

Artist-in-Residence

NOMAD: A PHOTOGRAPHIC VOYAGE¹

Jae Hoon Lee



Figure 1. Jae Hoon Lee, *One of these Days* (2007), digitally collaged photographs, 1100 x 1100mm.

I began this creative project by initially documenting my daily life by using a flatbed scanner to record the changes in my skin. This led to a growing fascination with the shifting variations in the immediate environment beyond my body, so I subsequently recorded the cyclical aspects of the natural environment as they occurred in my neighbourhood. Gradually, my area of interest spread, and I have now documented many parts of the globe. As I have moved internationally, I have not only encountered different elements and examples of nature (trees, leaves, oceans, mountains, hills, rocks, and so on), but I have also interacted with a number of different cultures, many of which were new to me. As I moved through the world, I also expanded my image bank to include daily objects and random, often banal, events that I have seen unfolding on the streets. This activity has now become integral to my very existence. It is a way of life that sees me constantly relocating between different cultures, a lifestyle that I have subsequently come to think of as nomadic. This experience of moving through various cultures began to create a sense of being dislocated, and it is this dislocation that has provided the conceptual framework of my practice.

Through my artistic process, I am continuously seeking to find a harmonic rhythm within the chaotic and changing surroundings I encounter. I perpetually relocate to discrete cultural territories, each time evoking a sense of cultural alienation and dislocation. At the same time I seek a sense of order, affinity and unity within these physically distanced and culturally distancing situations. To attain this sense of unity, I need to discover within myself an intense and momentary presence as a balance to the competing external or internal rhythms of chaos and order. The unity found between these two polarities is analogous to the refrain of a songbird, in the sense that it establishes its territorial boundary through the repetition of its own rhythmic voice while its song also draws the circular borderline of its own milieu. Of relevance to this state of being is the idea that the territorial boundary of the songbird is also expanded by the echo of its song. Like a songbird, my movement across different cultural territories becomes a potential energy field itself, accelerating the rhythm of my own creative voice towards unknown and untouched territories. In this way, the nature of my creative process accentuates my sense of being, bringing it to the fore where it intersects with the diversity of the cultural and natural landscape.

Through the period of my doctorate candidature, I have been traveling between different cultural territories. In order to assemble an image bank, I have collected source materials in New Zealand, India, Nepal and Korea, documenting my daily surroundings with a camera as a perpetual tourist. I have used this assemblage of images to create the digitally collaged photographs and videos developed over the course of the doctoral project. While spending time in each of these places, I documented my surroundings daily, based on my personal response to each of the unique situations I encountered.

My collaged photographic works are digitally rebuilt landscapes, constructed from multiple images taken over a protracted period of time. I think of these images as 'time-based' photography rather than still photography. They do not 'capture the moment' but instead present multiple instances that are collapsed, via digital manipulation, to create alternative new readings of my personal experience in different spaces and times. Through my 'time-based' photography, the multi-layers of different timelines coexist together, because each image captures a specific period in time. With their overlay and simultaneity, the images represent a new reality rather than the lived experience of my past.

Through the process of making digitally collaged photography, I am involved in playing a 'puzzle,' a kind of a virtual game in which I actively link many different places by digitally stitching together images of different environmental textures from a range of locations (ground, walls, clouds, ocean and mountains). It is my intention to alter and establish connections between different foreign territories. My use of digital photography not only records my surroundings, but it can also construct new topologies. The multiple layers of environmental textures across different geographical locations can be condensed into a single photographic image. I become a performer; in multidirectional movements, navigating different cultures by capturing environmental textures from many different living territories. This simultaneity of movement is possible through the flexibility of the digital imaging technology and its ability to fluidly transform images.

Through the work undertaken within this project, digital imaging technology is the vehicle that allows me to make correspondences between many different places simultaneously. This is similar to the way communication technologies – the internet and mobile phones, for instance – make their users omnipresent through a virtually-interconnected environment. Through the facilitation of the disappearance of distance between the real and the digital realm, a disordered sense of the immediacy of experience is produced within a virtual timeline. At times, the work projects a hybrid noise that is overly saturated by the simulation of vast, undiscovered and untouched territories. Through representing my real experience simultaneously through a virtual timeline, my sense of identity exists in many different geographical locations at the same time. It operates as a kind of membrane between spaces – a pliable layer that connects rather than separates. It is also my aim to expand my own territory, by adapting to and corresponding between many different geographical locations, as well as creating a symbiotic relationship of different experiences and places, as a sort of virtual time-lapse evolving environment.

