

# ARTFORUM

## Na Mira

### PAUL SOTO

In 1980, two years before the publication of her now canonical experimental novel *Dictee*, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982) began work on a film called *White Dust from Mongolia*. With grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the University of California, she traveled with her brother to South Korea, where the filming was to take place. The trip was ill-timed, as it coincided with an especially draconian moment in the country's four decades of right-wing authoritarian rule: the consolidation of power by Chun Doo-hwan and the brutal suppression of the Gwangju Uprising, a popular revolt against the abuses of dictatorship. Filming under martial law proved tricky. While Cha planned to turn the movie into a novel, all that remained of *White Dust* at the time of her death—she was murdered while living in New York—were thirty minutes of footage, a project description, a shot list, and storyboards. Like Kafka's novels or Bach's *The Art of Fugue* (1742–46), *White Dust* seems to achieve, more than poignancy, a kind of perfection in being left incomplete, its themes of displacement, loss, and amnesia distilled into fragments.

Na Mira's "Bad Ground" at Paul Soto was a faint reflection of Cha's project, a sketch of a sketch, a half-recovered memory. The show was spare—three photographic prints *Mori 1–3* (all works 2023), and the namesake work, a two-channel film installation—that transposed aspects of *White Dust* into a formal language of traces and glimpses. Mira's film takes place in a vast, empty movie theater. In a long shot, two women (respectively played by the artist and by painter Hanna Hur) suddenly appear, seated together, up near the screen. Then Hur, now alone, climbs over the seats to confront her own shadow. These are fleeting and distant images, made ghostlier by their presentation: Each 16-mm projector sits on the floor and casts its pictures into the corner of a red-painted rectangle of wall, a classic 4:3 aspect ratio at a little more than four feet wide. The red soaks and nearly subsumes the images, pieces of which reflect on mirrors arranged on the floor.



View of "Na Mira," 2023. From left: *Mori 1*; *Bad Ground*; *Mori 3*, all 2023. Photo: Marten Elder

While a cinema appears as the setting for one of the scenes Cha describes in her notes, *Bad Ground's* adaptation of *White Dust* is found in the play of disjunctions, of presence and absence: a movie split in two, dwarfed by its screen and reflected in fragments. Cha characterized *White Dust*, in her oblique and contemplative prospectus, as "a simultaneous account of a narrative,

## PARK VIEW / PAUL SOTO

beginning at two separate points in time.” In an earlier part of the story, a character suffers from amnesia—she has forgotten even how to speak. Though a historical allegory, the setting is hardly specified, as if amnesia had deleted this as well (in a later proposal for the novel, the tale commences in China, where many Koreans escaped to after the Japanese took over their country, and ends in Korea). The amnesiac moves forward in time toward a cure, while another character, starting from the present, moves backward to “retrieve events past.” The latter provides memory to the former—they “are the same, [become] the same.”

A kind of convergence—becoming the same—is enacted in Mira’s photographs, streaky and roiling black-and-white abstractions, which the artist made by projecting the two films simultaneously onto silver gelatin paper. Yet these frozen movements—dialectics at a standstill—are, we were told, already in motion again: The prints have been developed to encourage fading. In one sense, Mira assumes the role of the amnesia curer, inventing a memory of the aborted *White Dust*, just as the amnesiac, rather than recovering what’s been lost, is, according to the artist, “given a new set of vocabulary, a new language, [an] Invented language.” But the spectral and evanescent qualities of the exhibition suggested that Mira was equally interested in the invention of forgetting, just as history is a process of both writing and erasure.