

The Hushed Place: *Richard Choi's* Trampoline (2011)

A work of art's power to convey experience requires that we feel two sensations: *making* and *receiving*. We must feel that a world is made before our eyes. And we must feel that this world receives something outside itself—some charge, some depth, it is hard to know what is the right word—that transfigures it into not just any place but *a* place, a most special place, a single spot on earth. A significant tradition in American art (plenty of times I think it is *the* tradition) is experiential—it finds these intensities of making and receiving at a specific American location. Consider a recent work of this kind, a short video shot in August 2011 in Loma Linda, California, by Richard Choi (b. 1982), a graduate of the Yale School of Fine Arts. The video is called *Trampoline*.

About four minutes long, the video starts with two children jumping on a circular trampoline. At first, we only hear them—the screen is dark for a few seconds—and then we see a girl and a boy, each about eight years old, bounce up and down. Our vantage point is up close, from below (figs. 1–2). Choi is on the trampoline himself, positioned at the edge. We cannot see him but sense that he is sitting down. The lens aims up and across at the kids as they switch places, bouncing past each other, and the camera reverberates but remains fairly steady amid the buoyancy. The kids appear against a modest house a few yards away—the trampoline is in the house's yard—and they push up across

Screenshot detail
from Richard Choi,
Trampoline (see fig. 4).





a twilight sky, their forms dark and blurry, but still clear. The girl is thin, in a black T-shirt and black shorts, her blonde hair in a ponytail; the boy is chubby, shirtless, wearing knee-length shorts and a necklace. He is voluble, commenting happily as he jumps; she says less. Their bounces sound like a hand muffling a microphone. The sky they bounce against is framed by blurry trees that seem slathered, painted, or wet, like brushes or feather dusters soaked in water (fig. 3). The feeling of a world created is strong.

Then the bouncing stops, and the camera stabilizes. The girl, seen alone, comes to a pause. Lying on her stomach on the trampoline, she gazes at her surroundings—a two-lane road and some new low-level brick buildings several hundred yards away, their archways lit in the dusk (fig. 4). She appears out of breath; perhaps she had the wind knocked out of her, in some jolt we did not see. She flips over on her back, her left hand on her solar plexus, her right arm splayed back, her mouth open and eyes closed. Her breath starts to come back to her as the trampoline pulses a bit as though it were itself a respiration jostling her whole body (fig. 5). A cell phone (Choi's) begins to go off, the distinctive “Marimba” trill of an iPhone, an accident of filming that Choi chose to leave in the finished video. The girl looks across at the boy, who now reappears, sitting cross-legged, breathing hard, smiling briefly, his bare feet near hers. There is a quiet between them, the ringing of the phone heralding the end of the scene.

1–3
Screenshots
from Richard Choi,
Trampoline, 2011.





4–6
Screenshots
from Richard Choi,
Trampoline.

A moment later, in a new scene, the girl stands alone on the trampoline, framed against an empty field and the distant mountains just after sunset (fig. 6). The wind blows—a muted distortion sounding like the ocean in a seashell. The girl, her hands in her pockets, stands silhouetted before the distinctive split-branched tree near the trampoline, and the branches appear to extend out of her shoulders, as though they were her limbs and she were some Daphne growing into this tree right before our eyes. Daphne or Dorothy: the wind blows, the night comes, and the girl stands next to the tiny house as though that little dwelling had just landed, or were about to take off, in some Oz-like disaster of loneliness. Something mythological and something American attends the calm.

It is getting dark as we see a new person—a figure quieter even than the girl and boy have become. She is about fifteen years old, holding a transparent glass jar to her chest with both hands (fig. 7). Looking down, this adolescent girl is pensive, unsmiling, annoyed but somehow at ease, irritably saying the name of the family dog (“Honey”). The dog is at her feet, but we do not see it—the girl is photographed from the chest up—and in the gathering dark, her downcast look and mysterious clasp of the jar make her more than just someone gazing at a pet. Holding the jar on top with her left hand and on bottom with her right hand, she grasps it as though it contains not a cricket (we hear chirping) but some empty secret of the



place—something she would neither let out nor let go. We have gone quickly from the kids’ exuberance to this quiet.

