

RUBBING/LOVING

By Megan Lykins Reich, Deputy Director of Program, Planning, and Engagement



My first experience with making a rubbing was at daycare as a young child. We gathered fall leaves, selected one that we liked best, placed a paper over the leaf, and gently colored the paper with crayon. The result was magical. The creases and outlines of the leaf emerged on the paper: a ghostly imprint in purple, the leaf forever captured.

Unlike drawings or photographs, rubbings are exact indexes of the object being represented, strange but pure two-dimensional records. In 2012, Do Ho Suh embarked on a new project called *Rubbing/Loving* for the Gwangju Biennale. Gwangju was the site of a censored democratic protest in May 1980 that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians. For the Biennale, Suh wanted to create a monument that both portrayed and upended the invisibility of this incident in South Korea's history. Suh and a team of assistants covered a dormitory room at Gwangju Catholic Lifelong Institute in vellum paper, and, over the course of one day, rubbed the entire surface with colored pencil while blindfolded. The act of understanding the space without the use of sight was critical for this project, which connected symbolically to South Koreans' attempts to make sense of a massacre that was entirely censored by the government and news media.

The work's title is significant to Suh's impression of this process. As he states, "Rubbing is a different interpretation of space. It's quite sensuous...you have to very carefully caress the surface and try to understand what's there" (*Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 6, 2013). Rubbing requires a physical connection between artist and object: you must touch to transfer. From a practical standpoint, rubbings also provide precise information that is very

useful to someone creating, say, a life-sized sculpture of a particular environment. So, as Suh was working on the translucent fabric installations of his New York City apartment and studio, he began to consider rubbing as another way to translate the space.

In 2014, Suh attached paper vellum to every surface in his apartment—from walls to stove tops—and painstakingly rubbed the space using blue colored pencil. He then removed the textured rubbings and excised certain portions to create massive geometric shapes, fastening them to wood with tiny red pins like delicate specimens. Although soft and subtle, the rubbings' surfaces teem with activity. From afar, the works read like peculiar blueprints. Drawing close, large swaths of speckled blue dots indicate wobbly, uneven areas of plaster along Suh's walls. These quiet seas of pale blue are intermittently interrupted by meticulous representations of electrical sockets, light switches, and intercom systems, with the names of manufacturing companies clearly legible in tiny script. Small cut tabs reveal how Suh captured the rounded elements in his home: the sink, knobs, and buttons. Other highly dimensional details, like oven handles and faucets, exist separately, maintaining the strict flattening of the space that creates such strong contrasts with the translucent fabric sculpture.

The rubbings, much like the monumental sculpture, are simultaneously literal and enigmatic. Engaging us with the familiar, they quickly collapse into poetic expressions that move beyond representation and ask us to consider how we capture and draw meaning from time spent in a space, and, more specifically, in a home.

Do Ho Suh. *Rubbing/Loving* Project: Kitchen, Apartment A, 348 West 22nd Street, New York, NY 10011, USA, 2014, colored pencil on vellum pinned on board, 143.25 x 332.125 inches (overall)
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