

20 TO WATCH

# NEW ART

IN AUSTIN



YOON CHO

For an artist interested in the performance of identity, moving to a new environment can offer a fresh stage on which to enact life. This was the case for Yoon Cho when she and her husband relocated to the Austin suburbs in April 2004. Having lived in Seoul, South Korea, and New York City, southwest Austin presented Cho with unfamiliar social geography. She documented her suburban transformation, a process she both resisted and allowed, with a tongue-in-cheek series of color photographs titled *Nuclear Family* (2005), and six life-sized self-portraits, referred to as the *Texas Self-portraits* (2007), which overlay schematized information about Cho's biological and cultural selves atop exterior views of her body.

*Nuclear Family*, which was exhibited in 2006 as part of the first I-35 Biennial Invitational at Dallas's Dunn and Brown Contemporary, began with the reclamation of one of middle America's most ubiquitous pictorial genres, the Christmas card photograph. Cho and her husband addressed the camera, wearing stylish formal attire, while between them a yellow silhouette of a baby hovered on a chair. As the *Nuclear Family* series progressed over a period of two years, Cho charted the development of her imaginary child

as she (or he; the child's gender remains indeterminate) learned to walk, planted flowers in the garden, and helped Mom and Dad sponge down their SUV. Congenial as these photographs appear, they deliver an incisive social commentary. As a family of two, Cho and her husband may have differed from their neighbors; but by visualizing their comparative lack, they could both feign conformity and satirize the domestic standard they fell short of.

Rituals of conformity likewise provide the thematic content of Cho's *Hair* (2007), "a performance project of haircuts in progress," and her current video and photographic undertaking *Blurring* (2007).<sup>1</sup> In *Haircut* (2007), the three-minute-and-thirty-three-second video component of *Hair*, Cho adopts a state of physical conformity with her husband by having her long black hair cut to the specifications of his hairstyle. In *Haircut*'s split-screen display, marriage is signified not only through rings and the exchange of vows, but also through the assimilation of bodily appearances. As Cho explains, "I'm always interested in the relationship between where I am physically and mentally, with the space I inhabit and what's happening in my life."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, Cho's *How to Spell My Name*, (2007) offers an experience of what we might call "video Babel." Twelve subjects from four U.S. states, whose names range from a simple "Joe" to the polysyllabic "Lok-yan Leung," talk about their names and the delights and difficulties that have accompanied them. In the tapestry of voices it can be difficult to distinguish individual speakers, but careful viewing reveals an editorial logic to the sequencing of names and stories. The effect is akin to that of Cho's photographs in *Blurring*. Both works present a plentitude of information about their subjects, yet obscure the most common signifiers of identity (names in the first case, faces in the second) in a semi-penetrable haze. As artist, Cho becomes complicit in nominal and visual identity theft. But there is a twist: in the world Cho creates, we may be better off without them. CH

HOW TO SPELL MY NAME, 2007  
DVD, 17 minutes, limited edition 2/3  
Courtesy of the artist