

# Mirror image: Kimsooja's self-reflective installations take over the French city of Poitiers

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page 1 of 5

# SMART ART

Taking the temperature of the contemporary scene



HEAT, 2019, BY DOUG AITKEN, AT HIS NEW STUDIO

## Doug Aitken

Word play among relics of a vanishing American culture, and a new creative space in Culver City



Jean-Michel Othoniel and Johan Creten's super studio in Paris

Kimsooja kickstarts a kaleidoscopic takeover in Poitiers

Monika Sosnowska's perfectly proportioned atelier in Warsaw

An art collector's dual-purpose pad on Lake Geneva

# NOVEMBER



 SOUTH KOREAN ARTIST KIMSOOJA AT HER *TO BREATHE* INSTALLATION AT YORKSHIRE SCULPTURE PARK, SEE PAGE 153

## SMART ART

- 128 | American hero  
Doug Aitken presents his latest creative space, in Culver City, and an exclusive new portfolio
- 153 | **Mirror image**  
Kimsooja takes her urban wrap to Poitiers
- 158 | Solo show  
A collector's pad on Lake Geneva
- 164 | Deep space  
Jean-Michel Othoniel and Johan Creten think big in Paris
- 171 | Studio system  
Monika Sosnowska's reductionist atelier in Warsaw

## FASHION

- 218 | Power play  
We're tailoring for success

## FOOD

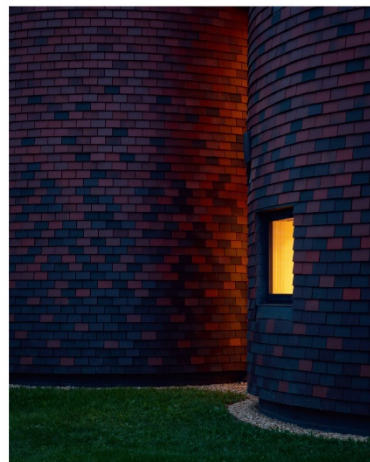
- 250 | Artist's palate  
Claude Lévêque's tomates farcies

## FRONT OF BOOK

- 055 | Newspaper  
From classy camping kit to cake as art
- 071 | The Vinson View  
Picky Nicky is down on dressing rules

## INTERIORS

- 242 | Hook smart  
Door furniture for the discerning



 ACME ARCHITECTS' CONTEMPORARY OAST HOUSE, SEE PAGE 114



Smart Art

# Mirror image

Kimsooja's self-reflective installations take over the French city of Poitiers

For more than 25 years, South Korean artist Kimsooja has focused her practice on a specific element in her country's visual culture: the *bottari*, a colourful bundle of cloth used to wrap and transport items by hand. It is a traditional and timeless component of life in Korea, where *bottari* fabrics are often recycled from old silk

bedcovers, a repurposing that inverts domestic and public spheres, conventional gender roles and power structures. It is in this context that Kimsooja began using this material in her work: 'I've always started

SOUTH KOREAN ARTIST KIMSOOJA WITH ONE OF HER *TO BREATHE* INSTALLATIONS AT THE YORKSHIRE SCULPTURE PARK, UK

from my own reality and my own culture,' she says. 'It's not that I like them, necessarily. I use them because it's my reality.'

Kimsooja (who goes by a single-word name, in defiance of cultural conventions) has spent the better part of the past two decades peripatetically, based between New York, Paris and Seoul, and realising »

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RIGHT, KIMSOOJA'S *TO BREATHE* IN THE CHAPEL OF THE YORKSHIRE SCULPTURE PARK, AND, BELOW RIGHT, A DETAIL OF THE WORK, MADE USING DIFFRACTION GRATING FILM AND MIRRORS

projects around the world. Her meditative works explore the self, the other, and the narratives woven through life's journeys. 'The whole world I was viewing has been, in a way, wrapping and unwrapping the bottari,' she reflects. Across sculpture, installation, performance and video, the bottari has served as a visual metaphor for the artist's own decentred existence and a longer history of human transience, migration and now displacement in a globalised society.

This year, the 62-year-old artist has translated the handheld bottari to an urban scale, wrapping the French city of Poitiers in a bundle of public art installations that activate its medieval architecture and foreground its rich history. *Traversées* is a sprawling contemporary art event in this old Roman town southwest of Paris, where Kimsooja inaugurates a new ten-year cultural and urban heritage initiative. More than a dozen works by the artist transform the city's historic sites into sensorial experiences.

