

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

New York

July 28, 2017

Myoung Ho Lee

YOSSI MILO GALLERY

245 Tenth Avenue

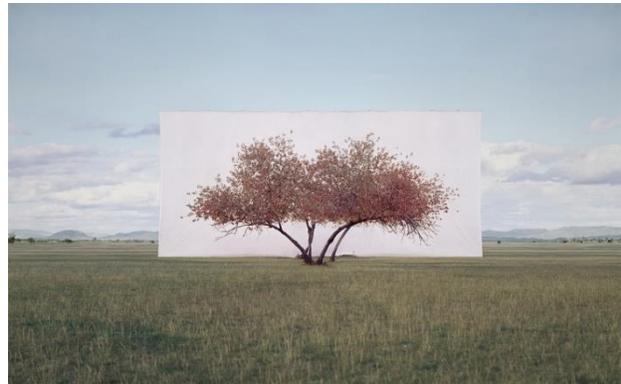
June 29–August 25

In 2015, environmentalists rejoiced after a new study estimated that there are three trillion trees on Earth—an unexpectedly immense tally. Meanwhile, the few remaining photography critics learned of a less joyous abundance: By the end of 2017, we will have collectively shot more than one trillion digital photos in one year—a glum statistic to reckon with in the campaign against a bumbling, illiterate image culture where photographs are taken, not made.

Myoung Ho Lee attends to both of these profusions

with deceptive simplicity. For his “Tree Abroad” series, 2011–17, the artist enlisted industrial cranes and a large crew to install white canvases behind solitary trees in South Korea, the artist’s home country, and Mongolia.

This costly, time-consuming performance remains vestigial in the actual images, which are doctored by Lee so that each tree appears backdropped by a levitating canvas—arboreal mirages amid pale skies, golfable pastures, pleasantly bland meadows. While the setup in *Tree... #2*, 2011, resembles a cherry-colored Rorschach test, others could be unlikely matinees at the rural drive-in.



Mirages, or billboards, portray what is desired, in theory. By advertising what is readily visible in nature, Lee’s stagings question the daily hierarchies of seeing, slyly conflating Korea’s tranquil landscape tradition with the bold style of studio portraiture perfected by Richard Avedon. But unlike Avedon—who plopped subjects into white backgrounds to relieve them of context, muddling ideas of neutral looking—Lee occasionally leaves traces of each spectacle’s production within the frame. Backdrops are wrinkled and shadowed. Gloved fingers can be seen curled around a canvas’s edge in *Tree...#9*, 2017. Electrical towers pock the horizon in *Tree...#3*, 2013, blued by distance and almost indiscernible. Totems of humankind’s giddy disregard for nature, the towers’ presence sobers up the artist’s wanderlust aesthetic, a reminder of the threats that loom over a tree’s gorgeous symmetry, over the very existence of a season.

— Zack Hatfield