

Sublime Simulacra

Kim Yun Shin, Kim Chang Euk, Hong Soun, and Scott Kahn

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Hong Soun, *Unfamiliar Familiar Landscape-24091, 2024*

Lehmann Maupin is pleased to present *Sublime Simulacra*, a group exhibition curated by Andy St. Louis. Featuring works by Kim Yun Shin, Kim Chang Euk, Hong Soun, and Scott Kahn, the exhibition speculates on the potential for landscape paintings to generate shifts in the ways that images mediate our experience of the natural environment.

In *Sublime Simulacra*, the landscape serves as an inflection point for new modes of perception. The ultimate reality of images was first contested by Plato, who theorized that all representations can be categorized as one of two types: exact (“truthful”) reproductions or deliberately distorted (“false”) likenesses. Jean Baudrillard’s seminal 1981 treatise *Simulacra and Simulation* expanded upon Plato’s theory by introducing the notion of the simulacrum, defined as an imitation that fails to make reference to its original. In postmodern artistic discourse, simulacra are typically conceptualized as representations of representations—copies based on other copies—that do not derive from empirical experience, thus blurring the line between the actual and the imaginary. This fundamental inability to distinguish objective reality from subjective representation informs much of postmodernist thought, which polemicizes the mediation of the real through simulacra. According to Baudrillard, the apotheosis of this phenomenon occurs when a representation is so lifelike that it creates its own reality, or hyperreality, effectively destroying the hegemony of the real and rewiring the cognitive connection between perception and belief.

Sublime Simulacra repudiates negative connotations associated with simulacra and embraces broader interpretations of the term as it relates to artistic engagement with the landscape. Through the visual languages of organic abstraction, geometric figuration, realism and surrealism, the paintings on view propose variable relationships between images and the realities they represent, in direct correlation to each artist’s conceptual stance and creative process. By reexamining the dialectics of simulacra through the lens of the landscape, this exhibition spotlights depictions of the ineffable as consummate expressions of authenticity.

For **Kim Yun Shin**, whose practice spans more than six decades, sculpture and painting have always served as distinct mediums that accomplish the same ends—namely, abstracting her impressions of nature. Whether using chainsaws and hand tools to shape solid masses of wood or brushes and paint to render two-dimensional shapes on canvas, Kim’s works convey a visual world filled with vital energy. She achieves this by attuning her own artistic consciousness with the rhythms and resonances of the natural environment, forging an almost spiritual connection that erases divisions between art and life, subject and object, representation and reality.

Kim’s paintings resist dualistic ontologies and in doing so embrace their intrinsic function as simulacra, despite a conspicuous absence of realism. As expressions of the very essence of the landscape, they operate as unequivocally evocative renderings that reproduce the sensibility of reality vis-à-vis the artist’s embodied experience, lending form to the natural order of the universe through layered compositions filled with saturated colors, organic textures and botanical structures. Contrary to Plato’s condemnation of the simulacrum as a “corrupt” copy of reality, Kim’s works effectively neutralize preconceived notions of image hierarchy by facilitating pluralistic interpretations of the cosmic energies they thematize.

Kim Chang Euk, like so many artists of his generation, progressed through several creative phases throughout his career in tandem with the evolution of modern Korean art in the postwar era. The landscape was an enduring source of inspiration throughout Kim’s lifelong artistic journey, from the geometric and symbolic abstraction that defined the first three decades of his career to the straightforward figuration of his later years. However, it was during the transitional period between these modalities, from the late 1970s to the 1980s, that Kim produced some of his most stirring renderings of the natural environment. These works evince a restrained subjectivity that suffuses their picturesque mountains, forests and streams with arresting immediacy and timeless appeal.



Kim Chang Euk, *Abstract Scenery No. 1*, 1989 (detail)

In shifting his purview from imagery that had little bearing on objective reality toward more clearly identifiable landscapes, Kim drew nearer to the realm of simulacra in his paintings while also retaining a certain degree of phenomenological affect. Reality and representation constituted disparate yet parallel perceptual paradigms that he deftly synthesized into a shared, simultaneous perspective rather than insisting on a single, authoritative viewpoint. As such, Kim's abstracted landscapes do not attempt to copy the "actual" landscape, but nonetheless provoke a comparable sensory response in viewers.

