

## An Ambiguous Perfection

Aden Evens

Photography has always maintained a unique relationship with ontology. All arts explore being, asking how the world is, but photographs connect to the actual more specifically, more definitively, not just representing but in some sense attesting to a particular moment, a state of affairs, a time and place. (Its direct, causal connection to the real is thought to have contributed to photography's limited acceptance as a "museum" art until the second half of the twentieth century: how can photography be an art practice if *nature*, in the form of light rays, optics, chemical reactions, etc., directs the *pencil* that draws the image?) Of course, plenty of photographs do not depict an actual historical time and place, and the nature of the connection between image and event is ambiguous and complex, but even abstract or highly manipulated photographic images still invoke photography's problematic and productive relation to the real.

Sangbin IM's photographic images both refuse and rely upon this tie between photography and the actual. IM sets aside the question of fidelity to the real by depicting scenes that evidently are not and never have been. Sometimes the clues are subtle, the same person or object in more than one place within the image, a photographically impossible pattern of focus and blur, out-of-place and out-of-scale objects at the edges of the viewer's perception; elsewhere the departure from the actual occupies the foreground, as when the cityscape of Seoul becomes a great monolithic mass, or the artifacts from entire wings of museums are compiled into a single, towering room. However, even when the impossible, absurd, or plainly wrong constitutes the image's contents, IM takes pains to maintain a look of *photorealism*, a style or aesthetic that functions as a rarely violated principle for a substantial subset of IM's work. Cleaving to this veneer of the actual, he thereby places his images squarely within the photographic tradition, insisting paradoxically on the question of their relationship to the actual.

But if IM's images have already answered this question by foreclosing a reading of the image as a literal, spatial, historical truth, then what is the meaning of photorealism in such images? In another context, a photorealistic image of what never really was might be an attempt to fool viewers, playfully or maliciously. But IM's images do not ask to be taken as a record of what happened. Or not exactly. Rather, they offer a version of a reality *perfected* according to conventions of visual beauty or drama. Clouds are gathered in a classically blue sky to heighten the dynamism of the image and direct the viewer's attention toward its central subject. Buildings and other objects are stretched, augmented, textured, painted, and rearranged so as to intensify the turmoil, crowdedness, sparseness, or, most often, monumentalism of the image's principal subjects. All of the artworks from an entire history of a culture are assembled side-by-side in one place, proposing an impossibly ideal vantage point from which to appreciate that history and culture, a perfect art collection.

Like photorealism, idealized perfection functions in IM's images ambiguously. Photography in itself already offers a hint of perfection: a mechanistically perfect vision, unbiased by the attentional prejudices of perception. The camera's indifference to what lies before its lens models a perfect neutrality, an ideal of objectivity. IM challenges this photographic ideal not only by the very fact of a constructed or manipulated image, which is thus no longer the least bit neutral, but also by the nature of that manipulation, which takes its cues from an expert understanding of the practice of human seeing. While IM offers lush, gorgeous, intense, and startling imagery guided by a keen intuition for longstanding *ideals* of beauty, this beauty (or drama, or tension, etc.) is so perfect as to saturate sensation, raising the possibility of parody. Instead of a delicious scoop of ice cream, IM's images heap gallons of it on the viewer, shaming her for her zealous appetite. Applied to the photorealism that constrains IM's images, this logic of perception, a parody of the fantasy of aesthetic perfection, pushes in divergent directions: IM both teases the eye with a masterful verisimilitude and chastises the viewer for succumbing to this ancient artistic canard. Are viewers supposed to be embarrassed by the pleasures these images provide?

Or, we might describe this same tension as a hesitation between photography and painting, where *painting* refers not only to the application of paint to a surface but to any process of making (mostly) flat, constructed images. The combination of perfection and photorealism thus calls into question the status of the image within the tradition of artistic production. If these are paintings, they make an unusual claim to represent places that are "out there," parts of the world rather than the painter's inner vision or the history of technique captured in the painter's body and perceptual apparatus. If on the other hand these are photographs, then they are photographs of idealized worlds, photographs of how we might like to see things, or of how our standards of beauty would arrange our surroundings. IM has developed a method of taking pictures of our fantasies, capturing an indexical account of human desire.

