

High on the Hog | Miru Kim's "The Pig That Therefore I Am"

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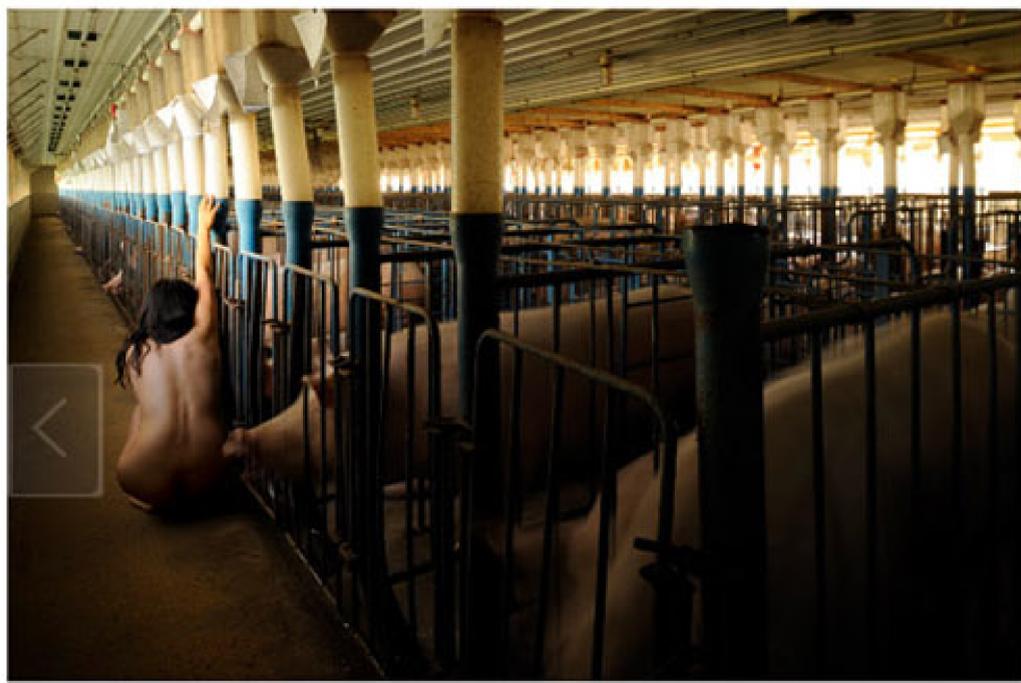


Photograph by Peter Domorak. Styling by Katie Mellinger.

At first glance, the photographs in [Miru Kim's new show, "The Pig That Therefore I Am,"](#) opening this Thursday at the Doosan Gallery in New York, seem like abstract studies of female skin. But as your eye moves to take in the big picture, you are surprised and perhaps a bit horrified to discover that most of the flesh in these intimate compositions is not human. A nude female (the 30-year-old artist herself) lies in filth with hundreds of caged hogs in industrial farms. The impulse is to recoil in disgust, but you are easily drawn back by the stillness, the almost transcendental quality of the images.

This daring new work screams of animal-rights activism, though the soft-spoken, matter-of-fact Kim denies any political intentions. Her interest, she says, is mainly in the performance. (She shows behind-the-scenes video footage and provides first-person narrative accompaniments with each piece.) It is also highly theoretical, a far cry from Kim's athletic urban exploring days that spawned her 2008 series, "[Naked City Spleen,](#)" in which the locations for her birthday-suit poses tended to be in abandoned buildings, underground subway tunnels and on top of massive bridges. The New York-based artist was raised on a diet of Taoism and Buddhism by her father, Do-ol, who is Korea's leading philosopher, and studied French postmodernism at college.

Here, she answers a few questions about her work.



A selection from Kim's "The Pig That Therefore I Am". Photographs by Miru Kim

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FULL SCREEN

Q. Where does the title, "The Pig That Therefore I Am," come from?

A. The title comes from the philosopher Jacques Derrida's "The Animal That Therefore I Am." He critiques the relegation of animal life since the time Descartes made the distinction between man as a superior rational being to every other living species. I tend more towards the Buddhist perspective that all living beings are connected in a circular way via life force, or qi. It's not that "I think, therefore I am," but rather, "I am, therefore I feel."

How did you gain access to these large-scale, highly secured industrial farms?

I sent out countless packets of letters and press articles about my work to farmers along the East Coast. I had to prove that I was not an animal-rights activist. All but one gave me negative replies. That farmer seemed to enjoy watching me work. Not many get to see a naked woman with their pigs.

How did you find the Iowa and Missouri farms?

I packed my bags for couple weeks of motel living. I can't tell you how much time I spent on satellite maps searching for those white rectangles lined up and connected to a black pool ("lagoons" where the manure is collected). Eventually I found someone who runs a hog farm in Iowa. That's where I took the photos with sleeping pigs. It took about six hours to have them all lie down and get used to my presence.

Not all the farms were accessed by permission, right? What was the most difficult aspect of the project?

Driving through these massive complexes in Missouri was nerve-racking because the workers could see that my rental car did not belong there. There were thousands of hogs getting shipped out for slaughter. But I spotted one complex that looked quiet. I changed into a dress and sandals that could be taken off and on very quickly, and prepared my camera on a tripod. The only access was somehow left open. This was the single most frightening experience I've ever had. The clanking of metal crates, the screams and grunts, the smell, the filth, the dreary eyes of pregnant sows confined in gestation crates, the fear that someone may come in and find me naked, and the possibility of a farmer chasing me with a shotgun.

What was the most enjoyable part?

I learned firsthand that there is absolutely nothing enjoyable about industrial hog farms.

The "ick" factor is strong in your work: rats, hogs, mud, feces. How did you build up a tolerance to touch these animals and substances that people normally cringe at?

I was raised with different kinds of animals, and since I was a child I thought rats were cute. In my daily life I am a sanitary freak. After the pig shoots, I poured vinegar on myself and even tried hydrogen peroxide and toothpaste. I scrubbed so much that my skin became red.

In your 2008 series, "Naked City Spleen," you were also sneaking into forbidden and hidden locations. Tell me how you were able to access the incredible places you've been to like the Bronx aqueduct and the Manhattan Bridge?

It involves jumping off the platform when no one's watching, popping manholes, climbing over gates and getting clothes torn, squeezing through small dirt holes and under chain link fences, climbing scaffolding, walls and ladders.

Do you consider yourself a part of any art movement today?

I identify most with graffiti writers and street artists in terms of methods and locations, but I don't see my work as being "hip" or fashionable in any way. I am more interested in underground artworks and films that are quite obscure. I mostly feel like an oddball.

And what did your urban explorer and street artist friends teach you?

The city is a giant playground, especially between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m.

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