



Korean-born artist Nikki S. Lee's recent work, titled "Sugar Daddy," left, appeared in the New York Times' weekly magazine. The "Untitled" series of self-portraits, below, is a visual story of a young Asian woman accompanied by a mysterious older man. The work is an extension of her "Parts" exhibition in New York last year and Washington, D.C. earlier this year.
Courtesy of Nikki S. Lee



Artist Nikki Lee, known in America for her photographs, returns to Korea to pursue her passion: filmmaking.



The second project, "Parts" (2003), is about the various persona of the same individual in relation to men.



An East-West search for identity

By Inès Cho
Staff Writer

The search for identity can have many manifestations, but for some it is a lifelong journey expressed through art.

For Korean-born artist Nikki S. Lee, the search began in earnest a decade ago as she launched her career in the United States. Having established a reputation there for her photography projects, she recently returned to Seoul to pursue a new identity — as a filmmaker.

Upon moving to New York in 1994, Lee adopted a new American name, Nikki, which she decided upon while leafing through a copy of *Vogue* magazine. "A friend and I went through all the names of supermodels, Amber, Kate, Nikki... it's the supermodel Nikki Taylor's name that I chose," she says. She kept her given name, Seung-hee, as a middle initial.

She decided to acquire different identities by becoming part of the different subcultures she found in New York City. Her debut work in the United States, titled "Projects," comprises 15 works completed between 1997 and 2001, a period in which she made a series of self-portraits as a punk, a club dancer, a housewife, a senior citizen and a high school student.

To become an integral part of each subculture, Lee says, she first needed to look the part. Prior to approaching and actually befriending a group, she spent a few months researching the people and their mannerisms, as well as shopping for the right attire and makeover.

"For the hip hop project, I went to a tanning salon three times a week to make my skin look dark. When the black guys [in the group] first saw me, they said it was 'cool' because I'm Asian but so black," says Lee, 34, recalling her first encounter with the group.

The series of photographs compiled in the book "Let's Be Nikki Projects" (Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2001) might at first glance seem to be a collection of casual color snapshots of various groups. On close examination, however, the viewer can sense the strong presence of Lee in each frame, which is seemingly natural yet carefully composed and controlled by the artist herself.

In the seniors project, her makeover into an elderly woman was so credible that women she met during the project did not believe that she was in fact a young woman in artistic disguise.

To look at the photos in the book is to watch Lee transform herself completely in relation to different contexts, cultures and people.

A curiosity about identity

Lee says the idea for the project came from her personal curiosity about identity in different contexts — how society, culture or relationships affect one's identity in the world.

"I always thought the people surrounding me affected my identity. And that identity constantly evolves, shifting along with places, people and atmosphere," she explains. "I just wanted to observe it and reveal the process of how identity develops and is perceived by others."

Lee's "performance" through photography became a hot topic for critics, "guaranteeing her speed-dial status around the themes of identity and race," New York Times editor Elizabeth Stewart wrote in a recent issue featuring Lee's conceptual works.

Her stylistic approach, self-transformation and smooth infiltration into each group shown in the photographs have been compared to those of leading contemporary artists such as Cindy Sherman, Adrian Piper and Tseng Kwong Chi, but "Lee is never confrontational, and rarely alone, in

her photographs," wrote Russell Ferguson, the curator of "Projects."

Lee claims she wasn't particularly affected by her four-year experience with different subcultures, nor did she necessarily learn from the experience. "I just wanted to prove to myself that I can belong to any group and that I can be anyone," she says. "My projects are a process, which can make me keep on going."

The extension of Lee's search for identity continued as she exhibited "Parts" in New York City last year and in Washington, D.C. earlier this year. In this series, her presence in various photographs taken by a friend appears to be more emotional, since her identity, as well as her appearance, mood and the context, shift in terms of her relationship to a man.

