south Korean-born artist June Yong Lee produces lush monochromatic photographs of human skin as flesh without bones. For each image in his Torso Series (2008–present), Lee presents the entire surface of a larger-than-life-size torso splayed out horizontally. An invisible line from sternum to navel roughly forms the central axis of each photograph. Working from the center and moving outward around the body, the artist meticulously fuses together numerous digital images until a 360-degree view of each torso appears as if unfurled onto a single plane of vision. The eye is free to wander among the corporeal contours of the chest, stomach, pelvis, ribs, back, and spine. Within this seamless expanse of flesh, viewers can explore some of the most private and unknown regions of the body, where birthmarks, nipples, scars, and tattoos usually remain hidden from public view. This unrestricted access to naked flesh appears in stark contrast to the partial and incremental way we often come to know bodies—our own and those of others—through physical interactions involving touch, sight, pleasure, and pain. Evoking vintage medical and morgue photography, Lee’s realistic yet “impossible” panoramas of flesh are both fascinating and disturbing as a visceral site of intimacy, memory, and physical trauma.

Lee received his BFA degree from the Academy of Art University in San Francisco and his MFA degree from Indiana University, Bloomington. Lee’s work has been exhibited widely in the United States, China, and Japan. In 2010, Lee received the Society for Photographic Education Award for Innovations in Imaging in Honor of Jeannie Pearce. He is an assistant professor of photography at Arcadia University in Philadelphia, where he currently lives and works. Lee’s work is part of art collections at the Portland Art Museum; the Kinsey Institute in Bloomington, Indiana; and the Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts in Japan.

This conversation took place following Lee’s solo exhibition at the Arts at CIIS Gallery at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. In this conversation, Lee discusses his use of digital photography, his thoughts on race and identity, and his unique approach to rendering human skin. Lee also talks about how he selects and builds trust with his models, as well as what he has learned from the process of getting to know people through the markings on their skin.

TINA TAKEMOTO: Can you speak briefly about your upbringing and your childhood experience?

JUNE YONG LEE: I was born and grew up in South Korea. After graduating high school, I moved to the United States because of my father’s job. At that time, I wasn’t really interested in art or anything else in general, so I struggled while attending community college. When I first came to the United States, I mainly studied English. Soon after, over the summer, an introduction to photography class caught my attention. My English was not great, but I thought this class would be interesting because it was Studio art and would require less English than others. At the same time, photography seemed to be the least intimidating medium to me in the arts. During the class, I enjoyed taking pictures. I still vividly remember the first exercise to process a roll of film and make a print in the darkroom. It was magical for me to see an image emerge on paper. At that moment, I knew that I wanted to study photography.

TT: How did moving from South Korea to the United States impact you and your sense of identity?

JYL: As I became more fluent in English, I started to notice ethnicity and race issues here in the US. I was previously aware of these issues through the media, but when I was growing up in Korea, it was a homogeneous society. We were all Koreans. These days, Koreans are dealing more with ethnicity as the country becomes increasingly diverse. In the US, I realized for the first time that I am an Asian. It was not so relevant to my everyday life before, but it suddenly became one of the identities that society projected onto me. I was aware of being different. People around me looked different, and sometimes I noticed people treated me differently. On a personal level, it was confusing and frustrating. On the one hand, recognizing difference is a natural process of human experience.
On the other hand, making assumptions and judgments based on difference seems wrong. Through these experiences, my identity as an Asian grew stronger. I realized skin is not only profoundly personal but also an intricate matter. I would not have thought about this at all if I had not moved to the US.

**TT:** What inspired your interest in the arts and photography?

**JYL:** What interests me in photography is the fact that it documents time and space but can also be easily constructed and deceiving. A photograph presents both a reality and a fantasy. Naturally, people tend to believe that what they see in a photograph actually happened in front of a camera when it was taken. For example, the feeling I get from looking at Ansel Adams’s majestic photograph of Yosemite is different from when I stood in front of Half Dome. It was still majestic and magnificent, but it was not the same experience. Sometimes people manipulate a photograph to change the reality of what happened. Because photography is usually based on and begins with an actual scene, photographs evoke this intersection and interaction between a truth and a fantasy. It creates a vulnerable state for viewers and artists. As an artist, [I think] photography is an exciting medium to explore, especially because of this fine line between truth and fiction.

**TT:** Your Torso Series of 2010 displays a 360-degree view of the body that is visually and corporeally stunning. You offer an intimate view of each individual’s body that we can rarely see in real life, especially in relation to our own bodies. How did you develop this unique approach to representing the body “in the round”? How does Torso Series relate to your earlier self-portrait body prints, including Face Print (2007), Hand Print (2007), and Body Print (2008)?

**JYL:** I was already fascinated with the nature of skin through my experience moving here to the US. Skin carries deep emotional and personal identity. It was a natural process for me to talk about skin through my work. At first, skin related to my own story, which I explored in my self-portrait series. *Face Print* was one of the main influences for *Torso Series*. In order to make *Face Print*, I rolled my face onto a flatbed scanner while it was recording. It is the same action as fingerprinting. Fingers are rolled onto the surface of paper as a way of providing one’s identity. In *Face Print*, the continuous three-dimensional face is represented on the two-dimensional surface, creating a flayed skin of my face. I was interested in how a three-dimensional story could be told through a two-dimensional form. Also at that time, I was looking at photographers who were exploring a similar format by digitally combining multiple images into one, such as Gary Schneider (with light), as well as Ben Gest and James Nakagawa (both with Photoshop). As an experiment, I photographed my torso with a DSLR camera while holding up my arms. It was shot one frame at a time while my body rotated 360 degrees. Then I brought in all twenty or thirty of the digital files to Photoshop and slowly and meticulously extended the image of my torso little by little. While keeping the overall position of the body, I tried to make the surface of the skin look flat. That was the start of this project.

