

# foam

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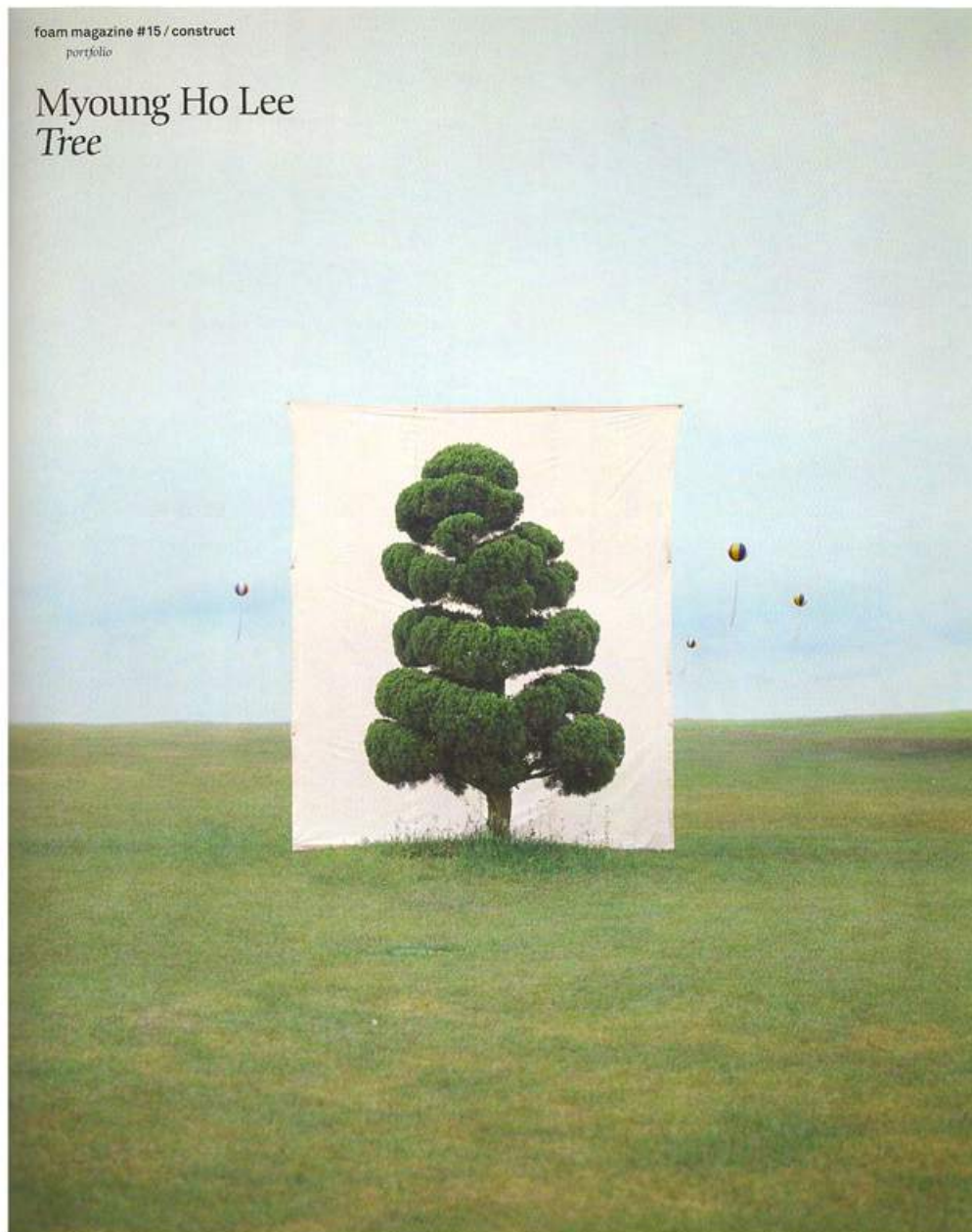


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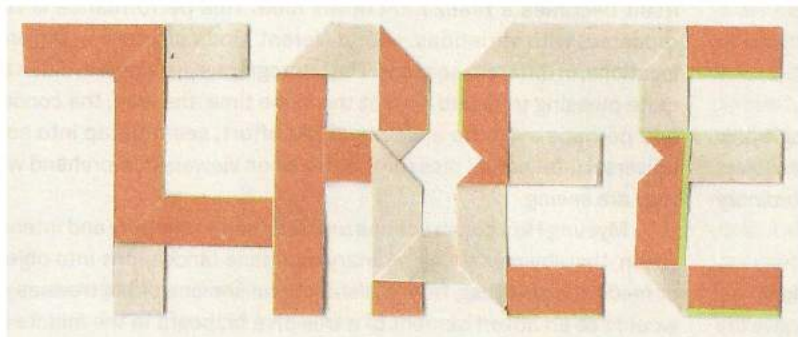
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Myoung Ho Lee  
*Tree*