What sets "Parts" apart from her previous work is that Lee "performs" as a woman in different relationships with men and succeeds in delivering a kind of narrative whose communication with the audience is made through the truncated body part of unknown men in the photographs. In one frame, she is a victim of sexual harassment, in another, a bored date, and a rural girl in love in yet another.

Closer to performance art

Since she doesn't press the shutter herself, the works are closer to performance art than pure photography. But a point Lee repeatedly makes is her control of the production: "I do everything, the setup, the composition, my makeover... and tell exactly where to cut when I get the prints."

Earlier this year, the New York Times asked her to do another extension of her performance/photography production for its weekly magazine. The Sept. 19 issue includes a sleek eight-page fashion spread, for which Lee was in charge of creating the images, incorporating French haute couture. She spent 10 days attending fashion shows of her choice in Paris.

The result is an enigmatic visual story of a young Asian woman accompanied by a grizzled older man at the

opulent Ritz Hotel in Paris.

Lee's "acting" in relation to a man raises the question: "Who's that guy in the photographs?"

"He's a hired actor in his 60s," she replies. "The first thing that came into my mind when I heard about haute couture was, 'How can she afford those sorts of expensive dresses?' So I chose 'Sugar Daddy' as the theme."

The issue of whether she's married to him or just using him for money, Lee would rather leave to the imagination of the audience. "I like to keep it mysterious," she says.

While Lee says she is content with her success in New York now, she wants to pursue another aspect of her search for identity — filmmaking.

"I'm an artist in New York. It's my job, from which I earn money. I have enough, but filmmaking is my passion, so I spend my own money [on it]," she says.

Lee has been in Korea for the past two months making two short films with differing styles. She collaborated with an amateur Korean cinematographer, Umm Hyun-chul, who did the actual shooting and editing.

By the time she leaves for New York again later this week, she will have two 6-millimeter films ready on CD-ROM. Both are low-budget films, costing a total of less than \$1,500, through which she is able to express certain cultural nuances in Korean society and the humor that stems from them.

A satire and a thriller

One is a 15-minute satire of a young single woman's lifestyle, and the other an 8-minute thriller involving a lone woman's strange taxi ride. While the satire is "non-stop talking," she says, the thriller has almost no dialogue. She has titled the satire "Nampyeongdo Eopneun Jeolmeun Yeojaga," roughly translated as "A Young Woman with No Husband Dares to..." and the thriller "Taeksireul Tagogan Yeo-janeun," roughly translated as "A Woman Who Rode the Taxi to..."

When asked if she had intended to

star in the films as in her previous work, she replies, "No, not in my films, because I do the directing." She says she is handling all aspects of producing the two films, including the music.

In the thriller, she is considering using a Japanese song that has a "film noir" sound. "I could easily choose a Korean song, but I like that kind of music. The music shows the taste of the character in the film, but I haven't yet decided," she says.

She adds that curators at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Smithsonian Institution have said they would be interested in seeing her new films, and if they are accepted by the Korean film community, she wants to make commercial films eventually.

Having lived away from Korea for the past decade, Lee says she has come to feel that there are innate, profound differences between the two worlds: the West, where she lives and works, and the East, where she was born and grew up.

The young Lee Seung-hee spent her school years in Seoul and Geochang, her mother's home town in South Gyeongsang province. After graduating from ChungAng University in Seoul, a school renowned for producing talented photographers, she wanted to further her studies in America.

"My father, a wedding planner, is pretty open-minded. When he traveled to America, he rented a camper and drove across the continent. He's that kind of free-spirited guy. So he's been supportive of my plans," she says.

"I've dealt with American culture [in my past work]. Now I want to combine two cultures and become a bridge between the East and the West," Lee says. "That way, I can go back and forth between New York and Seoul. And I will have two different media in which to express myself: the art work I do in New York and filmmaking in Korea."

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Lee's first work, "Let's be Nikki Projects" (2001), comprises snapshot-like photographs in which the artist becomes a part of different subcultures in America. From left, the skateboarders project, the punk project and the seniors project.

