

## Michael Joo's Intimate Intersections

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Soft Skills and Underground Whispers, 2024 (installation view).

Courtesy Kukje Gallery, Seoul

### **The artist folds layered references to geology, biology and archeology into his exploration of how identity is formed**

Michael Joo is a man obsessed with cross sections. That would be a reasonable conclusion to draw, on panning around the American-born Korean artist's latest exhibition of two- and three-dimensional works. In it he appears to be dissecting everything: from genetic to biological structures; from the display systems of cultish modernist architects and the animal collaborations of cultish postwar artists, to the scientific legacy of the artist's recently deceased mother. Accordingly, at various points of your amble through it, this show appears to be geological, archaeological, biological, deeply personal and broadly metaphysical. With respect to these last, *Mediator (Redux)* (2024) features a pink embroidered quilt that the artist's mother had imported from Korea to the US during the 1980s, hung and folded in such a way that it echoes the silhouette of the German artist Joseph Beuys (his staff replaced by a cascade of rainbow coloured stone beads that spread across the floor like an octopus's arms), huddled under a blanket during his celebrated performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*. The latter co-starred a coyote and reached the fifty-year anniversary of its staging earlier this year, when Joo's mother also passed away.

You'd most likely be an art historian if you knew the first reference off the bat, and a close personal friend of the artist if you knew about the second. But this is the kind of intersectionality with which Joo's work is occupied, concerned with how identity is formed. Which, as everyone knows, is never a simple process.

Revider for Ganoderms (Yeongjiboseot 3) (2024) comprises two intersecting plexiglass planes with three carbonised mushrooms balancing on and around them (the specific fungi, referenced using its Latin name in the title, is often used in traditional medicine across East Asia). Perhaps the carbonisation speaks both to consumption and to the effects of deep time. The effect of the whole, however, is like watching a giant, exploded glass microscope slide, or a slide from which the subject has escaped, leaving us to inspect the material of the oversized slide itself. Such works also riff off Italo-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi's glass easel display system, originally developed for Sao Paulo's Museum of Art (MASP) during the 1960s, rekindled for this year's Venice Biennale and here, by Joo, in *Untitled (after LBB)* (2024).



Michael Joo, *Mediator (redux)*, 2024, Embroidered quilt, stone beads, dichroic glass, structure, and textile.

Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery. Photo: Jeon Byeong Cheol

In another work from the Revider series – Revider with Carbon Doppelganger (2024) – the clear panels have merged with a carbon boulder on the floor in such a way that you're left wondering which came first, or grew around which – the glass or the carbon. That the form of the 3D-printed rock is based on samples collected from Korea's Demilitarized Zone (for one of Joo's earlier projects) adds a whole new layer of narrative. If you want it. In sculptural terms, it remains an encounter between a transparent material and a dark material – something that denies its physical presence and something that insists on it. At certain points in this show, you might begin to wonder whether it's the artist obsessing about things such as intersections, incisions and cross sections or whether it's you, the viewer, obsessing about reading a narrative into everything that provides the show with its undeniable momentum. What with all the carbon and charcoal on show here, Joo's materials certainly speak to a certain amount of embedded exhaustion from the off.

The colours in the Mediator stone beads are reflected in the large EP Print (v. 2) (2024) that hangs on a wall and scrolls down over the floor and appears as though a giant litmus test gone slightly awry. It is in fact an image that originates in electrophoresis (a technique of genetic imaging practised by Joo's plant-physiologist mother), here given a few AI tweaks. Though you and I might struggle to work out what those tweaks were. Instead it hovers between a zone of information, a zone of aesthetics and a zone of artistic and scientific discovery. As if it were the intersecting cross-sections of each. At once the language of both and of neither.

**Soft Skills and Underground Whispers at Kukje Gallery, Seoul, 30 August – 3 November**