# Myoung Ho Lee



**Myoung Ho Lee** is a student, lecturer and photographer based in Seoul, Korea. He attracted international acclaim when his series *Tree* was first published online by Lens Culture ([www.lensculture.com](http://www.lensculture.com)) in July 2007. Within days, more than 200 other websites and blogs had reproduced his images and pointed to the original article and images in Lens Culture. The buzz continues today, with reproductions of his photographs gracing the covers and inner pages of many high-profile national and international print magazines (of all genres, including art, ecology, entertainment, home decorating, news and men's fashion), and more than 500 websites referring to his work. His photographs are in the collections of institutions and individual collectors in Europe, Asia, Australia and North America.

Myoung's *Tree* series has prompted references to diverse traditions in the history of photography, including landscape photography, anthropological field studies, studio portraiture, fashion, staged photography, cinematic projections, surrealism, and billboard advertising.

Even though Myoung has been practicing photography for several years (he earned his BA in Photography in 2003, and his Masters in Photography in 2005), it was his conceptual series *Tree* that catapulted him into minor celebrity status on the internet and in pop culture. He is struggling to balance his instant fame with his working life. In addition to his artistic pursuits, he teaches photography at Joon-Ang University in Seoul, where he is also working toward his Ph.D. in Photography.

Born in 1975, Myoung had his first solo exhibitions in May 2007 at Factory Gallery, and at Gallery 1964, both in Seoul. Earlier this year he was one of two photography-based artists to be included in the first *InterAlia* group show of emerging artists in Korea, which has quickly become the most prestigious national venue for visual artists in Korea.

Myoung is the recipient of several awards, including the first Young Photographer's Award, from the Photo Artist's Society of Korea in 2005; Korea's Photography Critic's Award in 2006, and a grant from the Culture and Art Fund from the Arts Council of Korea in 2007.

His work is represented by Gallery Zandari in Seoul, Korea. A signed, limited edition of smaller prints of his *Tree* #1, *Tree* #2 and *Tree* #3 are also sold online via Lens Culture Editions.

*All images: © Myoung Ho Lee, courtesy Gallery Zandari, Seoul*

**Jim Casper** is the founding editor and publisher of Lens Culture, a popular online magazine about contemporary photography and shared territories ([www.lensculture.com](http://www.lensculture.com)). Casper curates, writes, and lectures about photography. He serves on the board of directors of San Francisco's PhotoAlliance, and is an active participant in photography festivals and portfolio reviews worldwide.



# The Audacity of Big Ideas in Art

by Jim Casper

*The painter constructs, the photographer discloses... But photographic seeing has to be constantly renewed with new shocks, whether of subject matter or technique, so as to produce the impression of violating ordinary vision. ~ Susan Sontag, On Photography*

Conceptual art is often envisioned, at first, in words or quick sketches. Sometimes a preliminary description all by itself is sufficient to give life to an idea; it isn't necessary to nurture the concept into three-dimensional reality to allow the idea to reach its fullest potential in one's imagination. The blueprint is enough.

However, when a technically challenging idea is physically constructed on a large scale, the audacity of that performance confers even greater importance on the concept. Confronting the physical reality of a simple-but-preposterous work of art encourages us to consider the idea and its implications with a heightened degree of intellectual and emotional engagement. For example, the installation art work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude accomplishes this effect with great success, as does the architecture of Frank Gehry.

South Korean artist Myoung Ho Lee creates elaborate, unlikely large-scale temporary installations as well. But his constructions are built purely for the purpose of photographing the results. His *Tree* series of photographs pose intriguing questions about representation, reality, art, environment and seeing.

Simple in concept, complex in execution, Myoung Ho makes us look at trees, one at a time, in their natural surroundings. He isolates each tree from its immediate environment by presenting it against an immense white canvas backdrop, creating in effect, a temporary monumental outdoor art installation.

Myoung Ho then photographs the installation, and the photograph itself becomes a realization of his idea. This performance is then repeated, with variations, with different kinds of trees, in different locations, in different seasons. The photographs are elegant, clean and quite pleasing to regard. And at the same time, the idea, the concept, and perhaps even the audacity of the effort, seem to tap into some universal intellectual pleasure center when viewers comprehend what they are seeing.

Myoung Ho's constructions are designed to simplify and intensify vision, thereby converting ordinary mundane landscapes into objects of meditation. At first, from a distance, we see one of his trees as one would see an advertisement of a tree on a billboard in the middle of a wilderness. We wonder, 'What's going on here?' Why would someone erect a life-size photo of a tree in an empty field? Yet when we realize that this is actually an unusual twist on *tromp l'oeil*, we feel a jolt of intellectual delight.

