

Playing with Light and Space

A Conversation with

Soo Sunny Park

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Soo Sunny Park's light-filled installations are simultaneously visceral and immaterial. They encourage viewers to explore the sensual effects of light and shadow, geometry, the natural landscape, and the wonders of physics. Her 2007 exhibitions included solo shows at the Fire House Gallery in Burlington, Vermont, the Knowlton School of Architecture in Columbus, Ohio, and Reeves Contemporary in New York City, as well as group shows at the American Academy of Arts and Letters in New York City and the Cummings Art Center in New London, Connecticut. Her works in these shows, and at the Rotunda at Hopkins Center (2006) in Hanover, New Hampshire, intermixed common objects like string and transparent plastic cups with industrial design materials. Educated at the Columbus College of Art and Design and Cranbrook Academy of Art, Park is an assistant professor in the studio art department at Dartmouth College.

Jan Garden Castro: *What were the origins of “Liminal Engagement,” at the Fire House Gallery?*

Soo Sunny Park: Liminality is central to what I do. It comes from the Latin word for “threshold” and is associated with one’s sense of identity dissolving due to openness of mind. Some Asian and Western philosophies might call the liminal state “egolessness.” It’s not a static condition and, by definition, is always changing.

I called the largest work in the show *S.S.VT. Vapor Slide*, which stands for South Stratford Vermont Vapor Slide. Being here in Vermont has really influenced me. My work always uses industrial materials and quotidian materials, stuff you would see at Home Depot, but it always becomes organic, mimicking forms that are natural rather than rigid and industrial. The piece in Burlington is fluid and curvilinear. A lot of people say that it looks like a floating sea creature. I was inspired by the sloping, snow-covered hills here. I’m constantly driving back and forth on a dirt road to reach my house on a hill covered in snow, which I call a white vapor. I also had the idea of using a chain link fence with plastic cups stuffed inside, the kind you see at ball parks—that is the upper half of the piece.

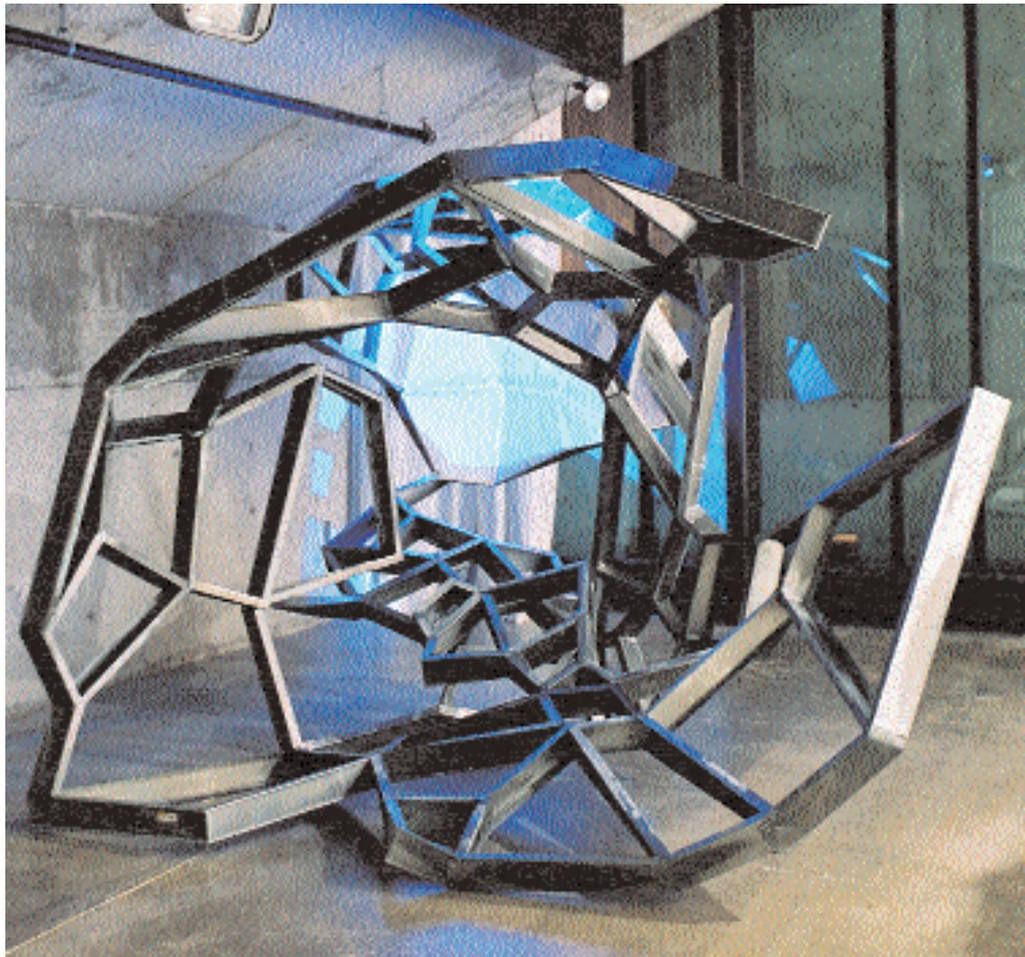
JC: *How did you get it to look so ethereal?*