**TT:** Standing before your work, the viewer can experience both attraction and repulsion in relation to the visceral quality of flesh without bones. How do you account for this dual response to your work?

**JYL:** That is still one of the biggest concerns I want to explore in this project. Even though it was never intended, there is a medical and visceral quality to these images. In a way, I think people react strongly to this unfamiliar portrayal of the body because we are very sensitive to our skin and body. The nature of skin is profoundly intimate and delicate; it is the reason I started this project. My idea was to present skin in a unique way, to allow viewers to examine other people’s skin closely, and to hear the story it tells them without any other distractions. Also, the whole story (all 360 degrees of a torso) is told as skin records their life. Furthermore, prints from *Torso Series* are usually printed slightly larger than life size to reveal more details of the skin. In an ideal
situation, I display this work under spotlights so that only the photographs are illuminated without any ambient light. It creates an intimate viewing experience for the viewer.

TT: Various theorists have described the skin as a site of memory, trauma, fetishism, and inter-embodiment. What aspects of the skin resonate most strongly for you?

JYL: For me it is all of the above. By looking at different people’s skin and sharing it with viewers, I explore the meaning of skin, especially the deeply intimate nature of skin and the fact that it is closely tied to one’s identity. I do not think many people realize how emotional the subject of skin is, and how much of who we are is associated with it. We are born with it, and skin is the biggest organ that we have. Skin defines and dictates who we are. We judge and categorize people by it. Also, it is a physical record of our life. Whether markings on skin are permanent or temporary, intentional or unintentional, skin carries our stories in a much different way than memories in our mind.

TT: Formally, your work simultaneously evokes early medical imagery, or even morgue imagery, as well as modern and classical photography. Can you describe how you use digital technology in combination with black-and-white photographic techniques?

JYL: Digital technology allows me to create this impossible view of the body in order to emphasize the surface of skin. By removing its form and structure, skin becomes like paper. Paper has been used in civilizations to pass on knowledge and stories to future generations. It was interesting to think about the relationship between text on paper and markings on skin. In a way, the project displays a new reality that allows viewers to look closely at our skin and what it tells us. Because the skin looks very realistic, I think it engages viewers more directly and emotionally, and sometimes they are uncomfortable looking at it. I seek a balance between reality and constructed imagery. Even though all of these photographs from Torso Series truthfully depict the model’s torso, it is not entirely real because it is impossible to see our backs at the same time as we see the front part of our bodies in real life. Also, the original color of the skin has been removed and the details on the skin have been visually enhanced. Therefore, the surface texture of the skin becomes more important than before. I am consciously making these decisions based on the traditional nature of the photographic medium that evokes a sense of “what was in front of the camera” and altered or constructed imagery that becomes more accessible with digital technology.
TT: I notice that you don’t include the names of your subjects. Do you consider your photographs portraits? More generally, how do you see your work in relation to race, identity, and portraiture?

JYL: None of the photographs from Torso Series have titles or any information about the individuals. I feel that personal information can distract from the viewing of work. I believe who they are is already written on their skin, and I want to introduce these models to viewers in this particular way. Even though it may not be so apparent at first, I think that Torso Series is deeply rooted in notions of race, identity, and portraiture. For me, it is about different characteristics of skin, my personal experience of race issues, and how an individual’s identity is shown through skin.

TT: How do you select and approach the individuals whom you photograph? Do you go through a process of building trust with your models? What kinds of conversations do you have with them about their memories of scars and tattoos? What is their response to your photographs?

JYL: The most difficult part of this project is finding models. In general, I do not photograph anyone I already know, and I do not really get to see what kind of markings are on my models’ torsos before they come in for the shoot. Most of my models are found through online sources such as Craigslist. There is a lengthy process of emailing back and forth to get to know each other before scheduling a shooting session. I try not to select or make too much of a judgment before meeting them. As long as they are comfortable with modeling and have some types of marks on their bodies, I photograph them. I continue to talk to my models when they come in for the shoot. I ask broad questions about their personal lives and also about the markings on their bodies. In fact, lately these conversations have become longer than the actual photo shoots. I am more and more fascinated with their personal stories and their lives. After the shoot, I usually send them the finished image of their torso and ask them how they feel about looking at their own body in this particular way. Because people never see their bodies in this way, they are usually astonished. When I used my own body as the first model for this project, I felt very exposed and embarrassed to display a photograph of my torso on the wall. But at the same time, the response from viewers was incredible. Generally, viewers’ responses are polar opposites. There are people who are moved by the work, and others who cannot even look at it because it is too disturbing and reminds them of flayed skin.

TT: What have been the most challenging and most rewarding or surprising aspects of working on this project? Will you continue to photograph more torsos?

JYL: For me, the process of meeting different people and getting to know them through the markings on their skin is the most rewarding part of the project. They are not professional models. Some people participate because they are intrigued with this project, and some are interested in the cash that I pay them for their time. I am fascinated with the personal stories that are attached to each marking on their skin, and working on the digital files to form the composite images into one single photograph.

TT: What are you working on now, and what are your plans for future work?

JYL: I continue to work on Torso Series, and I am trying to figure out ways to expand it. As I become more interested in the models’ actual stories, I have started using video during the photo sessions. I am experimenting with how to approach this same topic—identity and skin—in different ways to reveal something that I have not considered before.

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