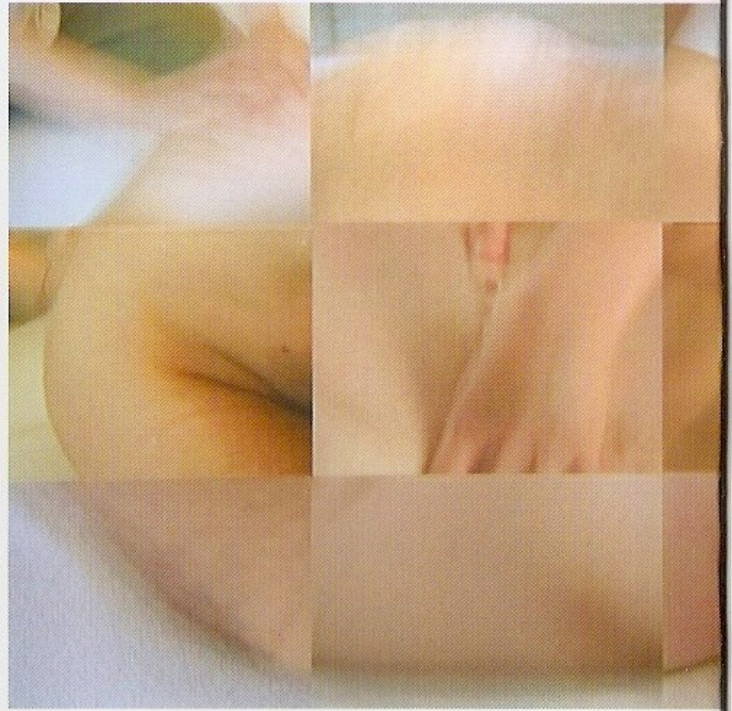
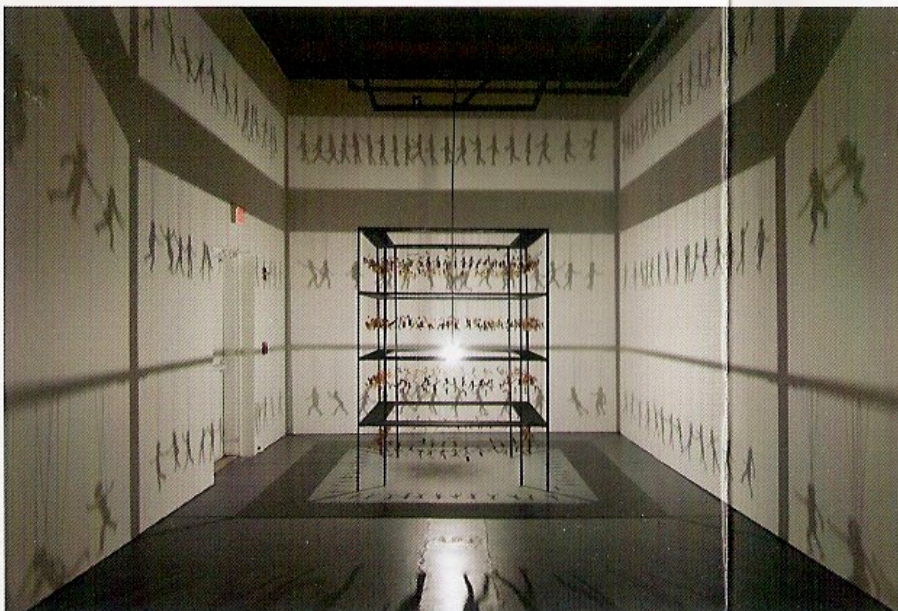
Bohyun Yoon is a native South Korean who studied in Japan and the United States. He received an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and has studied at the International Summer Academy of Fine Art in Salzburg, Austria. He also received a BFA and MFA from the Tama Art University in Tokyo, Japan. Currently, Yoon is an adjunct faculty at Tyler University of Arts in Philadelphia. He has also participated in the Fellow Program at the Kyoto University of Art and Design (2005) in Japan and is currently a fellow of the Center for Emerging Visual Artists in Philadelphia. He has exhibited his works in the galleries and alternative spaces in and around New York, including Hunter College, The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, the S & R Foundation and Chungju International Craft Biennale.

dangle from steel piano wire, hovering at varying heights and seemingly random intervals from all levels of the armature. The imagery of fractured bodies frozen in mid-air has an unsettling paradoxical effect not unlike war photographs that manage to capture the precise moment of lethal impact. In its supernatural state of permanently suspended explosion, *Structure of Shadow* simultaneously evokes mortal combat while fetishizing the raw heat, power and energy of detonation. The effect is fantastically mesmeric and morbidly fascinating.

