

actors reenact "arctic hysteria," a term coined by Western sociologists for physical reactions to a harsh environment. Evoking seizures, these episodes are viewed by natives as both medical ailments and spiritual possessions. In the third, "feeding" portion of the piece, surveillance cameras monitor a taxidermy caribou carcass in a remote landscape. The cameras, placed in- and outside of the carcass, record a kind of natural performance as the sculpture defies its own natural decay, until its eventual interaction with a lone wolf. Here, as in much of Joo's work, natural cycles are disrupted; authenticity is replaced by artifice.

To achieve perfect equilibrium, there can be no absolute binaries and Michael Joo rejects these dualities in his work. Instead, he undermines them and replaces them with fluidity.

#### About the Artist

A second-generation Korean American, Michael Joo was born in 1966 in Ithaca, NY. Raised in Ithaca and near Minneapolis, he studied biology at Wesleyan University. After working for a seed science company in Europe, he received a BFA in sculpture from Washington University in 1989 and an MFA in sculpture from Yale in 1991. Chosen to represent South Korea in the 2001 Venice Biennale, Joo first gained international attention in 1994 when Damien Hirst included him in the ground-breaking exhibition, *Some Went Mad, Some Ran Away*, at London's Serpentine Gallery (which also traveled in Europe and the U.S.). Recipient of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (1998) and the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters' and Sculptors' Grant (2000), Joo has had fifteen solo exhibitions in museums and galleries and also exhibited widely throughout Europe, Asia, and United States.

#### PUBLIC PROGRAMS

**Artist's Talks:** Michael Joo  
Saturday, November 1, at 2:30 PM  
Friday, November 21, at 6 PM (Curator Jane Farver will participate.)

**Curator's Talk:** Jane Farver  
Wednesday, December 3, at 12 PM

**Gallery Talks:**  
Bill Arning or Hiroko Kikuchi  
Every Wednesday at 12 PM

Bill Arning  
Friday, October 17, at 6 PM  
Friday, November 14, at 6 PM

Hiroko Kikuchi  
Sunday, October 26, November 9 & 23, December 7 & 14, at 2 PM

**Film Screening and Discussion:** *Nanook of the North* (1922)  
Thursday, November 13, at 7 PM, Bartos Theatre

This classic film by Robert Flaherty documents one year in the life of Nanook, an Inuit hunter, and his family as they struggle to survive in the harsh conditions of Canada's Hudson Bay region. *Nanook of the North* was widely shown and praised as the first full-length, anthropological documentary in cinematographic history.

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# MICHAEL JOO

October 16, 2003- January 4, 2004

Curator: Jane Farver

Organized by the MIT List Visual Arts Center

by Sara Lasser  
MIT List Visual Arts Center Intern

Michael Joo explores notions of science, spirituality, identity, gender, and cultural identification in his work. Enlisting images from popular culture to examine and explode cultural stereotypes and preconceptions, Joo invites the viewer to reconsider the idea of such binary dualities as Western/Eastern, male/female, American/Asian, strength/weakness, and energy/waste. In the process, the artist addresses his own identity as a Korean American and what it means to belong to a specific cultural group.

In *Slanty*, a pie chart construction of nine hollow aluminum wedges containing synthetic tears, Joo employs methods of science to establish a kind of code of shared identity. Each wedge represents an individual drawn from popular culture that Joo gauges against himself by determining the degree of the angle formed by the lower and upper parts of the individuals' eyes. As if to suggest that a magic number (in this case, Joo's angle measurement, 29.38) can guarantee membership to an exclusive club, the artist points to the absurdity of identification based on physical "ethnic" attributes; Joo is not actually connected to any of the individuals in the pie chart. Their shared identity is a fallacy.

