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March 20, 2018

Yoonmi Nam: Still

2017.

The Print Center, Philadelphia, May 12–August 5, 2017

John Muse

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Installation view, *Yoonmi Nam: Still*, the Print Center, Philadelphia, May 12–August 5, 2017 (photograph © 2017, provided by the Print Center, Philadelphia)

Yoonmi Nam's *Still* was a simple, direct exhibition: three lithographs, three sculptures, and three Japanese woodblock prints (*mokuhanga*) displayed a single white room. While the sculptures rested on white perimeter plinths, Nam's lithographs and woodblocks held the walls, delivering spare, nearly diagrammatic flora composed swimmingly on creamy paper. The presentation was elegant and normcore basic, except that the sculptures were facsimiles of throwaways, appearing to be bagged takeout food containers on their way to both table and trash. These tableaux were aptly titled *Take Out*, with parenthetical identifiers that repeated the obsequies printed on the bags: "Thank You Gracias" and "Thank You for Your Patronage." Nam's containers, though, are not styrofoam but glazed porcelain, not plastic but Gampi paper, not nameless and useful things but titled and newly useless things. Just as Andy Warhol opted for wood with his *Brillo Boxes* and Jasper Johns for bronze with his *Savarin Paint Can*—just as other artists exercise their rights of trompe l'oeil and translation, so too does Nam.

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bronze with his *Savarin Paint Can*—just as other artists exercise their rights of trompe l'oeil and translation, so too does Nam.

Built to last though? To preserve these precedent objects born of the earth and ancient flora—petroleum—and returning to earth, slowly, via landfill, ocean gyres, incineration? No, not exactly. Nam's clamshell containers and plastic bags are more fragile, more in need of care, of galleries and plinths, of locks and keys and contracts, than their barely biodegradable models: porcelain shatters; paper tears, suffers moisture, mold, and handling; paper burns, stains, and creases. Nam's objects do not capture otherwise transient processes. Nor do they liberally assist entropy à la Dieter Roth's food processing, Eva Hesse's crackling latex, or William Pope.L's weepy baloney. Rather, Nam's sculptures

grind the gears of one clock against those of another; they grind the gears of paper, ink, and porcelain against those of plastic; they grind the gears of white-cube deep freeze and cotton-gloved hands against those of deepwater drilling, refinement, and waste management.

When we do right by Nam's work, this grind sets the beat and helps us grasp a few features that might otherwise appear incidental, merely generic, that is, driven by considerations of the still life, of ink on paper, and of the multiple. First, if Nam aims to stretch us over the gears of said clocks, to feel the bite of their teeth, then what of her monochromatic depictions of flora, her arrangements of flowers, weeds, and grasses? And second, what of the ubiquitous occurrence, across the nine works shown in *Still*, of containing things and contained things, of not only bags and entrée-sized clamshells but serviceable containers holding and presenting said flora? Yes, in the prints Nam joins throwaways and Ikebana-styled bouquets, plants, and plastics, but she also makes it difficult to evaluate their relative durability, stillness, and worth. How so? She renders the plants and plastics differently, as though they were emerging from different times and spaces.

Looking first at the plant forms, we see that they are expertly inscribed in contour, nearly flat and without volume, either as individual structures (as stems, flowers, leaves) or as bunches. They are also colorless or, rather, only filled by the color of the supporting paper. This traditional reduction to black and white says "iconic sign." The gap between sign and referent may be narrow, based as it is in resemblance, but it is still significant: a black-and-white drawing can show me a red rose while also showing me the difference between this rose and its representation. But this paper is planty too, fibrous as it is, unbleached but still blond, creamy, toothy: it is both something I look through to see something else, a plant, and a thing I look at, an object. Made of plants. And as if to emphasize this dual function, Nam's flora are not projected through the picture plane via perspectival codes, but are pressed into the surface, the embossing of the woodcuts registering the paper's soft bulk. So, the supporting paper and these colorless printed plants are on the same plane; the paper is a metonymy for the iconic images it supports. All of which could be said of many works on paper, but here the link of paper to plant makes a difference because of the containers, because of what they are and how Nam renders them, because of how she relates the contained to the containers.