Then another figure appears, still quieter, the last person we see in the video, an older woman pacing in the background soon after we first behold the girl with the jar. Wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, this older woman walks slowly, her head down and face averted, as though in some rhythmic and almost penitential meditation, or in a careful marking of ground or a property line. The girl with the jar watches her, establishing some connection between them, the girl always close, the older woman always at a distance. The woman appears again later, still in the background, still watched by the girl with the jar, still pacing, still walking the line (fig. 8). Then the video ends.



At the start, the kids are like young gods joyously creating their surroundings, bouncing the earth and ozone into life, shaping their world as we watch. The boy, an infant Jove, makes the trees and sky tremble; so does the girl in black. Befitting the video’s California location, the children are an earthquake, except their shaking is not destructive but joyous, exuberant, creative, the kind an “exhilarated” William James felt when in Palo Alto, California, on April 18, 1906, he awoke to the San Francisco earthquake believing it to be the power of “a permanent Entity”—a God—releasing its pent-up energy.¹ The camera, moving about, registers the kids’ impacts in real time, each bounce offering a successive new view, a view never before seen, things seemingly made before our eyes. Choi’s camera, a Canon 5D Mark II with a Zeiss 35mm Distagon manual-focus lens, gives the world they make that wet, slathered, new look.

The video’s turn to quietude might seem something different, but it is not. The young girl and boy finish jumping and pause to rest, as if considering the world they have made. Looking around, still out of breath, they seem like first observers of the new place, primitives of a kind, surveying their surroundings but without comprehension or ritual to denote what they have shaken into life. When the girl stands Daphne-like against the sky, she becomes a more formal commemoration, a pensive sculpture, crude and cryptic, portraying like some rude totem the world she has helped create. The split-branched tree behind her grows as no tree grows in nature—it has likely been damaged, possibly by winds or even lightning—and its starkness makes the girl’s pose all the more elemental. Standing there, she calls to mind one of

7–8
Screenshots
from Richard Choi,
Trampoline.



those “restrained, hieratic gestures of ancient religions” that the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke admiringly equated to the sculpture of Auguste Rodin. Those old stone sculptures, for Rilke, rippled with the restless movement that alone gives a “credible interpretation of life.”² The girl, standing there, evokes such a sculpture—a primitive local legend of the earth’s first reverberations.

The adolescent girl with the jar is another legend. Her composure, however, is less elemental, less primitive, than the little girl’s brazen shouldering of the heavens. Older, her pensiveness less windswept, more sheltered and darkened, she seems a more refined portrayal of how the world came about. She holds the jar like a sacred keeper of secrets, maybe of how the world once shook, now that it has been subdued, as if the jar holds the reverberations of the trampoline. To portray what has come before—the shaking, the cataclysm—as an aesthetic form, turning it into a shape now rounded, contained, elegant: this is what her gesture implies. Despite this lapse of experience into some careful work of art, there is no loss of solemnity—maybe even an increase of it—upon the appearance of this Priestess with her jar.

Off at the edges, the older woman has the least to do with origins. Refusing the epicenter, walking the grounds, she is the most removed from the sacred spot where the world was made. The girl with the jar may attend to the religion of the event, keeping its sacred symbol and standing still so near the origin, but this older woman steps off a patient demarcation, preoccupied in her downcast walk by things other than exuberance, wonder, and devotion. If she is a mythological figure, her name is Perimeter.

Perimeter seems not to care how this world has gotten shaken into being, and she is furthest from childhood. What keeps her going is maybe her closeness to the edges, to the plaza architecture that seems to encroach, to impinge on the little house and its rituals, to the cars zipping by on the two-lane road. She seems to know the import of these surroundings more than anyone else—to measure what’s out there, to plot her walk in relation to it—as if she alone understands how perilously near to being lost were this cosmology of shaken closeness. Devoted to her ritual, pacing property and boundary, she is a historian or geographer of the world that got made, a person incapable of seeing it in an enchanted way yet aware of that enchantment as a principle she would protect.

Together, these figures imply that every experience, if we could behold it right, turns out to be a condensed history of life. At first, there

is a rude state of mists lifting and mountains emerging; then an arcadian state of purified rituals; last, an “adult” historical state of real-world awareness and lost intensities, eclipsing to predictions of demise. Choi recalls that around the time he shot the footage on August 5, 2011, he was reading the opening of John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* (1952), the pages where Steinbeck describes the Salinas Valley in northern California from geological origins to the progressive settlements of Indian tribes, Spanish conquistadors, and American settlers. Steinbeck’s novel, with its allusions to Genesis right in the title, goes through successive generations from the loam up. *Trampoline* is about those generations, those epochs, manifest in a single experience.

