

Michael Joo: *Radiohalo*

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BLAIN SOUTHERN GALLERY

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A white slab of marble towers over visitors as they enter the gallery. Flanked within a three-meter-high steel frame, the mammoth stone vacillates between being a taciturn menace and a secure object, as it incites viewers to consider their own corporeal awareness. A meandering vein slices through the boulder, symbolising Cameron's Line, a tectonic boundary defined by a subterranean belt of marble that runs from Connecticut to the Bronx. Oozing art historical references, Michael Joo's work speaks of the geometric impulses and minimalist ideologies of the 1960s, of Joseph Beuys' articulation of primal and elemental forces, of Gary Kuehn's emphasis on the physicality of raw materials, of Richard Serra's sculptures that teeter on the brink of danger and of Barry Le Va's conceptual installations. Yet, Joo's engagement with independent themes and the transformative qualities of matter lends his practice a unique position within the context of contemporary art. This sculpture, fittingly entitled *Prologue (Montclair Danby Vein Cut)* (2014-2015), acts as a preamble to the exhibition. Echoing the nucleus of the artist's iconography, it sets the stage for Joo's *Radiohalo* show at Blain Southern in London.

Reminiscent of a billboard, one side of *Prologue* carries a landscape within which the echelons of time are depicted through the organic matter; the other side is heavily treated with silver nitrate — a chemical compound. Applied directly to the marble, the refractive surface reveals the stone's textural detail, whilst also acting as an alternative picture plane and portal into another reality. The amalgamation of these two distinct materials — the unrefined and the distinctly modified — epitomizes Joo's autonomous and distinctive visual language. This optical contradiction reverberates the daedal concepts behind the artist's practice. By relying on acts of negation, and investigating notions of inner and outer space, the installation simultaneously conveys familiarity and strangeness, weightlessness and mass, fragility and monumentality, playfulness and menace, completeness and provisionality.

Furthering the artist's investigation into the complex networks and systems that continue to impact energy, nature, technology, history and perception in our hybrid world, *Prologue* explores these synchronized narratives through a cyclical approach to artmaking. The result is a work that carries within its boundaries a visual documentation of Joo's process from initial inception to realization, and accords as much importance to the act of creating as to the final aesthetic. In the artist's words: "For me the process of realizing an artwork is a bit of a path that goes in multiple directions. I will often subject a work to some kind of extreme process whether chemical or physical, whether it is something born out of a laboratory or out of a social experiment. I guess, I allow it to be shaped by being subjected to those things and I think in many ways my art is about that type of potential and possibility.



Perhaps the result is not really the anticipated outcome." Through the use of a wide range of mediums and artistic processes, Joo's oeuvre reveals the chaotic and eclectic characteristics of everyday life. Yet, his art also points to the homogenizing effects of globalization and digital technology.

Joo's theme spins into two other three-dimensional pieces. Exhibited in the gallery's stairwell, *DRWN (Carunculatus) AI 1* (2015) and *DRWN, Carunculatus (28)* (2015) take the form of casts from endangered African crane leg specimens. Exploring geographical and socially constructed boundaries, these graphite and resin installations express how physical borders and cultural intersections can often trigger creative impulses, breaching new life. Cast in a medium typically used for drawing, the sculptures establish a dialogue with their surroundings. Hauled along the length of the wall by the artist during installation, the works are juxtaposed against a backdrop that bears the marks and traces of their journey there. Impacting the architectural space that frames them, the objects are transported into another dimension, as they morph into illustrative works. Challenging the margins of the white cube, these elusive wall scratches further point to the frailty of populations living within conflict zones. Through this simple act of etching, their migration and present existence permeate their environment. Vacillating between living organism and specimen, and artistic instrument and dynamic sculpture, *DRWN Carunculatus* teeters between object, sketch and performance. Refusing to commit to a single category, it is rather an amalgamation of all three; each of the parts informing the others.

The final series of artworks to occupy the exhibition space is a sequence of paintings that resume Joo's *The Saltiness of Greatness* narrative. Akin to this 2012 installation piece that documented the amount of energy historical figures consumed during their lifetime, the artist's "caloric tray paintings" (2015-2016) rather emphasize the number of calories expended through the enactment of various



physical acts. The numerical values required for each action – ranging from boxing to sleeping to waiting – are transferred to the canvas through the use of old commercial baking trays that are infused with their own caloric history. Creating a parallel with *Prologue*, the canvas's surface is chemically treated with silver nitrate. This recurring methodology produces artworks that alter the beholder's perception, and also imbue the oeuvres with a performative element, alluding to the chemical's application to other materials.

Repeating this visual language once again, three large paintings from Joo's *Radiohalo* series (2016) occupy the second room. Rendering the visible invisible through its refractive properties, gallery visitors wander in and out of the art, temporarily occupying the frames. Hence, the works comment on both identity and space. The documentation of process is

also central here because the application of silver nitrate and epoxy ink on the canvas imprints each piece with its own individual history. Thus, abstract silver lines run across the surface, recording the artist's movements during the artmaking process.

Warping our perception of the world around us, Joo's artworks explore a unique visual language that invites viewers to reconsider the notion of subjectivity. Akin to the phenomenon of *Radiohalos*, the installation points to the power of transformation and change.

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