On the surface, his photographs simply show what was there in front of his camera. By using a very large temporary framing device to create some visual isolation, he grabs our attention and forces us to look at something that we might typically ignore or not notice. Indeed, the landscapes he photographs might prove to be quite ordinary and even boring without the presence of the white canvas.

The strong graphic nature of the image is immediately engaging to our eyes. And when we begin to notice the details and understand the reality of what we are seeing ('This is not a billboard of a tree, it is a real tree!... No, wait, this is a photograph of a real tree that looks like a billboard of a tree.'), we begin to experience the playful delight that comes with the enjoyment of art.



Still cuts of work, 2007 © Myoung Ho Lee



When photographers like Richard Avedon employed a seamless white backdrop in the studio or out in the American West, the effect was to focus the viewers' attention on the intricate details that visually defined the person in front of his camera. Avedon removed the subject from any context, and the stark graphic form invited us to notice the contours of a body, the cut of fashion, the lines of age in a face, the everyday toll of wear and tear on humanity, stunning natural beauty. All of these things gain in importance in a photo by Avedon, because we have a moment to breathe, for our senses to relax, and then to exult in focused sensory delight. It also made each of his subjects look larger than life, somehow. Avedon once said, 'I always prefer to work in the studio. It isolates people from their environment. They become in a sense... symbolic of themselves.'

By removing the background visual noise and sensory overload, we are offered a relatively unobscured view of the object of our attention. The white background in Myoung Ho's photos allows the viewer to see the intricate detail and textures of branches and twigs and furry needles of trees in sharp relief. We see the thing itself, without the distraction of a cluttered background. We are able to appreciate the graceful, flowing,

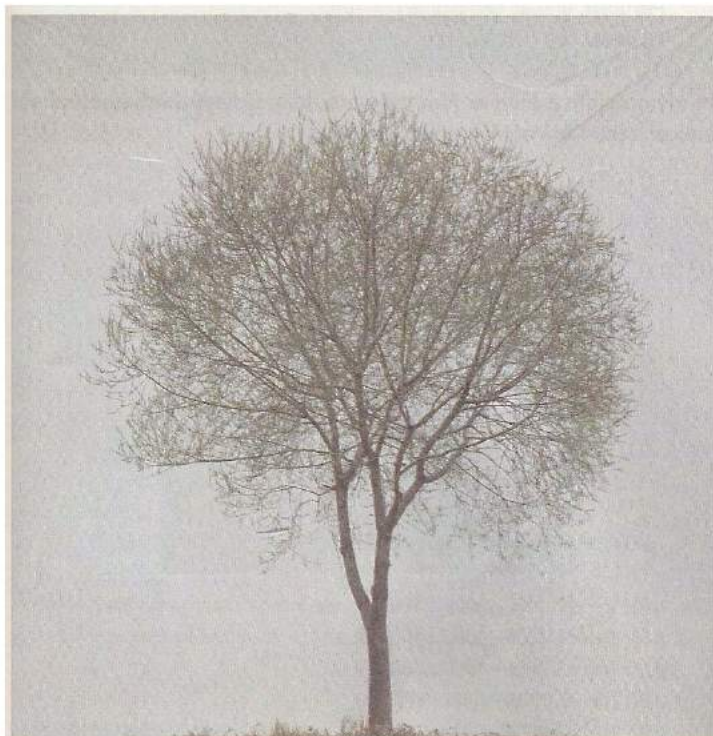
overlapping lines and organic shapes of the trees. When viewed as a series, we can begin to compare one tree's form to the next, and marvel at the similarities and differences from one species to another, from a tree in winter to a tree in springtime. We notice symmetry and asymmetry.

This series could be thought of as a continuation and extrapolation of a long-time tradition of scientific botanical photography where plants and flowers were often photographed against the temporary background of a hand-held piece of paper, or a bit of white cloth.

But Myoung Ho's background is more than just a neutral backdrop to clarify vision. The strong geometric form of the backdrop creates a stark and vibrant graphic shape in the middle of the photo. It is as if a hole has been cut out of the center. So the photo becomes interesting even at first glance, because of the strong composition, and the interplay between colour and the absence of colour, and the details of shape and form which are cast into high relief thanks to the bright white ground.

Myoung Ho's use of backdrops is not as straightforward as Avedon's; here we have the real background (sky, hills, other trees, etc.) revealed all around the upper and side edges. And along the bottom edge, we are suddenly brought in touch with the earth, with weeds and twigs and dirt and snow and grass and rocks blocking out some of the white rectangle at the bottom. The trunk of the tree breaks through the artificial rectangular boundary implied by the backdrop, and asserts its connection to the earth. The roots are implied; and there is no doubt that this tree lives in this precise spot.