As a Korean-born New Zealand immigrant, I try to locate myself in the transition between many different cultures in order to circulate a sense of my existence in a constant 'cycle of flow.' Through my art process, and my continuous movement between locations, I believe I am able to fuse together an unrealised 'stream of energy' from the cultures I encounter with my sense of alienation and contrasting interconnection. My nomadic drive posits a new relationship with the different cultural territories I am confronted with. I feel as if I am throwing a sense of my existence into the open-ended world and through my work I am able to recreate my sense of self.

For example, *Ganga View Guesthouse* (2010) was shot while I was traveling in Varanasi, India. While there, I stayed at the guesthouse adjacent to the Ganges River with an open view of a field that was full of cows. Living very close to the land near the river, the people at Varanasi gleaned cow dung that they used for warmth and cooking. I spent the whole two weeks of my stay in Varanasi near this exotic location. Being at this place granted me access to a sample of the life of Indian locals. The area is remote from the tourist trail and is not frequented by many outsiders. Every day, I took a walk around the field to observe the whole scene closely. For the people dwelling in Varanasi, the Ganges River has a visceral nature that integrates the mundane and spiritual aspects of life, such as the bathing of a new-born baby, the cremation of a dead body, and the provision of a supply of drinking water. All these different facets of life are like parts of an extensive river system.

As a stranger wandering in a strange land, I felt an affinity with the locals and was compelled to understand and find a spiritual meaning from within the mundaneness of their daily lives. Having a new relationship with ever-changing environments and being open to new possibilities, my art process feels like the 'journey of a nomad,' moving between different geographical locations. I become a mediator between different cultural boundaries without an epicentre or an anchor point.

As a result of the continuous cycle of becoming through the nomadic movement in my art process, I consider myself as a cultural wanderer in relation to the concept of 'deterritorialisation.' In employing the term 'deterritorialised' I make reference to a weakening of ties between culture and place. This means the removal of cultural subjects and objects from a certainty of location in space and time. It implies that certain cultural elements have the capability to transcend specific territorial boundaries in the world that fundamentally consists of multicultural exchange in continuous motion. The cycle of becoming is a process of constant change and movement within my nomadic drive to assemble environmental textures from many different cultural territories. By tracking and recording my activities in specific geographical locations, I generate a sense of becoming, a becoming that emerges from an array of places and times. Rather than conceiving of the pieces of an assemblage as an organic whole, within which the specific elements are held in place by the organisation of a unity, the process of becoming serves to account for relationships between the discrete elements of the assemblage. In becoming, one piece of the assemblage is drawn into the territory of another piece, changing its value as an element and bringing about a new unity.

This principle might best be illustrated by the way in which atoms are drawn into an assemblage with nearby atoms through affinities rather than any organisational purpose. This follows the empiricist tradition of modern physics,



Figure 2. Jae Hoon Lee, *Ganga View Guesthouse* (2010), digitally collaged photographs, 2080 x 1400mm.

where each atomic particle is organically interconnected with others and therefore not defined purely by its own laws and properties, but also by the conditions of neighbouring particles. The process is one of deterritorialisation in which the properties of the constituent element disappear and are replaced by the new properties of the assemblage. There is the potential for becoming a molecular form of constituent parts or, conversely, being distinct atom particles.

In the fluid-like digital transformation, the surrounding matter I am confronted with is translated into the state of becoming molecular or atomised. The seemingly natural elements in my works (pebbles, trees, water or clouds) are treated as having the same material state and existential value through their digitalisation in a singular plane of the digital structure, as well as existing with the open possibility of continuous digital transformation. I call this digitalisation process of physical materials in a singular plane 'atomisation.' This atomisation encapsulates my physically experienced spaces and times in a digital structure. The rigid and solid structure of the material reality of an object is decomposed by the atomisation of the digital process.