In his prolific painting practice, **Hong Soun** appropriates press photos and strips them of their primary function by focusing on the landscapes at their periphery. These partial depictions belonging to the artist's *Sidescape* series reveal images that are always visible yet remain perpetually overlooked—a strategy that subverts our habituated cognitive framework for construing an image's meaning by cross-referencing its primary subject matter with its surrounding context. The disorienting effect of expunging a scene's focal point is reinforced by the naturalistic aesthetic with which Hong paints the landscape and the specificity of each work's title, which includes the date and location of its source photo. In his most recent body of work, Hong takes photos himself, inevitably imbuing his landscapes with personal memories connected to actual places he has visited, resulting in a series of painterly landscapes titled *Unfamiliar Familiar Landscape*.

Throughout his oeuvre, Hong asserts the independence of images as inherently fallible configurations of signifiers that have been divested of their communicative capacity. Instead of striving to render subjective approximations of sensible phenomena or imply viable alternatives to physical reality, his paintings operate as meta-images that preclude the possibility of conflating their simulacra with the landscapes they reconstruct. This dissociation of reality and representation is particularly urgent in light of today's highly mediated visual culture, which Hong counters by positing that the ultimate truth of an image is derived from its intrinsic unreality as a copy, regardless of how legitimate its outward appearance may seem.

Since the late 1970s, **Scott Kahn** has continuously developed an uncanny mode of figuration, visualizing ambiguous landscapes through precise applications of paint and subtle manipulations of perspective. This approach generates an infinite depth of focus that contradicts the natural distortions inherent in human optical perception, thereby undermining the realism of his depictions. Kahn's signature aesthetic sensibility and idiosyncratic compositional logic—including motifs of voluminous

foliage casting dappled shadows, prominent pathways and gates leading to indeterminate destinations, peculiar atmospheric conditions and abnormal variations in scale—is redolent of the liminal semi-conscious state between being asleep and being awake that elicits fantastic imaginaries permeated with surreal affect.

Just as dreams are deceptions, so too are simulacra of the highest degree, and Kahn's paintings are no different. Baudrillard categorized such illusory simulacra as simulations that conflate the real and the illusory such that they become indistinguishable and the original ceases to be relevant. Although this definition implies a negation of meaning, Kahn's works foster new interpretations due to their ontological incongruity with the physical attributes of specific locations. Hyperreal yet untethered to the real world, they envision the domain of the subconscious, which may be influenced by objective reality but cannot act as its substitute. However, since the visual signifiers that pervade Kahn's works directly correspond to his own personal lexicon, they remain largely inscrutable for viewers who perceive his otherworldly landscapes as divergent from their own dreamlike reveries.

Whenever the sensory response evoked by the totality of the landscape overwhelms normal perception and approaches the inconceivable, Baudrillard's dialectics of simulacra collapse under the weight of the transcendent sublime. Given the practical impossibility of reproducing the moment-to-moment impressions that lend the landscape its essential ineffability, it is no wonder that artists abandon the notion of objective authenticity in their representations of the natural environment—they are compelled to break certain rules that differentiate reason and imagination, forging simulacra that recreate reality on their own terms and invite the viewer to share in this "unreal" experience.

"The simulacrum implies huge dimensions, depths and distances that the observer cannot dominate," reflected Gilles Deleuze in his 1990 essay *Plato and the Simulacrum*, which formalized the phenomenology of the sublime in relation to Baudrillard's theory. "The simulacrum includes within itself the differential point of view, and the spectator is made part of the simulacrum, which is transformed and deformed according to his point of view. In short, folded within the simulacrum there is a process of going mad, a process of limitlessness..." Nowhere is this description more salient than in depictions of the landscape, which cannot serve as copies of reality because they manifest a mode of subjective experience that lacks a rational corollary—an ineluctable sublime.

**LEHMANN MAUPIN**

Rachel Lehmann and David Maupin co-founded Lehmann Maupin in 1996 in New York. Since inception, Lehmann Maupin has served as a leading contemporary art gallery with locations in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. For over 25 years, Lehmann Maupin has been instrumental in introducing international artists in new geographies and building long-lasting curatorial relationships. Known for championing diverse voices, the gallery's program proudly features artists whose work challenges notions of identity and shapes international culture. Today, the gallery has permanent locations in New York, Seoul, and London, as well as team members based in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, and Palm Beach. In recent years, with growing opportunities in new markets, the gallery has opened seasonal spaces in Aspen, Palm Beach, Taipei, Beijing, and Milan.

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