Choi’s title for the works he made in Loma Linda between 2009 and 2011 is *Inland Empire*, after the region of California where the town is located, and this title tells us, too, of a moment of life. The phrase might seem to promise a documentary mode, as in Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* (1936) or Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). But Choi says his work has never been “an attempt at making political statements on social issues.”³ Although he recalls that the little house in *Trampoline* was under threat—that it was a real estate holdout in an area undergoing development (the new plaza architecture across the road indicates the social change)—he says that this real estate issue was of little interest to him. Rather, the phrase “Inland Empire” refers to the vast yet limited world of a moment on earth, as Choi understands it. From total darkness—the screen black for those first few seconds—the boy and girl generate something out of nothing. Theirs is a fable of how a world starts, and, like Genesis, the story condenses a lot of creation into a short time. Soon we have a terrain of narrows and shallows and mountains. But then we feel that buoyant creation move to its limits, and it starts to get dark again.



To make this world, Choi had to be receptive. He did not want to go to the house of the trampoline with a gallery of prepared notions. He wanted to be open to whatever happened. “I’m never really prepared to experience the things I experience,” he says. “Richard Benson and Tod Papageorge [two of his teachers at Yale] would always tell us that the world is so much more interesting and smarter than we are—and I completely subscribe to that idea.”⁴

That openness inspired his subjects’ trust—an equally important kind of reception. Choi saw the little house with the trampoline in 2010

and asked the residents if he could take photographs there (at that time, he was a photographer and had not turned to video). They agreed, and he made some photographs that summer, including one of several kids jumping on the trampoline, one of them the boy who would appear in the video (fig. 9). When Choi returned to make the video footage on August 5, 2011, having switched media earlier that year, he had already secured these strangers' willingness to be filmed—a crucial thing if a world were to emerge before the camera.

Being open, working on a trusting basis, Choi could also receive—that is, be at ease with—his subjects' discomfort as he filmed. The children react uncertainly to the cell phone jingle, not sure how to react, and the boy giggles nervously, looking at the camera and then conspicuously away. The adolescent girl with the jar does not mind being close to the camera, but surely Choi's presence—boldly filming right in front of her—helps cause her to look demurely down, and to be annoyed at the dog at her feet, who seems to behave not as she would wish when a camera is rolling. Likewise, the boundary-walking woman keeps her face averted from the stranger with a video camera, staying as far as possible away from him. And yet she also insists on being in the scene—why appear in the yard at all if being on camera is not her thing?—suggesting that Perimeter is keeping an eye on events (she is the mother of the girl on the trampoline), making sure that Choi is as honest and open and fair as he has represented himself to be. Her measured pace might even be the way she marks the time until the stranger leaves. But somehow Choi's openness converts even this self-consciousness and discomfort into the video's prevailing sad, gentle atmosphere of unfolding sensation.

That said, these kinds of reception are only basic and preliminary. They do not account for some grander feeling of receptiveness in *Trampoline*. What is this other kind of receiving? For an answer, consider the photography of Gregory Crewdson, another of Choi's professors at Yale.

Crewdson's work is very different from Choi's. Unlike Choi, who is never ready to “experience the things I experience,” Crewdson is a master stager of American scenes, well known as a micromanaging fabricator of the tableaux he photographs. He scripts every element of his photographs down to the last detail (the time of day, the water on the pavement, the movie title on the theater marquee, the model of the car, the clothing of the actress hired to play the woman standing next to it). Crewdson is really a movie director of his photographs—standing in a cherry picker and giving orders in a megaphone as he sets up a



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Richard Choi,
Trampoline House,
Loma Linda,
California, 2010.

shot—and he calls to mind not just any director but a particularly finicky one, such as Alfred Hitchcock, who has thoroughly pre-conceived each image before shooting. Even if Choi’s work has its own calculation—the careful shot of the girl posed on the trampoline against the tree, for example—Crewdson’s philosophy could not be more different overall from Choi’s deliberate lack of preparation. Yet Crewdson’s aims illuminate Choi’s and point to a profound receptiveness in the work of each. How so?

