



Once Upon a Time I

FEATURE

## LIVING MEMORY

Past and present meld in **Soomin Ham's** recontextualised photographs, in which the multimedia artist infuses her grandfather's long-lost photos with her own unique vision. Donatella Montrone reports.

All images  
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of memory and dreams.' The result is a new body of work, *Portraits* – in effect, a collaboration between Soomin and her grandfather, in which she builds on fading memories. '*Windows* continues this exploration by instead "merging" my grandfather's vision and my own.' Imbued with fragments from the *Portraits* works, the *Windows* images express a new narrative that 'transcends the people, place and time captured in the original photos'.

*Schoolboy*, one of the most evocative images in *Portraits*, is a photo her grandfather took, and Soomin believes it may be a photo of one of her uncles. In the original, the boy is wearing his school uniform, backpack hooked over his shoulders, a snowy mountain visible in the backdrop. 'When I saw this photo, I imagined a boy who dreamt of being an artist when he grew up.' This interpretation became the central focus of the reworked image, in which a photo of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea is merged with the photo of a schoolboy. *Song of Schoolboy*, which forms part of *Windows*, follows on from *Schoolboy*.

Recomposed with a fragment of the *Schoolboy* photo, Soomin overlays an image of a young girl, her daughter, who also dreams of being an artist. The result is a fusion of the hopes and dreams of two children, separated by decades, demographics and death, 'through the window of a different time and space'.

Familial bonds have been the most profound influence in Soomin's work. As one of four children growing up in South Korea, her parents encouraged them to pursue the arts. While her siblings studied fine art, she studied classical music and played the oboe. However, her career path veered in 1992, following a trip to Rajasthan in northern India. 'It was my first time seeing

the desert, and I was overwhelmed by its infinite, timeless presence. I was feeling uncertain about my career at the time, but the desert allowed me to expand my vision. By the end of the trip, I decided to follow my true passion – photography.' In 1994, Soomin moved to New York to study at New York University and the International Center of Photography, leaving behind the family from whom she had >

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Soomin Ham's *Portraits* and *Windows* portfolio has a delicate, haunting quality. A collection of recontextualised old photos, printed on hanji (handmade Korean mulberry paper), the subjects in this twofold series are obscured by what can only be described as a sheath of white noise. The effect is actually the result of exposure to harsh elements, the images later rephotographed in their new atrophied state. Distressed and faded, the photographs hint of a time long gone. Soomin's works are in essence a reinterpretation, manifested in reconstructed compositions that draw the viewer into the past while bearing witness to the present.

Soomin's grandfather was long dead when she found a box of photos among his belongings – dozens of tiny contact prints, 2x3in in size. Little is known about the photos or their subjects, many of which are portraits that hint of daily life in Korea

(before the country was divided) in the late 1930s and early 1940s. 'I never knew about this box of old photos,' says Soomin. 'My grandfather was not a professional photographer; he was a businessman, but he had an artist's sensibility. This would have been lost to me had I not found the box.'

She pored over the photos, captivated by the gaze of their subjects – women standing closely, their hands overlapping in demure repose; young families, the children posing serenely. 'The photos were faded and worn, yet alive with beauty. Their composure revealed very little of the harsh life they experienced under Japanese colonial rule. Except for a few photos of my grandmother, the portraits were of people I didn't recognise.'

In an effort to understand her grandfather's creative vision, Soomin studied the photos, conjuring her own visual narratives. She recontextualised the images, infusing them with her own interpretations. 'In my imagination, I created visual poems, woven fabric

