

BUDDHA MIND IN CONTEMPORARY ART

collective imagination.

THE REAL FAKE

*To be free from convention is not to spurn it but not to be deceived by it. It is to be able to use it as an instrument instead of being used by it.*⁸

ALAN WATTS

In addition to this emphasis on process is the central issue of all art-making: the relationship between illusion and reality—that complex negotiation between signified, signifier, meaning, and artifice. I have recently worked with several students who are concerned with these issues of ephemerality in a continuously overt way. Jaye Rhee, a young Korean artist, makes work that plays with the constructs of the real and the fake. In her most recent piece, multiple video monitors display what initially appear to be falling cherry blossoms—an image often found in traditional Asian painting. This image is still a powerful advertisement for the elegance and beauty of the “Orient.” Korean culture, like that of other Asian societies, anticipates the appearance of cherry blossoms each spring and is obsessed with their exact moment of perfection. But even as Jaye Rhee intends to create the illusion of light pink petals falling softly to the ground with the tinkling sound of Asian instruments in the background, she also wants the viewer to know that the petals seducing our eyes are not real cherry blossoms. They are in fact not petals at all, but rather chewed pink bubble-gum, spit from a height then photographed and manipulated to appear to be gently drifting down. The exotic, airy, pseudo-Asian soundtrack is actually the amplified noise of Jaye Rhee rummaging through a box of Styrofoam packing peanuts. She wants the fakeness and contrivance of the piece to be as apparent as possible. She delights in making the fake, fake. At the same time, she also wants the fake to appear just real enough to seduce us, if only fleetingly, into its illusion.

What I find so interesting and challenging in all Jaye Rhee’s work is that her chosen materials are banal, yet the images she creates reach for the sublime. There have been other such pieces. In one, the illusion is of the sea slowly rising to fill a row of video screens. It is created by Jaye running back and forth, winding and unwinding a length of variegated blue yarn before our eyes. In another, a large piece of fabric creates

the illusion of undulating water that the artist walks through, splitting, tearing, and parting it as she goes. Although each piece could construct illusion as reality, this is not her desire. Her intention is to create the "real fake," as she calls it, the momentarily perfect simulacrum that seduces her viewers; gives them an actual sensual experience. In her case, this is always pleasurable, but also simultaneously deceptive and honest.

⁹ As quoted in Kenzaburo Oe, *Rouse Up*
O *Young Men of the New Age*, trans. John Nathan
(New York: Grove, 1986), 127.