The implicit provocation in IM's images, the embarrassment of beauty, derives first of all from the formal, photorealistic quality of the works, but this same message reverberates in the images' subjects. IM focuses his oeuvre on one of the sore spots of digital arts, the *monumental*. Just as the photorealism of the image teases the viewer's fetishistic reverence for photographic as opposed to painterly aesthetics, so the monument (or monumental) as subject underlines the European ideal of art as auratic grandeur. The monument stands apart from the viewer, a phallic assertion of power, immensity, and dominance, which is nowhere more evident than in IM's idealized images. Their sheer size furthers this hierarchy of power, subordinating perception by monumentalizing the entire image. (The etymology of *monument* itself refers to a kind of enforced recall, a forthright reminder that stands for power per se.) Even when a whole catalog of artworks is massed onto a huge wall or hundreds of female nudes from European art history lounge within a single frame in a beautiful meadow, the message is a sardonic celebration of the greatness of great art, the

world's flaws stamped out, covered over, revised so that the viewer faces the purest statement of her own ideal of beauty.

Though the crowds in IM's images might seem to oppose the monument that gathers their multiplicity into its unity, this opposition (which IM often reinforces by dividing crowd from monument in a diptych) is as much reflection as contrast. The immovable monument sets off the frozen motion of the crowd but also frames and aggregates the individuals, whom IM photographs one at a time or in small groups and then composes into the image. Individuals dissolve into a crowd, whose congregation forms the cultural complement to the monument: monuments are addressed to crowds, to congregations, to the masses.

The crowd thus can also become the monument, as in the *People* series, where the frame of the image, frequently doubled by another frame in the depicted scene, highlights the composed character of the crowd. IM groups individuals to make an idealized crowd, one whose *montage* intensifies or dramatizes the act of viewing. But this artistic deliberation, this precise, calculated control, reaches well beyond the crowd to include the entirety of the artwork. Not just crowds, but every surface, every object, every element of the image has been chosen, constructed or built toward the image's ironic question.

In light of this ubiquitous painterly oversight, IM's photorealism reveals another significance; it demonstrates the *technical* prowess in IM's works. IM's total authority over the image, itself brimming with monumental power, conveys more than a hint of pride, though perhaps this too is parody rather than authentic artistic narcissism. In any case, the glossy photorealism of a wholly constructed image not only shows off IM's mastery but also marks the image as *digital*.

For IM's images achieve their reality effects and admit the artist's radical manipulations only through the unique affordances of digital tools. If IM casually steals from photography its epistemological force by mimicking its look, his relationship to his digital tools is more cooperative, as they determine and constrain the available possibilities of expression. To build a crowd from scratch requires the ability to isolate and resituate individuals, an ability offered readily by the granularity and precision of the digital. To add stories to a skyscraper while maintaining appropriate perspective (and color, shadow, reflectivity, etc.) down to the level of pixels—such alteration demands the algorithmic calculations of a digital machine, whose software tools incorporate conventional principles of European visual representation, inviting such piecemeal editing. We might see in these tools the ideal partner for IM's chosen aesthetic: just as his images present a reality intensified to a point of perfection, so have cultures around the world embraced the notion of the digital's perfection. The fantasy (both frightening and tempting) of the digital is that it will one day provide a world free from material imperfection, a world where every element can be constructed according to one's desires, a world where *Undo* promises to rectify any misstep, a world of a total perspective and a total control. If IM ironically chastises the viewer for her uncritical love of conventional beauty, he may

be recognizing that viewer as a subject of a culture made digital, caught by the ominous faith that machines offer a better future. In the pre-digital regime of monumental architecture, at least you knew where the enemy was.

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