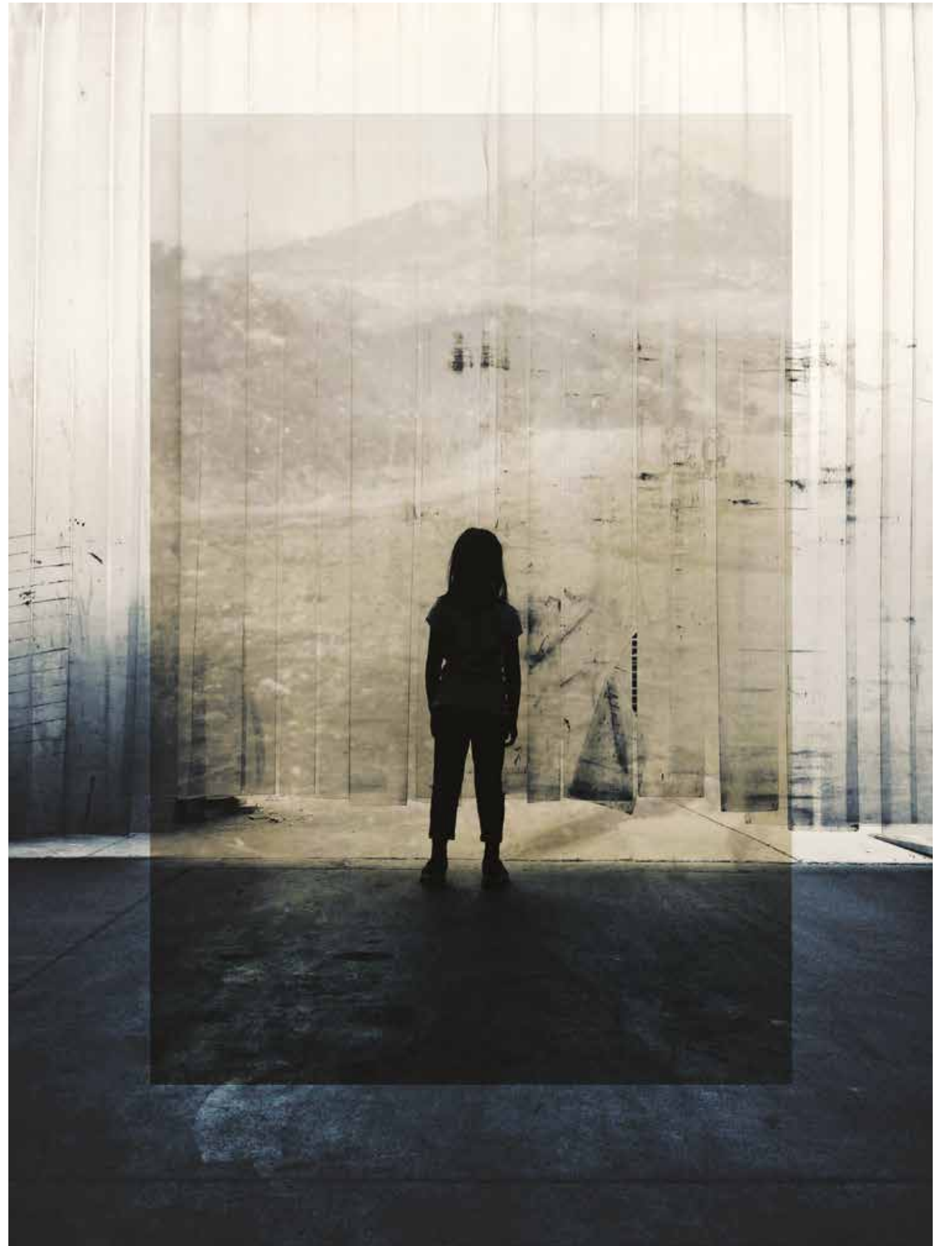


Above **Portraits** | **Scent in the Wind**  
Right **Windows** | **Song of Scent in the Wind**

