

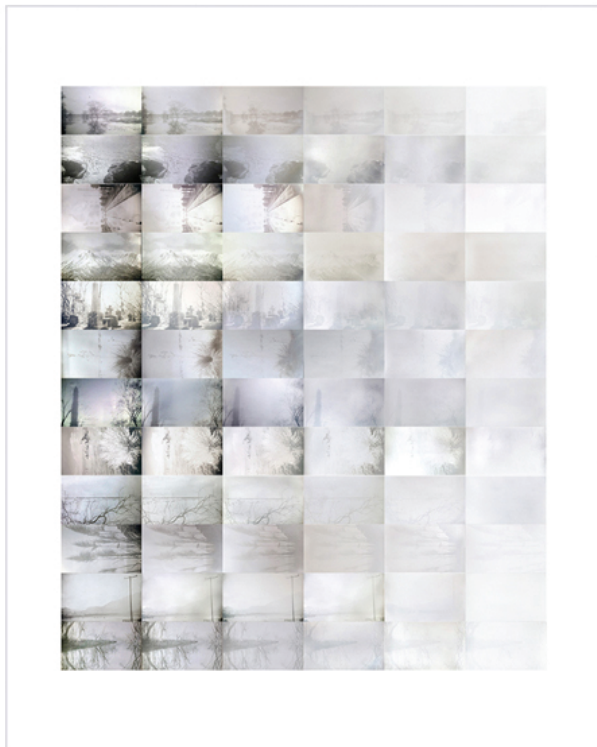
BLOG, MUSEUMS/GALLERIES

How Photographer Soomin Ham Uses Retro Processes To Create Images

The Seoul-born photographer has made an impression in D.C. with two recent exhibits.



by **LOUIS JACOBSON**
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Soomin Ham, originally from Seoul, South Korea, has made an impression with two recent D.C.-area exhibits. In April, she mounted “Sound of Butterfly,” an exhibition in which she grapples with the loss of her mother. Now, this month, she is presenting “UNSEEN/EXPIRED,” an exhibit made from retro photographic processes at Alexandria’s Multiple Exposures Gallery. Ham grew up studying oboe at Ewha Women’s University in Seoul, then earned a master’s degree at New York University/International Center of Photography. She moved to the D.C. area 14 years ago. Recently, *City Paper* talked to her about her work and career.

Washington City Paper: How did you come to photography?

Soomin Ham: I came to this medium when I was in college; I started playing with an old manual camera that my father used to take a picture of our family [with] and immediately photography became my favorite medium. I was fascinated to see the new world around me through the lens.

WCP: What are some of your major past projects?

SH: “Ricemap” is a multimedia video and sound installation in 2003. Rice was the theme of the project—not only a fundamental substance of life but also a symbol of nourishment and an expression of love in my culture. It explores the themes of Korean women’s cultural identity, assimilation, and self-awareness presented in a landscape of memories, losses, and dreams.

My recent project, “Sound of Butterfly,” reflects my mother’s journey through life, depression and death. “Sound of Butterfly” presents an experimental, yet personal approach to interpreting memories of grief and loss. Using ephemeral components such as ice and snow helped transform this personal subject into an experimental and conceptual work.

WCP: How is your current exhibit different?

SH: While “Sound of Butterfly” was intensely personal, and memory played a main role for the whole concept, “UNSEEN/EXPIRED” is more time-based work. It was created within a limited period of time. However, both works reflect an ephemeral value of the moment as old images were rediscovered and reprocessed.

“UNSEEN/EXPIRED” explores impermanence and the transitory nature of the photographic image itself. I used traditional darkroom methods to project and enlarge film slides. Each image was allowed an extremely short exposure because a slide projector is much brighter than a regular enlarger. The slides were then processed using expired photographic paper, outdated developer, and no fixer to create photographs with a short life – images offering only a fleeting glimpse of places and time long forgotten.

WCP: You seem to be fascinated by rephotographing physically manipulated images. Why does this in particular interest you?

SH: The process of rephotographing preserves moments that would have perished. It gives them new life, while leaving hints of the past. For example, “Back to Heaven” presents soft, blurry images of old photographs of my mother; they are re-photographed as the images just begin to disappear under fallen snow. And the “Frozen Moment” series was created by photographing pictures of my mother’s belongings when they are literally frozen, on a light box.

WCP: How does the way you remember things change your art?

SH: I am inspired by many things in my life, especially memory, which became a main theme for me. To create “Sound of Butterfly,” I collected scattered memories that my mother shared with me. Memory was the most beautiful gift that she left, and it helped me find a trace of her present.

WCP: What’s next for you, or don’t you know yet?

SH: I was so excited to work in the darkroom again. It took me back to the place where I had been so amazed to watch magic—an image emerging in the tray. I like to combine this traditional process along with digital methods to explore more experimental work, such as with my early film photographs that my grandfather took.