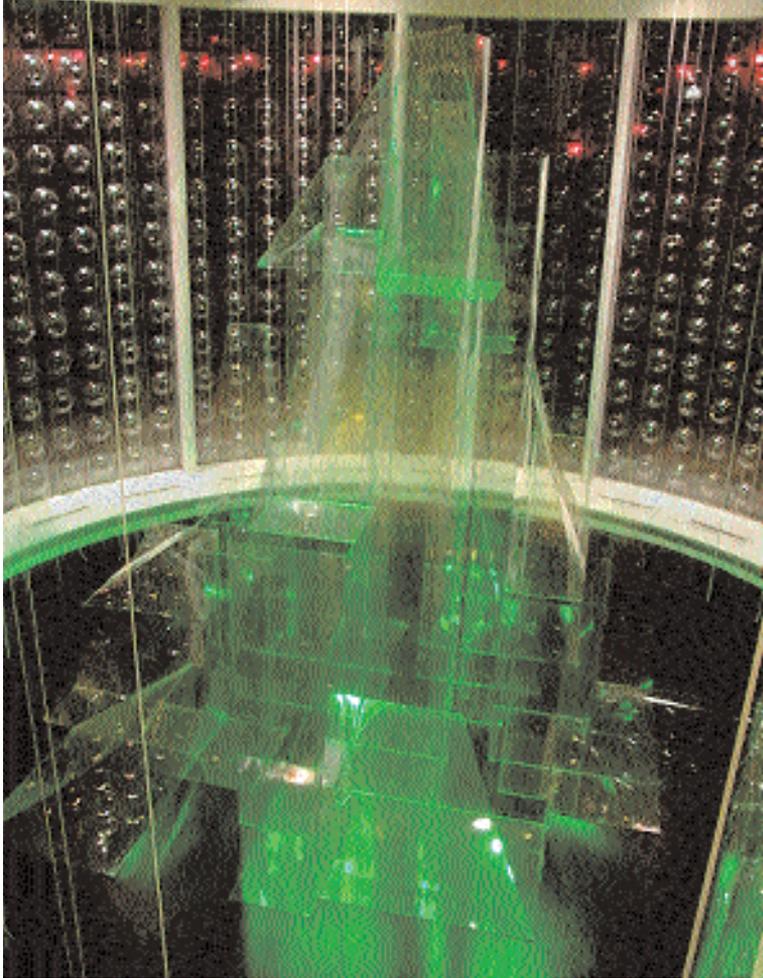
SP: By backlighting the transparent cups. A white string hangs from a hole in each cup, extending down and supporting a river rock dipped in yellow ochre to imitate dirt on the ground. I’m interested in interstitial or in-between spaces, and for this work, I was thinking about the margin between the snow and the gravel on my driveway. The strings are the space between the snow and the rocks. I wanted to see what would happen if the space in between were opened up and stretched.

