Words
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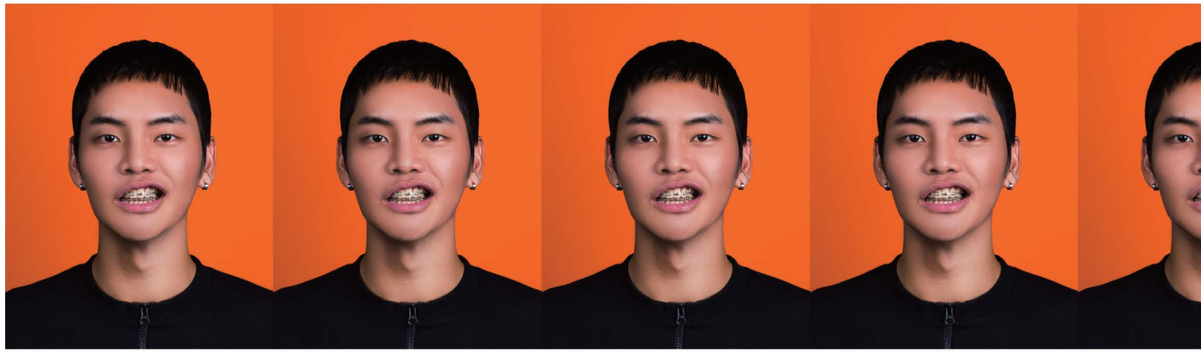
Photos
Kim Sihyun

SIHYUNHADA



Kim Sihyun's photography tackles the seemingly mundane—identification (ID) photographs. Unlike other photographers dealing with these quotidian, biographical images, however, Kim's reservations for each month sell out in less than thirty seconds, through Instagram promotions fitting of the digital age. As her largest body of work, Kim's "Identification Photo Project" captures images of South Korean people, attempting to sample and represent people and trends idiosyncratic to the contemporary moment. Since we last spoke, Kim had photographed over 300 people so far.

Although regulations may vary, the method for producing identification photographs is fairly standard from country to country. A client walks into a photo studio, a booth, or even the post office. They stand with their backs against a plain-colored background. The photographer directs their face toward the camera. On the count of three, a stifled, expressionless face is captured, evenly spaced between the edges of its printed form—a small, 35 mm by 45 mm piece of paper. For both the photographer and the subject, the process of image-making remains curt and robotic.

The process is the same in South Korea, Kim explains: "Identification pictures in Korea are generally seen as something that one must do in a standard way. It isn't seen as a form of art, as it can be a repetitive process. There's a white background, a certain type of lighting, and a face positioned in a certain angle." This repetition and standardization gives the image credibility, a claim to "realness" and uncorrupted representation.

The authority of these photographs is ubiquitous—understood as markers of identity, they serve as affirmations of personhood, national status, and legality. Behind this logic is the belief that, when accompanied with personal metrics, the photograph can objectively and neutrally fix an organic subject that exists prior to the image. However, in South Korea, the complexities of this assumed neutrality are brought to surface through indexical practices and standards of beauty that disturb the notion that the photographic image, edited or not, is unaffected.

For South Koreans, identification photos are typically used for both ID cards and résumés, since job applications require candidates to submit an identification photo recently taken, within 3-6 months from the time of application. Recently, several politicians have protested this practice, citing the

use of images as an easy pathway to discrimination, especially for women. In June, the newly inaugurated president, Moon Jae In, pledged to institute "blind hiring," which would ban employers from asking for identification photos, in addition to other discriminatory information such as one's hometown, academic pedigree, physical condition, and parents' background.

In South Korea and much of Asia, where physiognomy is more openly practiced, standards of an ideal face developed: pale, fair skin, big eyes with double eyelids, a small nose, and a v-shaped jawline. Beyond beauty, readings of physiognomy understand these features to connote health, class, and fortune. These interpretive practices, of course, are not limited to just Asia—similarly discriminatory hiring practices based on visual coding of gender, race, sexuality, and disability are common practices in Western countries as well. Still, by linking employment with these identifiers produces the logical necessity for enhancement—that is, Photoshop and even surgery—to better match these standards and therefore increase the likelihood of employment. Usually, after being photographed, clients will either work with the photographer to make these enhancements, or have a heavy amount of Photoshop put into service without their say.

For Kim, the processing starts early, but aims to individualize rather than normalize. Before every shoot, Kim asks her clients to choose a color for their background. "I want them to choose their background color carefully. There's a certain feeling that a color gives off. I tell them not to choose a color that they think would suit them but instead to choose their favorite color—I'll make sure that it suits them!" The bulk of the project, displayed on Instagram, shows the sheer diversity of colors chosen by each individual. Strikingly rich, the different background colors interact with the subjects' faces in a way that draws out their unique, ethereal characters. Despite sharing the pose and structure of typical identification photographs, the tone and mood of these photos sharply contrast with the former's attempts to assert

an aesthetics of impartiality.

So when Kim explains that "an identification photo, to me, is a picture that truly holds a person's identity," her work and process gesture toward an identity inclusive of yet beyond the supposedly objective nature of the photographic capture. Here, even light is personal—before every shoot, Kim makes sure to discuss angles and lighting to suit her customers and their desired image. "For instance, darker lighting would give off a more hardcore, serious ambience than brighter lighting." At the end of her shoots, Kim works with the client to go through the process of photoshopping together. According to Kim, she limits herself to small edits—including the tone of the background color or make-up touch-ups—that make a significant difference to the image's overall effect. Her practice reworks the relationship between beauty and digital enhancements: these enhancements are not necessarily positive or negative, but communicative tools, mediating between shared visual codes and subjectivity.

The result of this collaborative process is an image that, bordering on hyperreal, communicates an aura unfixable by personal data or standardization. In this project, for a photo to properly identify its subject, or "capture [their] true colors," requires a sensitivity to subtle changes in image-making, rather than prescribing to standards that police both the subject's representation and our own image of what truth looks like.

What distinguishes Kim's "Identification Photo Project" from other imagery along the same vein—from ID photos to mugshots—is that it makes visible the ways in which the photographic image is a surfaced marked by subjectivity. Making no attempts to feign objectivity, Kim's work embodies its chosen hues and visceral exaggerations of each individual captured, creating identities where beauty is unknowable and ungraspable by standard models of knowledge.