



Soo Shin: *Paths Between Two Steps*
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In Louise Erdrich's short story *The Stone*¹, a young girl, vacationing with her parents on an island in Lake Superior, encounters a smooth black stone in the woods surrounding the family's cabin. As she holds the object in her hands, the girl observes that the stone seems "owlish," or "blind;" on its surface are two symmetrical hollows, like eye sockets, scoured by water over time. There is nothing outwardly remarkable about it—the stone is a stone—but it gives the girl a strange sense of being seen or known by something outside of herself, not through literal sight but from a different kind of vision.

The girl takes the stone home, sleeps with it beside her bed, and feels that "everything [is] understood." We are never told precisely what has been understood; it can't be known to us at all. The stone stays in the girl's life, through college, marriage, her career as concert pianist, divorce, and eventual death. It sits on shelves and in drawers, it rests on the piano during every performance, a fixture in each home, and for each new self the woman becomes over her lifetime. At some moments, the stone soothes her; at others, it unsettles her. All the while, the stone remains a stone—eyeless, smooth, and solid—quietly helping the woman examine parts of her life that are beyond reach from others.

I think of Erdrich's tale of the silent correspondence between girl and stone whenever I encounter Soo Shin's sculptures. In their muted palette of blacks and steely greys, Shin's sculptures feel like they contain something beyond the surface that we aren't able to see, like looking into a deep well or dark lake. The artist has described her practice as "searching for something with my eyes closed,"² calling upon an acute sense of trust or vulnerability in the pursuit of making. The subjects that hold Shin's attention are likewise "unseeable," existing not as physical entities, but as ineffable psychological



Soo Shin, *Place #9*, 2020, steel, glazed stoneware, 42 x 24 x 9 inches.

experiences, like the struggle between faith and doubt, or attempts to trust in things that can't be proven.

Shin creates sites as much as sculptures that resist direct representation or narrative. She works as if she were feeling her way through the dark and, through touch, discovering

¹ Louise Erdrich, "The Stone," *The New Yorker*, Sept. 9, 2019.

² Soo Shin profiled by Maria Girgenti, "Breakout Artists 2015: Chicago's Next Generation of Image Makers," *Newcity Art*, 2015.

certain motions, textures, or forms. Relying on elemental materials like wood, metals, and ceramic, the artist's abstract works project a weighted stillness and an irreducible quality; in this, they evoke the vastness of our own uncertainties, projections, and inner mysteries. Shin translates psychological states of doubt and unknowing into metaphorical gestures, but her expansive subject matter is rendered intimately, in forms that feel familiar and proportional to our own bodies—steps we could imagine resting our feet on; grooves that our hands might touch; arrangements of objects that might sit on a table in our home. Our recognition of something of our inner lives in these enigmatic forms is enhanced by the works' slight reflective qualities, alluding to the idea of an inner void being projected back to us through the object at hand.

Shin's "Invincible Summer (Return to Tipasa)," comprises two large steel panels and a small monitor displaying flickering lights. On a summer night, Shin recorded the movements of fireflies blinking brightly through the heavy, humid air. Later, she plotted each flicker on the flies' paths to create a kind of temporal map, which she then transferred to the steel panels. Using a plasma cutter, Shin removed every "blink," creating empty spaces where the bodies of light once existed. Yet the diptych's title, taken from a 1952 essay by Albert Camus, calls upon warmth—or light—as an embodied or psychological state, even when the outer elements are in opposition to it. "In the middle of winter," Camus writes, "I at last discovered that there was within me an invincible summer."³ As we peer into the empty spaces in Shin's work, the physical absence that we face amplifies an imagined or projected light conjured in our minds. The presence of warmth becomes internalized and subjective—imagined, but no less strongly felt or known.

Like the symmetrical eye-like hollows in Erdrich's stone that suggest seeing and being seen, Shin's sculptures exhibit bodily traces or impressions that invite us to correspond with them, to imagine them as structures or supports for our own psychological states. Possessing an "ineffable gravity," to use Erdrich's words, the works seem to acknowledge the difficulty of articulating why a particular object may affect us the way it does. Maybe it's the shape of the thing or the way our eyes



Soo Shin, *Invincible Summer (Return to Tipasa)*, 2020, steel, wood, primer, tv monitor, 54 x 38 inches.

move across it, how we imagine it would feel to run our hands across its surface. What it might feel like to live with it in proximity to us for many years, through different moods and phases of life. Even in the installation *Grounds*, where we find the most literal traces of a body, Shin's work welcomes the broadness of our projections. Covering the floor of Gallery II, ceramic casts of Shin's own feet form the tops of dozens of small, four-legged sculptures whose pointed legs resemble large black thorns or spikes, organically bending slightly so that the sculptures appear precariously upright. Although the image of a footprint is stark and distinctive, its proliferation frees it from the idea that it belongs to a single identity or being. As an unruly, irregular group, the sculptures follow no single direction; in a sense, their paths lead nowhere. When we encounter them, however, they create a space for imagined possibilities, and remind us that standing between uncertain points is not the same as being lost.

³ Albert Camus, "Return to Tipasa," *Summer*, 1954.



Soo Shin, *Invincible Summer (Return to Tipasa)*, 2020 (detail), steel, wood, primer, tv monitor, 54 x 38 inches.

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*Front Cover: Soo Shin, *Grounds*, 2018 (detail), vitreous china, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

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