Going further, Myoung Ho introduces playful elements, like the colourful floating balloons that echo the bulbous shapes of a manicured tree in his Tree #2. (How big are those balloons, and how far away? Are they invisibly tethered to the ground so they hover in just the right spots?) He also illuminates a tree at night using bright artificial light, which casts dramatic dark shadows onto the backdrop and creates a well of light at the center of the photograph that quickly fades to black at all edges. He changes the game again when he puts bright light behind the white backdrop at night, throwing the tree itself into a not-quite complete silhou-



Tree #12, 2007 © Myoung Ho Lee



Tree #8, 2007 © Myoung Ho Lee

ette, and calling attention to a second tree in the near distance, which is bathed in light from the front.

When viewed as a series, the controlled, similar composition of each photo/installation, encourages comparisons and contrasts. We notice horizon lines at slightly different levels and different qualities of light and colour in the sky depending on the season and that day's weather. Or how close the camera is to the tree and the varying shapes and sizes of the backdrops. The back and forth comparisons reveal that each tree is truly unique and beautiful. (Of course each is unique, but do we really take the time to notice this kind of thing when we are near a tree?) The series also seems to imply some universal truths generated by the 'singular expressions' of each portrait.

Once the viewer becomes accustomed to recognizing the patterns and similarities of isolated trees and their bits of exposed surrounding environments in this series, Myoung Ho takes even more of that away from us, cropping in to eliminate the sky at the top and the surrounding terrain at the sides and practically all (but not quite) of the foreground and earth below. Now we have a tree alone, clearly outlined against the background, and it is perhaps not as compelling as the uncropped photos. We have been trained by this exercise to know that something is back there behind and around the white screen, and when that information is not supplied, we feel a desire to fill in the blanks, to give this tree its context.

None of this could have been done successfully in Photoshop. Digital trickery would never impress us the way that these 'real' portraits have been made and presented to us. Why? Garry Winogrand said, 'I photograph to see how things look photographed.' And I think this is part of what drives photographers like Myoung Ho Lee to go to so much trouble to create a photograph that is easy to see in the mind, but much more difficult, and more powerful, when recorded as an actual fact by a camera.

It takes audacity and determination and will to bring a creative vision like this into reality. This is no easy task. It requires planning, coordination, construction of a backdrop, and a means to erect it and support it without showing its supporting structure. It takes some engineering know-how to make a taut 15-meter by 20-meter canvas appear to be hovering effortlessly behind a huge tree.

But more importantly, Myoung Ho's giant white canvases are not meant to disappear as a screen in a movie theater does when the movie is projected on it. Nor are they to become invisible like the undefined white space over which consumer products float in countless advertisements. In Myoung Ho's work, we are meant to see and to look at the backdrop as well. The backdrop is part of the subject matter. His backdrops have character of their own. They have wrinkles, ripples, even some torn spots that reveal what is directly behind them. They catch the shadows of the tree, to reinforce its three-dimensional nature even as it is flattened in a two-dimensional photograph.

A photographer is an editor. He or she chooses what to reveal and what to conceal, what to include and what to take away. By placing the backdrop into the center of a photo, and allowing the surrounding action to continue, unfiltered, the backdrop becomes an active participant in this dialogue about plastic space.

The end game is really a series of printed photographs, and they couldn't exist without the construction and installation of the really big backdrop. And I, for one, am grateful that he took the time and trouble to make all this work.

As a final philosophical bonus, when one of these photos is hung on a wall, a wonderful hall of mirrors effect starts to happen, with a white rectangle at the center surrounded by a rectangle of colour, which is surrounded by the white matt, which is surrounded by a frame, which is surrounded by a white wall, which is preventing us from seeing what is behind that wall...

In a parody of a poem by Joyce Kilmer, Ogden Nash wrote:

*I think that I shall never see  
a billboard lovely as a tree.  
Perhaps, unless the billboards fall,  
I'll never see a tree at all.*

In my opinion, a similar kind of serious and playful intellectualism enlivens the work of Myoung Ho Lee. +

*List of works (in order of appearance):*

- p.01: Tree #2, 2006 – 1000 x 800 mm
- p.03: Tree #1, 2006 – 1000 x 800 mm
- p.05: Tree #3, 2006 – 1000 x 800 mm
- p.07: Tree #7, 2006 – 1000 x 800 mm
- p.09: Tree #9, 2006 – 250 x 200 mm
- p.11: Tree #4, 2005 – 1000 x 800 mm
- p.13: Tree #11, 2005 – 1000 x 800 mm
- p.15: View of Work, 2006 – 500 x 400 mm