Top **Windows** | **Song of Waterfall**  
Above **Portraits** | **Waterfall**



Portraits | Schoolboy



Windows | Song of Schoolboy



## Once Upon a Time II

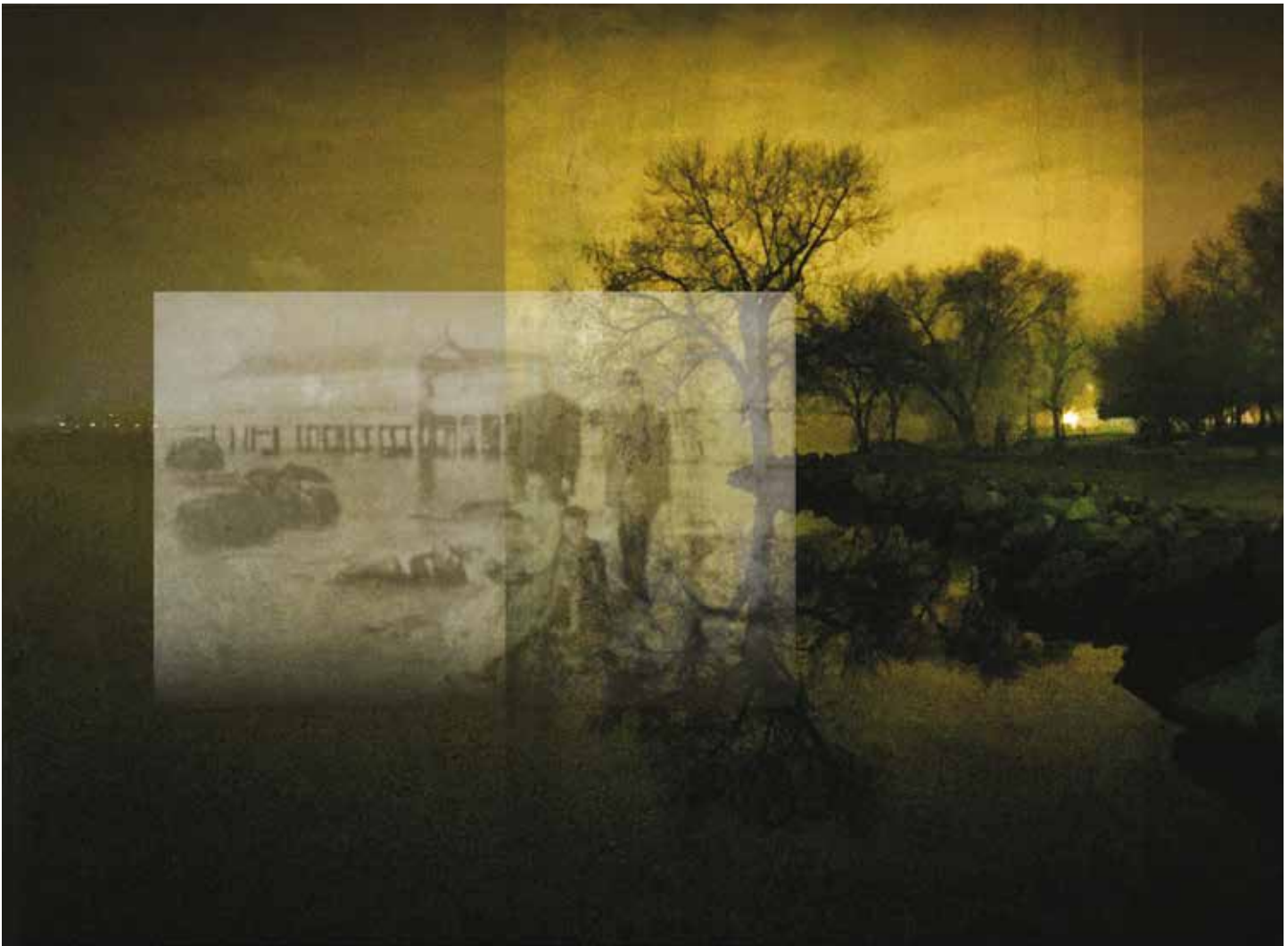
◀ always drawn strength. Among the hardest to leave behind was her mother, whose lifelong struggles with depression resulted in suicide more than a decade later. 'My grandfather was wonderful. He was really generous and always positive,' she recalls of her childhood. 'When I got older, and my mum's depression got progressively worse, my grandfather expressed his deepening worries. He asked me to take good care of her. For me, it was more like a promise between us. I still feel remorseful for not being able to attend his funeral in Korea, and for my inability to keep my promise... and for the tragic loss of my mum.'

Soomin returned to South Korea after her mother's death to sort her belongings. As an expression of profound love and sorrow, she created a heartbreaking series, *Sound of Butterfly*, which explores her mother's life through her personal effects. She hadn't set out to create art from grief, she says, but as she catalogued her mother's possessions, she grew more intent on capturing the 'silent echo' of her mother's presence – lingering traces of her existence in her intimate possessions.

She wrote of the experience: 'One quiet night in August, I lost someone I loved so much. With my grief, I began

searching for memories we shared. I found these in family photo albums, and in the belongings she left behind. The memories were painful, but I found myself feeling an appreciation for her love, and the passion and dreams she had shared with me. She was my beloved mother who had dedicated her life to her family but who struggled relentlessly with depression. Butterflies were one of my mother's favourite things. But more than this, they also symbolise a new journey for me. The process of creating this body of work enabled me to understand and embrace my grief by tracing the path of my mother's journey through life.' ▶

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Photography enables Soomin to search for meaning in life, and there are several ‘special places’ that give her the space to be reflective. ‘These places are my private sanctuaries,’ she says. Chief among them is India, which inspired her to pursue a career in photography, but also cemeteries, which Soomin describes as ‘a place of peace and personal connection.’ ‘I visited the memorial park in Korea to find comfort and contemplation. It is also my mother’s final resting place. Since moving to the US, I’ve continued to spend time in cemeteries, walking along the quiet paths, reading the stones, curious about the lives of the departed and thinking of their loved ones. I’m able to connect them to my own memories and find the kind of solace I had in my home country.’

Another of her ‘special places’ is Gyeongbokgung, one of the royal palaces of the Joseon dynasty. ‘It holds many memories of my childhood – school trips, days out

with friends, family picnics. As a child, the palace was a place of wonder, of adventure, of imagination, where past and present coexist.’ It inspired the panoramic collages *Once Upon a Time I* and *II* – an amalgam of ‘the pictures of Gyeongbokgung that I had taken, layered with my grandfather’s original photos. Gyeongbok Palace was the only place where my grandfather and I had photographed in different periods.’

Soomin’s photography and multimedia works are deeply rooted in familial love and loss. ‘The process of working with my family archives was a very moving and emotional experience,’ she says. ‘I wanted to not only preserve those precious memories but also transform them into a new visual narrative. I liked bringing lost images back to life.’

[▶ To see more of Soomin Ham’s work, and to learn more about \*Sound of Butterfly\*, a paean to her mother, go to \[soominham.com\]\(http://soominham.com\).](#)

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