

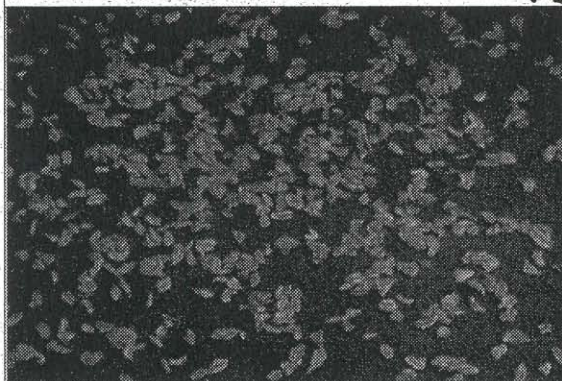
art

"CHERRY BLOSSOMS"
BY JAYE RHEE

EYE EXAM

Crossing the divide

By Michael Workman



A BILLOWING SURFACE OF COTTON FLUTTERS across four television screens and softly undulates in the still air. Drawn tight at the corners, the fabric seems strained, a shiny skin caught in a hard, machine twist. Is this the same fabric or the illusion of a continuation as conjured by the four screens sitting side-by-side? It's difficult to tell, and doesn't really matter. As we're watching, a crude sound starts to emit and we watch as Seoul-born artist Jaye Rhee edges into the right-hand side of the frame, walking diligently forward, hands outstretched, through the fabric. As she steps, she tears it a little more, inching forward to open a black void behind her as she rips her way through this parting ocean of fabric.

"Tear," a video in Rhee's exhibit at the Chicago Cultural Center, takes this forward motion as a leaky metaphor for the delicacy of personal progress. It's a spirited work that glows with enthusiasm for an individualistic, occasionally daunted and hopeful philosophy. Why four monitors? "Tear" was made for projection on a room's four walls so that, when her march through the fabric was completed, the room would appear torn down the middle. It's a painful notion of the architecture of the mind, of the artist's own deeply divided interior. Rhee's work is caught between the native Korean culture of her youth and life in the United States, a perspective that she often illustrates with textiles. Those differences, for Rhee, are often visceral. "It's like your body knows it," she says. "I go back to Korea once a year, for instance, and when I go I'll order a small coffee. Only it's not the same as when you order a small size here. Our small size is their medium. I drink a small size in Korea and it's not enough because of what I'm used to here."

That difference comes through in the labor intensity of her work. In "Sea Saw," a video piece on five screens, Rhee moves back and forth, hooking a length of yarn on one end, then moving back to hook it on another. Each length of yarn's a shade of blue. Through this back and forth, she slowly builds up a surface that grows until she's covered the entire screen. "Each point, from start to end," says Rhee, "comes differently on each monitor to create these different levels." Those levels, she explains, are meant to evoke a memory in the viewer of the motion of waves—slowly and painstakingly and over a long period of time. It's a significant demand to place on the viewer, but its meditative appeal succeeds dramatically.

Both pieces concern this engulfing sense of progress toward completion, an assimilation to an endpoint that, in her looped video, can never fully arrive. It's an incomplete that mirrors Rhee's own adaptation of her longtime cultural home, still somehow foreign and new at once, and which advocates for a kind of abstract refuge that exists only in her own constantly changing memory. Perhaps no clearer expression of this exists than "Cherry Blossoms," a series of variously sized video monitors installed in the room's back wall. Each depicts a scattering of cherry blossoms arranged pell-mell against a white background. "I was noticing all these spots of gum on the sidewalk everywhere here," explains Rhee, "In the West it's all about beauty. Cherry blossoms are beautiful, yes. But for Koreans when the cherry blossoms fall, they are like spots of gum."