



## Jae Ko

Kiang Gallery

Contemporary artists are known for their use of unconventional materials. Subverting those materials—visually transforming their original nature—has become a common element in the creative process. Jae Ko, whose subtle abstractions were recently on view at the Kiang Gallery, may be the ultimate manipulator of alternative media—she finds her materials in office supply stores.

Based in Washington, DC, Ko has been working with paper—receipt paper, rice paper, yellow paper, and newspaper—for over 14 years. For her new sculpture series, the Korean-born artist starts with adding machine paper. She rolls, then places the paper in a tub of sumi ink and water. As it swells, Ko shapes, then dries the form, and applies glue as fixative before attaching the sculpture to a wood backing. Over half the creative process is beyond her control. When the paper goes into the tub and absorbs the water and ink, it moves and assumes its own shape. Ko is only able to see the front surface of her work

**Jae Ko, *Untitled*, 1999. Rolled paper and sumi ink, 18 x 20 x 5.5 in.**

two or three weeks later, after it has dried.

Ko's simple process generates transcendence. From its initial utilitarian existence, paper is transported to an aesthetic plane. Her dense coils resemble yards of tightly wound velvet ribbon. At the same time, they read as elliptical or twisted fragments of burnt charcoal. In absorbing ink, the paper shapes take on the sheen and quality of a painted stroke. Each form is like a swollen calligraphic mark. The suspended gestures in these sculptures are transfixing for many reasons, not the least of which is the illusion that there is no beginning or end to their movement.

All untitled, the 12 works are distinguished by their singular shapes—a Western eye might see a great black wheel, a ribbon candy, the letter "C," a pair of ram's horns, or a swooping sign of infinity. There are allusions to the body in those rounded, undulating forms. Though Ko leaves their interpretation to the viewer, she

acknowledges personal references in their gestures. Drawn to traditional Asian family marks and architectural details such as the design of columns, she also looks inside flowers for inspiration.

Ko's work occupies a space between writing and sculpting, between minimal abstraction and conceptual art. In a process where the ultimate outcome is unpredictable, she describes an acceptance of nature that embraces uncertainty and chances on beauty. The outcome is simply exquisite.

—Cathy Byrd