In *Ephemeral Contact Cement Dodecahedron* (1999), an earlier experiment related to *S.S.VT.*, I used six gallons of contact cement, which you normally don’t see, and made a sculpture out of it. The dodecahedron (12 pentagons) is the shape closest to a sphere, with the least number of sides using a platonic shape. After I transformed the liquid contact cement into a ball-like form, I did a performance in which I pumped it full of air until it burst.



Opposite: *Fractal Immersion*, 2007. Egg carton crates, glue, drywall, wood, and aluminum honeycomb, 10 x 45 x 25 ft. Above: *S.S.VT. Vapor Slide*, 2007. Chain link fence, plastic cups, cotton strings, river rocks, and yellow ochre dye, 12 x 45 x 60 ft. Below: *Untitled/metal stud structure (roadside video project)*, 2007. Metal wall studs, rivets, parchment paper, and video projector, 8 x 10 x 12 ft.





Left and detail: *36, Kr81*, 2006. PETG plastic, cotton strings, black latex paint, and green lighting, 10 x 25 ft. diameter area.



JC: Could you describe your Knowlton School of Architecture show?

SP: I had three works there. One was an early version of *S.S.VT. Vapor Slide*. Another was an irregular polyhedron made of metal studs; one side was covered with vellum paper, which acted as a screen for a film I made. Then there were five digital photographs I had taken while driving on a pitch-black Vermont road at night. Above viewers' heads, a kinetic light contraption moved very slowly, from left to right, projecting light. As the light met with the viewer's line of sight, it hit reflective beads on the photographs. The fine glass bead powder is from 3M; it's used for retro-reflective signs. I wanted the flashing or sparkles on the photographs to show what I'm seeing at night through the snow and moisture on the windshield—a kind of displacement and contraction of moving light, or like driving down a lost highway.

JC: *The Rotunda piece, 36, Kr81*, was more focused on light itself than on seeing light out of darkness.

SP: The natural force of light plays into form, space, and perception. I wanted to make transparent forms against transparent forms so that viewers might question the notion of sculpture having a concrete visible form. My work tends to use neutral colors, monotone or clear. The *Rotunda* piece consisted of clear against clear plastic forms within a cylindrical glass room. I wanted to create a piece in which the form was hard to see or hazy during the day; but when the natural light changed, such as at sunrise or sunset, the Plexiglas edges created a prism effect on the floor. At night, the green lighting took over, and the work became a glowing green structure. The light was on constantly, but you couldn't see it during the day. The center structure was both a cityscape and a rocky, mountainous, crystal structure that could have been in a Superman movie. So, the green color hints at Kryptonite or a surreal sci-fi connotation. The title, *36, Kr*, is the scientific notation for krypton on the periodic table; *81* is an ionic bond or special effect that Kr could have. It's a colorless gas that becomes green. I liked the associations of green and krypton and Kryptonite.

JC: *Fractal Immersion* is your most recent work. What is the concept there?

SP: As you can see, I don't work objectively. Most of the time in my studio, I'm researching materials. Since I have limited space, everything I do is repetitive or in geometric modular units. Jean Tinguely is one of my favorite artists because he worked toward deconstructing sculptural form. For this exhibition, I was thinking about forms and materials and objects I could make,

and my partner had been collecting egg cartons for years. I was interested in the shadows made by the beehive/honeycomb/egg carton shape as well as in the deconstructive quality of paper. When the gallery director came for a studio visit, I got the idea of running with the notion of fractal space/immersion. A fractal is an infinite repetition of natural phenomena such as waves crashing; it's a rough, fragmented shape that can be divided into parts that repeat the same form. "Immersion" has many meanings, from being completely focused on one thing to being covered by liquid or even by a shadow, such as the moon's shadow covering the sun.

In *Fractal Immersion*, there are many kinds of shadows casting shadow against shadow. I found a fabulous honeycombed industrial aluminum used for heating, ventilating, and air conditioning systems and for airplane parts. When you look through the tiny hexagons of the honeycombs, they fracture your vision, so I've inserted them into egg carton forms.