'We wanted to put the city in motion, starting from its iconic sites of memory while looking to the future, which Kimsooja understood perfectly,' explains the event's co-artistic director Emmanuelle de Montgazon. 'This constellation of works resonates together and allows visitors to chart their own course.'

As the birthplace of Michel Foucault, Poitiers is an apt locale for an in-depth presentation of Kimsooja's work. The influential 20th-century philosopher's premise of heterotopia – a socio-cultural space of otherness theorised as a self-contained 'world within a world' that exists in parallel to our lived experience – seems a fitting description of Kimsooja's bottari. The organisers of *Traversées* were drawn to the duality conveyed by Kimsooja's works: 'They exist only in relation to the places they take over, but they come with a very strong introspective dimension, says de Montgazon. 'They belong as much to their own history as to the history of the places and people to which they are addressed.'

Kimsooja was originally drawn to bottari in 1992, during an artist residency in New York at P/S Contemporary Art Center. She adopted it as a colourful, readymade, three-dimensional canvas and alternative platform for art-making that she quickly expanded in multiple directions. 'I also started working >>



**'Kimsooja's works are site specific, with a strong introspective dimension'**



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**BOTTARI-TRUCK MIGRATEURS, 2007**

An allegory of migration, this installation at Poitiers' Chapelle Saint-Louis is accompanied by a film of the artist travelling atop the truck through Paris

**ARCHIVE OF MIND, 2019**

In the Palais des Ducs, the public is invited to form clay balls on a giant table, a nod to the banquets that were once held here

**THREAD ROUTES VI, 2019**

Screened at the Palais, the latest chapter of this visual anthropology series focuses on Morocco's crafts, including Fez's tanneries

in video, considering the video frame as a wrapping method – wrapping the world or wrapping nature – rather than image-making,' she recalls. A representative series of her video performance works, collectively titled *A Needle Woman* (1999-2001), depicts the artist standing motionless in the midst of busy pedestrian thoroughfares around the world, with her back to the camera. In these simple yet compelling works, her body acts as a needle, the unceasing flow of passers-by serving to wrap her stationary form. For Kimsooja, video offers 'an immaterial way of wrapping the reality of the world'.

In 2006, Kimsooja received a commission from the Museo Nacional de Reina Sofia in Madrid in which she introduced a different approach to wrapping reality: a site-specific installation at the city's iron-and-glass Crystal Palace, built in 1887. Titled *To Breathe: A Mirror Woman* (2006), this large-scale architectural intervention covered the building's glass exterior with a translucent film that diffracts white light into a spectrum of colours, swathing the interior space in an ethereal prismatic environment. A floor-covering of mirrors multiplied the

refractions, completely enveloping the audience in her luminous bottari.

Similar bottaris of light and sound were subsequently unveiled at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013 (where Kimsooja represented her country at the Korean Pavilion) and earlier this year at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. In Yorkshire, Kimsooja transformed the art centre's 18th-century chapel into a vertiginous space of reflection, both literally and metaphorically, softening the solid interior surfaces of its historic masonry, to convey a lightness that contrasted with its rigid exterior. In Poitiers, she unveils her first mirror installations to be exhibited in France, including one that reveals the stunning vaulted ceiling of the Maubergeon tower in the medieval Palais des Ducs d'Aquitaine.

Traversées also marks the debut of several new works by Kimsooja, including the latest chapter in her ongoing video series *Thread Routes* (2010-2019), which contemplates the intersection of craft, architecture and landscape through the lens of regional weaving practices. Whereas previous chapters brought the diverse textile traditions of Peru, Europe, India, China and

indigenous peoples of North America into focus, *Thread Routes Chapter VI* (2019) explores the practices of Moroccan artisans working in leather-dyeing, tile mosaic-making, embroidery and weaving. As with earlier chapters, this work interrelates the natural landscape and aesthetics characteristic of the region with these traditions, creating a poetic portrait that weaves the routes and threads of local history and culture in dialogue with their surroundings.

For Traversées, Kimsooja approaches the city of Poitiers as a tapestry, its medieval streets and historic sites forming paths that intersect, converge and separate as visitors trace their own journeys while traversing its contours. Not only are her works installed throughout the city, but she has invited an array of other creators – among them composer Myriam Boucher, choreographer Min Tanaka, and artists Subodh Gupta, Tadashi Kawamata and Rirkrit Tiravanija – to contribute to the project, incorporating their own threads to the warp and weft of Kimsooja's cultural fabric. ★  
*'Traversées / Kimsooja', until 19 January 2020, Poitiers, traversées-poitiers.fr; kimsooja.com*

Photography: Courtesy of the artist, Aaron Wax; Thierry Depaigne