Through the continuous cycle of digital transformation in my art process, I delineate the natural circulation of my own living boundary. All physical forms in this continuous transformation merely project the impermanent body of nature, which generates the array of virtual transformation of physical elements. In my photographic series *Nature*, natural elements such as stones, trees, water, clouds, and green fields are included. In their natural state, the elements follow their particular orders and habitat, but in my photographs they are digitally transformed to coexist symbiotically as nebulous energy particles in a digital cascade. One of the images in the series *Piha* (2007) presents multiple images of different waves which are seamlessly stitched together, composing a much more chaotic pattern of oceanic turbulence. The resultant image therefore fails to capture real 'nature,' although the repetition of the same wave engenders the mechanically seamless ocean surface. Ultimately, these waves move through their own physical order, but every single wave in this work is digitally fabricated to generate a chaotic pattern with random, multidirectional movement.

Piha addresses the idea that our environment is a smooth space like the surface of water: In our contemporary environment with the networking capabilities of digital communication, all communication systems are by definition operationally closed systems. That simply means that no system can function outside the technological confines of the system. All communication takes place within the system and is based on the exchange of binary digital codes. We can only travel through this system of organisational topology that the State has built for controlling our living environment. In contrast, *Piha* surf stands for hundreds of other oceans in many different geographical locations. It is ubiquitous. Its rhizomatic spatial movement reflects my nomadic status as a cultural wanderer; it flows across different cultural territories seeking an equilibrium of harmonic alliance.



Figure 3. Jae Hoon Lee, *Piha* (2007), digitally collaged photographs, 1200 x 1200mm.

One of these Days (Figure 1), also from the *Nature* series, provides another example of my spatial movement in different geographical locations. The virtual patterns of cloud are constructed from multiple images of the subject, taken from several different locations at different times of the day. The image is therefore time-based because it presents multiple instants that are collapsed via digital processing to create a circular patterned cloud, evoking

a sense of multidirectional movement. For traditional nomads, the sky provided the most valuable navigational tools. The position of celestial bodies provided reference points, allowing them to navigate. Cloud formations also provided vital weather information. *One of These Days* emphasises boundless movement without any specific directional destination and generates a continuous motion across wide open air.

The perception I have of my own cultural boundaries and identity is tied to my constantly changing background and the resulting casual nexus of meaningful relations between my body and the differing surrounding environment. Because all objects and subjects are inextricably linked within this world of meaningful relations, each object and subject reflects the other as a mirror of all the others. My perception of the environment is not that of a proposition, or clearly delineated perception. Rather, it is an ambiguous perception founded upon the body's fundamental involvement and understanding of the world and of the meanings that constitute the landscape's perceptual formation.

In this sense of interconnection between my body and the ever-changing environment, I become an anonymous actor who makes an action of movement on different stages, with many different landscapes formed and seen as if they were backdrops. The flow of movements on these stages is not a linear or constant stream, but rather it is chaotic, accidental and simultaneous. As in the case of the internet, information flows come from a multiplicity of decentralised sources. The multiplication of emitters and receptors of information brings confusion, instability, conflicts, and chaos, so that the environment becomes a nebulous energy field of random disorder. The artistic experimentation between my body and its environment is engaged with this random drift of chaotic movement through my continuous journey. In a way, I also make sense of this confusion by capturing and ordering a moment with these flows, moments which are presented as static photographic images.

The abstract quality of 'becoming imperceptible' can be described as the dissolution of separation between my body and surrounding phenomena – the moment of merging with the web of environmental forces that reframe my sense of self. This sense of becoming reverses my subjectivity towards the outside: a sensory and spiritual stretching of my psychological and physical boundaries. By pushing my sense of existence to these limits, it feels as if I am possessing the capability to experience a more complex and intensive existence. The process of becoming imperceptible in my art can be described in terms of a portal that allows me to oscillate between the macroscopic and the microscopic dimensions of reality, or between the microcosm of my body and the macrocosm of the surrounding environment. The digital process of atomisation is the catalyst that enables me to achieve the process of becoming imperceptible. My ultimate aim is to achieve a deterritorialisation with a horizon that is beyond my body and its everyday environment.