Let us enumerate them: a Starbucks paper coffee cup featuring the "Barrista's Promise" in the woodblock titled *Promise*, a Meiji LG21 plastic yogurt cup in the woodblock *LG21*, a small white styrofoam clamshell box in the lithograph *Prairie Ikebana*, a popcorn box featuring the word *Popcorn* in the woodblock *Popcorn*, and two paper drink cups, one by Solo in the lithograph *Jazz* and one by Dunkin' Donuts that says "Joy" in the lithograph aptly titled *Joy*. In contrast to the flora, these containers lend their names and texts to the works, thus lowering the thematic center of gravity from the plant to its container. Further, to create volume and solidity, Nam colored and carefully shaded these containers, defining their edges not by dark contours, as with the flora, but by color against color. Thus the paper is resolutely underneath and behind these objects. And instead of letting the tone of her paper define what will be white, she used even whiter ink to establish the containers' surfaces. Finally, these containers are seen from slightly above, their tops rendered as slim openings into which the plants disappear. With the containers, similitude is more tightly bound than with the flora, the reference relation more robustly iconic and typified: Nam's Dunkin' Donuts Joy cup is every such cup, but her rose is not every rose.

She could have swapped these ways of handling the containers and flora, only roughing in the better known containers, relying on her viewers to imaginatively complete what they typically have in hand. In addition, the plants have singularity on their side and arguably deserve more detail, distinction, color, heft. But Nam carefully imbalanced these scales and so shifts our attention from the elements themselves to this relation between the rough and the finished, the "empty" contour and solid volume, the gauzy plant and the thickened container, the dull, dead, and dying flora and the charismatic, plastic avatars of our new nature, the Anthropocene aka Capitalocene. And this relation, too, foregrounds the self-referential loops that relate each figure to a separate ground. She has *printed* printed things (the containers) and *planted* in this fibrous, planty paper other planty things (the contained). Nam both offers and breaks these loops: she tends to the difference between what holds and what is held, and thus tells us that whatever holds is itself held: just as the cup holds the flora, so too does the frame hold the print and the gallery hold the frame. She also tends to the difference between the prints she makes and the prints she has in view, and thus tells us that printmaking today is constituted and scarred by this discrepancy between industrial and artisanal production, between profligacy and one-off craft. Hers is resolutely handwork, limited to editions of

the countable, steeped in processes that technically cut no bleeding edges, but keep venerable words and techniques in circulation: *mokuhanga*, an eighth-century Japanese woodblock technique; and lithography, a nineteenth-century European invention. Dusty and vital at the same time, these reproductive technologies are nevertheless pressed on one side by the reproductive organs of flowers—another loop—and on the other by the industrial gear that churns out trash by the tons. Handwork for Nam does not redeem mass production, rendering its products singularly adorable, but neither does the mass-produced thing only bite the hands that feed from it. These containers are us and are of our world; they will either vanish with us or survive because of us.

Nam brings these things together, the container and the contained, the throwaway and the flora, to keep them apart; she renders them with their degrees of separation intact, affiliated but without clear lines of filiation, without an order of descent, literally on the same page but precisely not. Nam's flora do not even rest inside or against the throwaways; rather, the former sprout, leaping and hovering above and beyond the latter. The containers, made of paper and thin plastic, should be lighter still than the gangly flowers and weeds. Yes, in *Popcorn* the red, white, gray, and yellow box visually balances the spray of brush that rises high above it, but it could never balance its weight. That is Nam's achievement, this break between weights—visual, conceptual, and physical. They may be cut flowers, as various traditions of arrangement require, but in relation to these containers, they seem less cut and placed than firmly if impossibly rooted, not in soil per se but to the spot, as ghosts might be rooted to the space and time of their untimely demise. Nam roots her plants in *Joy*, *Promise*, *Jazz*, *LG21*, and *Popcorn*, as in artificial turf, in the turf that has taken their place and will have supplanted everything. They are cut off because of plastic, but still rooted in it, part of it, a remainder, a reminder, an objection.

With her delicate prints and facsimile objects, Yoonmi Nam not only gives us something to care about, she also shows us what caring looks like, broken as it is: we grapple with dead and deadly things; we ruin everything and preserve these very ruins; we enjoy the grinding of gears, the ones that are destroying us and that we render asynchronous; we bring things together that should be kept apart, and in the process bruise ourselves and these very things. But still, we make things to hold and contain all of these other things—for example, *Joy* and *Promise* et al.—that in turn hold our broken cares and colorful bruises. Thus does she make for us a world, in other words, an exhibition entitled *Still*.

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