At the center of *Structure of Shadow* a high-wattage incandescent light bulb hangs suspended from the ceiling. This simple, solitary light source creates one of the most arresting optical illusions in Yoon's oeuvre. As if by magic, the light transforms the jumble of disparate body parts into intact human shadow figures cast onto the gallery's walls, floor and ceiling. Thus it is revealed that the interspersed male and female anatomies (which, notably, are comprised of three shades of silicone to suggest diverse skin tones) are not randomly placed, but have been meticulously positioned to create a flawless silhouette of people processing in concentric rows.

In reality, a pink female leg dangles next to a tawny male torso, which hangs beside a dark brown female head, and so

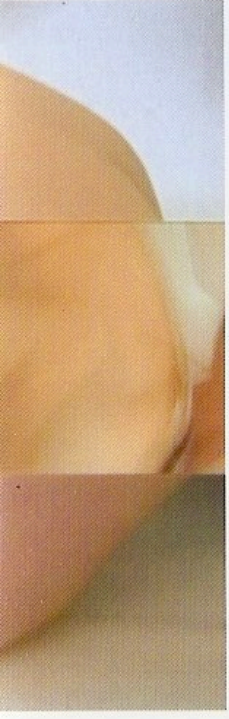
Installation view at Real Art Ways of *Structure of Shadow* (silicon rubber, wire, steel, light bulb, motor, sensor, 60"x90"x60", 2009).



Reforming, multi-channel video with sound, 6 minutes, 2009.

on. In shadow, however, these diverse forms and colors coalesce into figures whose sex and race are indeterminate and therefore irrelevant. That the shadows, which read as human souls or spirits, are integrated, unified and intact despite the fact that their corresponding bodily incarnations have been torn apart implies the existence of a distinctly human connection that is deeper and stronger than physical beings.

Structure of Shadow's ultimate tour de force relies on viewer participation. When a viewer approaches the piece she triggers a hidden motion-detector, which sets the central light bulb swinging. As the light source sways, the shadow figures dance and frolic despite the fact that the hanging body parts remain eerily frozen. At this moment, the mood of the work immediately changes from shock-and-awe provoked disquietude to sheer delight. The viewer's physical presence enlivens Yoon's



shadow-topia and in this way the artist renders us complicit to his idealist fantasy.

In *Reforming* Yoon deftly manipulates digital video to fracture and reconfigure real human bodies. To create *Reforming*, Yoon filmed various people—men and women from diverse ethnic backgrounds and age groups—receiving full-body massages. He then artfully edited close-up clips from individual massage sessions into an entrancing nine-channel video that depicts one enormous, heterogeneous lump of flesh being pressed, prodded and pulled by multiple sets of expert hands.

Like *Structure of Shadow* this video ultimately suggests a deeper sense of unity even while highlighting bodily distinctions like hair, moles, wrinkles, skin color and gender that draw attention to the fact that there are multiple massage recipients.

When watching the hypnotic rubbing and pounding of the amorphous fleshy bulge, the diverse constituents eventually become a cohesive entity—like flour, butter and milk coalescing into smooth pastry dough through persistent kneading.

In addition to insinuating a proverbial 'melting pot,' *Reforming* also describes a unique psychological state in which mind and body separate. Achieving this form of enlightenment is paramount in many cultures and religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, to name a few—and is often attempted through meditation, fasting, intense exercise or other extreme physical endurances. For Yoon, massage generates the euphoric feeling of detachment from his own body. The nine melded bodies in *Reforming* illustrate his personal experience of having his mind freed from physical associations to reach a higher level of consciousness.

Without a doubt there are numerous possible readings of *Structure of Shadow* and *Reforming* beyond those put forth in this essay and I would encourage the viewer to look for other interpretations. Yoon's work is rife with sociopolitical commentary as well as art historical references and part of

the allure is the diverse allusions it inspires. As always, one's experience of an artwork is inherently personal. Yoon in particular encourages—insists even—on intimacy between viewer and artwork. The impressive optical illusions that in part define Yoon's work are mesmerizing, impressively executed and surefire attention grabbers, but beyond the astonishing imagery lies an urgent appeal to examine our own spirituality and perhaps come away with an enlightened view of the human experience.



Still images from *Reforming* (multi-channel video with sound, 6 minutes, 2009).

Mara Hoberman is a curator at the Hunter College Art Galleries in New York City. In addition to organizing contemporary and historical art exhibitions at Hunter, she has written for catalogs produced by other galleries including Deitch Projects, The PaceGallery and White Cube. She is also a regular contributor to Artforum.com.