There is a sense of timelessness at this point of deterritorialisation; the present is fused with multiple layers of different timelines, intersected by a threshold between the past and the future. This journey is a non-linear flow of time and a relay of each moment. It is the outcome of my desire to move in different directions, experience the random flows of movement cascading through my internal rhythm, and engagement with the present. The blurred moments of my movement through these environments are more crucial than any point of arrival or departure.

An appropriate analogy would be the flight of a migrant bird on the way to finding a new nest, its path heading towards an untouched territory drawing an invisible line of flight in the air. The transitional stroke of winged flight becomes a movement from space A to space B. The journey is always in mid-flight, always at the present moment. Hence, my journey is a strategy of the present. Waking up from my elusive dream of past and future, my experience has been, with each moment, one of bringing to the fore an intensity of presence. There is only the present tense in my nomadic process of becoming. Without beginning or end, each moment becomes the whole cycle of multiplicity, because it causes the multiple interconnections with others. The theory of being-in-the-middle emphasises the ongoing ontology of the complexity of the moment, emerging as the transition between no longer (past) and not yet (future).

The Buddhist worldview is focused on the transition 'and ... and ... and,' where sentient beings pass endlessly through various incarnations, such as animal, human, god, and so forth. The Buddhist concept of reincarnation is an ongoing ontology in which a stream of consciousness links life with life in harmonic alliance. Buddhist reincarnation addresses the eternity within time; wisdom is a contemplation of the eternity of life forces, not the immortality of death. The link between life and death indicates a sense of timelessness as a single stream of energy flows in an endless relay.

When a body dies, atoms from that body are transferred to new entities following the decaying process, with dismantled atoms divided by absorption into water, soil, plants and micro-organisms. In this continuous cycle of transformation, time can be viewed as being not linear, but cyclical. It is a purely physical concept, an understanding of how the body has the potential to become embodied with its environment and composed of different substances. This is the ongoing cycle of dispersal organisms. It is an exchange of atoms from one entity to another.

Through atomisation, my sense of existence could be described as being dispersed within an imaginary landscape, having achieved a state of emptiness and formlessness. Therefore, I can look at myself from a distance, from a third person's perspective, as if the microcosm of my body were merged with the macrocosm of the surrounding environment.

In 500 AD, one of the most influential Taoists, Chuang-Tzu, dreamed about a butterfly that flew around a field full of flower blossoms. Immediately after he woke from the dream, he experienced a form of temporal confusion over whether or not he had dreamed about the butterfly or whether it was the butterfly that had dreamed of him. Chuang-Tzu appreciated the irony involved in considering whether his sense of real existence in living could be an illusion. The distinction between 'what is real' and 'what is not real' is not the issue; rather, it is both the existential and psychological gap between Chuang-Tzu and the butterfly. As a result of this confusion, Chuang-Tzu experienced a sense of formlessness and timelessness. Paradoxically, his consciousness of the existential state was expanded and linked to the dimension of multiple realities after he was awakened from a singular reality. This realisation embraced the virtual and the real world at once as he traversed two different realities.

Like Chuang-Tzu's realisation deriving from his dream, my existential state, positioned between the real and the virtual world, is blurred. In this contemporary environment, the complex web of artifacts tends to blind my perception of the true reality. Awakening from this illusive dream, what appears true isn't true; I live on the surface of life. Through the digital assemblage in my work, I try to take on the artificial environment as a part of my own nature, in terms of oscillating between the virtual and the real realm. My art process grows like a rhizome expanding on the surfaces of both the natural and the artificial environments.

After studying sculpture at the San Francisco Art Institute, **Jae Hoon Lee** completed his Master in Fine Art at Elam, University of Auckland. Lee's artworks are comprised of digitally collaged photography and video installation. He explores sensibilities and concepts relating to the nomadic experience of the artist in contemporary environments. Lee's digital image bank has been compiled from widely differing geographical locations, and he also makes digitally collaged landscapes.

1 Excerpts from the written component for the degree of Doctor of Fine Arts at Elam School of Fine Arts.