Joo studied biology for two years before turning to art in college, and this theme of rationality and scientific inquiry runs through his work. However, the science Joo applies to his creative endeavors is usually a kind of "weird science," the result of systems he has devised. In the piece *Saltiness of Greatness*, Joo reduces four well-known Asian figures from American popular culture – Temujin (Genghis Khan), Iva Toguri D'Aquino (Tokyo Rose), Bruce Lee, and Mao Tse Tung – to stacked blocks of salt, representing the number of calories Joo has calculated each expended in their lifetimes. Dripping onto these stacks of salt blocks is synthetic sweat that gradually dissolves each individual's tower. To calculate the number of calories for each figure, Joo has used an elaborate (albeit, by his own admission, ultimately speculative) equation that, like the pie chart of *Slanty*, proves to be absurd. Ironically, the salt structures of *Saltiness of Greatness* dissolve and disappear in a reaction with

synthetic sweat; sweat is released by the body when calories are burned, and the salt blocks themselves directly represent spent calories. In the end, it is the sweat that consumes the energy.

This kind of inverse or cyclical consumption is a common theme in Joo's work. *Salt Transfer Cycle*, a three-part video, is a prime example. Each part shows the artist undergoing a different kind of endurance test: swimming in 2,000 pounds of Monosodium Glutamate (MSG), enacting an evolutionary progression (first swimming, then crawling, and finally walking and running across the Great Salt Desert of Utah) all the while becoming covered in salt; and finally, in the northern mountains of South Korea, the salt being licked from his body by elk, referring to the Korean tradition of ingesting ground elk horns to increase sexual potency. Individually, each segment of the work embodies cycles and repetition: strokes through MSG, footsteps on salt, the licks of elk. However, as a whole, the three segments also function as an overall cycle; the artist as protagonist is involved in a grand scheme of transference. The beginning and end of the fragmented narrative are difficult to trace—do we begin with the synthetic MSG, evolutionary reenactments, or the return of salt to nature through the elk?

Perhaps the most overtly political of Michael Joo's pieces is *Mongoloid-Version B-29 (Miss Megook Paintings #1 and #2)*, in which he artist has painted what at first appears to be a Korean woman on salvaged pieces of the fuselage of a plane in service during the Korean War. Upon closer examination, the paintings reveal themselves to be of the artist himself. Echoing the practice of crew members painting "pin-up girls" on the sides of their military aircraft, Joo disrupts the traditional stereotype of Asian men as asexual counterparts to overly-sexualized Asian women by inserting himself into the role of sexually desired.

Michael Joo is able to call into question binaries, identities, and life cycles partly through his use of materials, many of which are bodily waste products, or actual or synthesized organic matter. By using

organic materials, Joo points to perhaps the most prevalent thread running throughout his body of work: balance. Adopting the body's residues as a metaphor for balance (after all, most of the body's waste products are released from the body in order to keep its chemistry properly equalized), the artist subtly points to the need to maintain equilibrium socially, intellectually, and spiritually. In other instances, the artist describes this need for equilibrium in less subtle ways: in *Visible*, we see a Korean Buddha's body molded from transparent urethane to expose opaque internal organs; and in *Hunt (Balance for Right and Left Lobes)*, two cast resin elk antlers, held apart by Plexiglas tubing, are each filled with separate household cleaners that, when mixed, create a highly toxic concoction.

Joo also explores notions of balance and cycles in his work *God*, in which he places the figure of an Inuit man dressed for arctic conditions atop a refrigeration unit. The man's figure is made of clear resin, revealing a skeleton beneath the surface of his skin. Visitors unwittingly contribute to the burying of the figure by breathing, the moisture of each breath condensing into layers of ice. For Joo, the Inuit represent the in-between; originally traveling across the Bering Strait from Siberia onto continental America, the Inuit were actually the first "Americans;" and, in effect, the first "Asian Americans." Similarly, the coyotes surrounding the piece also act as a symbol for the Asian American experience; thought to be untamed and wild, coyotes actually live on the outskirts of human society, and move fluidly from the wild to the suburbs, mirroring the experience of traveling between Asian and American identities.

*Circannual Rhythm (pibloktok)*, three video pieces shown side by side, takes place in Alaska. In the first, the "walking" section, the artist enacts an endurance-based performance, a two-week walk through the Alaskan landscape under forced isolation with minimal supplies. Here, Joo focuses on the tension between the physical journey and the spiritual journey many might expect him to undergo. In second, the "possession" part of the triptych, local Inuit