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still life

A SOUTH KOREAN PHOTOGRAPHER HAS
FIGURED OUT A NOVEL WAY TO MAKE A SERIES
OF TREES THE FOCUS OF HIS LATEST WORK.

Interviewer Nadia Saccardo

"I used to love going on long walks when I was young. Even when commuting to school I gave up the short route and took the long path. It was a tree that became my good friend at that time; it was always standing there, welcoming me every time I walked by. I've thought a lot about trees since then. They always seemed very mysterious to me. Tree roots go down into the earth, the branches reach up, and the trunk stands in the middle; it's almost like a person connecting the root and the branches. It's as if the tree unites all: the ground, the sky and the man in between. In East Asian philosophy the universe breaks down to three parts: 'Chun-Ji-In'. 'Chun' means the sky, 'Ji' means the ground, and 'In' means human. Since a tree connects all three, I feel very much that a tree is like a universe."

What inspired the series? When you think about 'art', or creating art, a common scene that comes to mind is the anguished writer sitting in a studio, trying to put something on a white canvas. Instead of trying to put something meaningful on top of the canvas I placed the canvas behind a tree. Trees are one of the most common things we meet in everyday life, but we often overlook them; we forget their value and just pass by. Trees are there, but not really there... so to speak.

What's the trickiest part of creating each image? The canvas size differs according to each work because it's tailored to match the size of the tree and the ambience of the environment. Now this will sound obvious: but trees are much bigger than you think. Each side of the canvas is generally over 10 metres long, so it has to be custom-made to fit each tree. Installation is difficult too. At first glance, it might seem like all I'm doing is stringing up a canvas behind the tree, but it's a big deal. In order to lift the canvas I need two cranes and lots of straps on each side to hold it still. I also need assistants to fix the canvas properly into place. It's a tricky job; on occasion the canvas has ripped. It's about as big as a ship's sail, so even the slightest wind can jolt it around.

Do any of the trees photographed have special meaning? There's a Korean proverb that says, "Out of 10 fingers, there isn't one that doesn't hurt when bitten". Each and every one of them is meaningful. If I had to recall one tree, it would be the first. After I came up with the idea for the series, I thought a lot about which tree to choose and decided to select one that I met most often during my daily life. It was one of the most common trees, a Sawtooth Oak at my university campus. You can see them everywhere, but I used to sit by this one and think about the world. After it was chosen as the object of my work, each and every one of its small branches came to have special meaning to me. Sadly the tree was gone when I visited the campus some time ago.

What's the most interesting thing to you about the series? The reaction of the audience. Perhaps the artist's first intention of the concept isn't that important. It is intriguing to observe the various reactions, feelings and interpretations of the audience facing my work.

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Myoung Ho Lee is a South Korean photographer who has been photographing trees in his homeland since 2006. He observes each chosen tree for four seasons before setting up a photograph, and is happy to produce just one image per year. His work will appear late September, 2012, as part of the Unseen Photo Fair in Amsterdam. yossi-milo.com

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