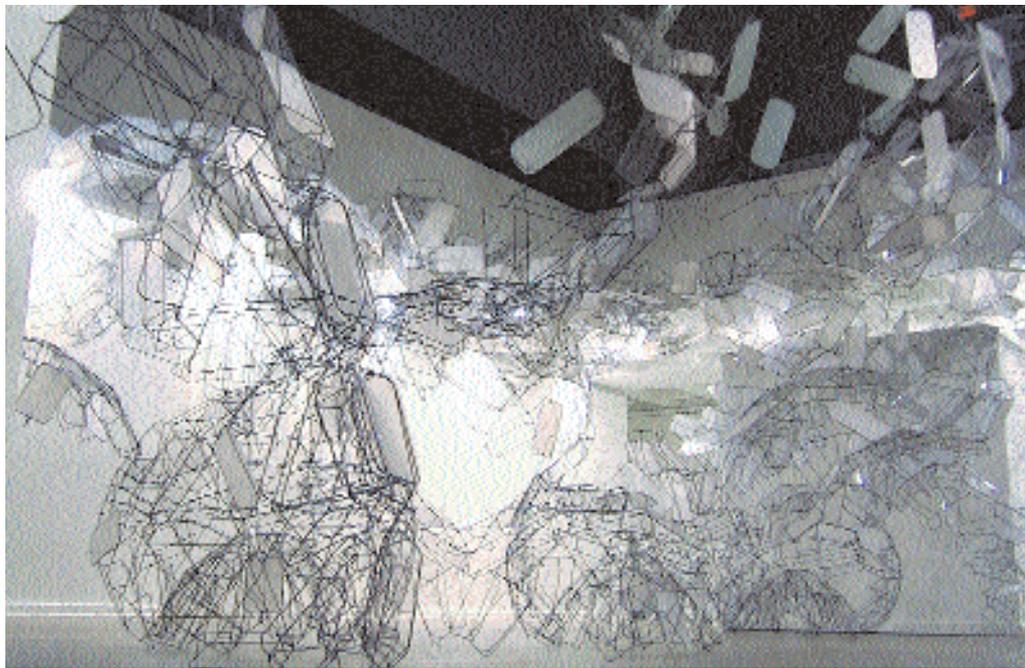
JC: *What are your other artistic influences?*

SP: About seven years ago, Mari Carmen Ramírez, a curator from Texas gave a lecture on Latin American conceptual/feminist artists of the '60s and '70s, which introduced me to Lygia Clark, and I began looking up her work. She was interested in experiential or sensorial space. She abandoned thinking about the artwork as an object and dematerialized it into experience. She blindfolded viewers and gave them bodily experiences that changed their perceptions: your sense of space changes according to which senses you're using and which senses are taken away. She dissolved the physicality of the sculptural object.

The challenge is to let go of materiality and the attachment that comes with possession and to focus instead on transitory time and transient experience or space. I've moved around a lot, and the way I think about making sculpture is to let go of the sentimentality attached to the object and to celebrate a moment of experience that I share with viewers. It's about creating the experience, not making the object. There are already too many works that will outlast their framework and circumstances. I think about how we physically experience



Above: *Fractal Immersion* (detail), 2007. Below: *Untitled Installation (CT Coll)*, 2007. Steel chair rebar and PETG plastic, 35 x 17 x 29 ft.



the external world from a certain eye level, from a certain distance. Having the body as a filter dictates our perceptions about the external world, and this affects our thinking.

JC: *So you are trying to take viewers from everyday to inner experience?*

SP: My desire is to confront the standard—what is given—by re-using quotidian products to produce unexpected results that somehow relate to nature. I aim to translate assumption and expectation into openness and incalculability, and I hope to gain empirical experience and dialogue about in-between phenomena. When I have a show, I look for things that I can't control such as moisture in the air, daylight, dust, gravity, and shadows. Within time and space, the constant cycle of nature envelops the earth. I'm only half the creator; the other half is the natural environment.

Jan Garden Castro is a writer living in New York.