Crewdson wants to portray something he believes is already out there, the “beauty, sadness, alienation, and desire” of American life.⁵ Photographing in distinctive, actual locations, such as Pittsfield, Massachusetts, he lovingly portrays the American times of day: sunsets over cheap rural apartment buildings; telephone wires strung above broken sidewalks at dusk; sedans bearing couples moving down the streets between the flower patches and fire hydrants. None of these elements conforms to some actual event—Crewdson’s work is always a well-lit dream of chosen detail—but the goal of the artifice is to make present the mysterious loneliness of a real American place. This loneliness Crewdson clutches with the certitude of holding a fact.

Crewdson’s oft-noted quotation of paintings by Edward Hopper (1882–1967) is a case in point. White wooden apartment buildings

surmounted by summer trees, twilight emptiness of picket fences and shrubs, existentially isolated figures—these all unite the work of Crewdson and Hopper. In a way that speaks to his artistic coming of age in the 1980s, Crewdson’s quotations of Hopper read as a knowing self-referentiality—a pleasure in artifice—so characteristic of those years. The equally resonant comparison of Crewdson’s work to that of the director David Lynch—in particular to *Blue Velvet*, Lynch’s stylized 1986 film about an American small town—also points up the resolute contrivance of his pictures. Yet behind these references, and uniting Crewdson, Hopper, and Lynch, is an absolutely un-ironic sense of cornering a feeling actually out there—a quality in the world, a quality metaphysical and social, to be found in an American location.⁶ That quality is a melancholy isolation, as if the art in each case were taken as an occasion, a gathering point, for that isolation to focus

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Gregory Crewdson,
Untitled, 2006–2008.
Photograph.

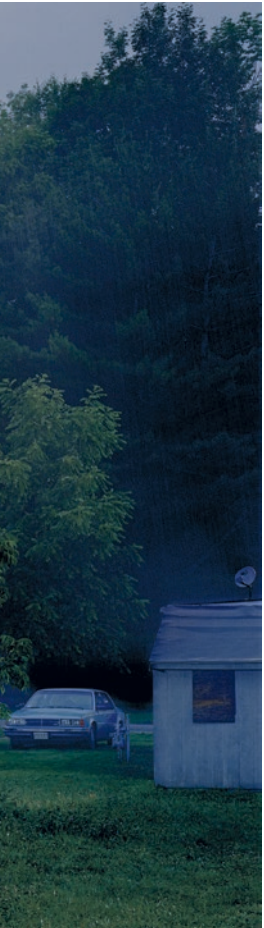


and spread itself in one spot. Or, to put it another way, for the artist to receive that quality, to draw it out of thin air and give it artistic form.

Choi's work belongs to this tradition. The isolated house in Loma Linda is Hopper-like. So are the mythological trees, the bright lights of the plaza square, and the woman in the white T-shirt and jeans wandering the edges. The girl holding the jar is so perfectly artificial—how could she have emerged out of that house holding a mysterious jar so carefully to her body? (though apparently she did)—that she would be perfectly at home in a Crewdson photograph. The connection is not a matter of imitation or influence, though it stands to reason that Crewdson has had some effect on Choi. It is instead a question of some kindred sensibility—one based on being open to receiving some larger feeling at an American place.

Two comparisons intensify the point. One of the photographs in Crewdson's *Beneath the Roses* series (2003–2008) shows a teenage girl in a blue dress, brightly lit, sitting on a child's swing (fig. 10). The girl's mood is downcast, reflective. Behind her are three trailer houses. A woman looks out from the central one at the girl on the swing. A pole rises above that trailer and assorted objects on the grass (a blue tarp, some toys), and this pole leads our eye to the background trees looming at a distance above the girl. Those trees make a great shaggy depth and height, an almost-animate force akin to the dark and pillared woods in a Robert Frost poem.

Something magical is happening. The girl on the swing is lit up as though she were the Virgin Mary before the Annunciation, quietly at her prayer. The blue tarp rhymes with the blue of the girl's dress and even appears oriented toward her, a spectral cowl of azure plastic, as if it too, like the woman in the trailer, were looking at her. The pole, edged in dazzling light (perhaps by the same theatrical klieg light that rains on the girl), is aglow with something like the "corpusants" that Ahab and his crew see as a portent on the masts of the *Pequod*—a dancing illumination, a spirit fire, "God's burning finger."⁷ The alert grass below, the shag of the shimmering-dark trees, and the steam rising off the central trailer's roof load the scene with a buzz of almost-electrical energy, like the sky before a summer storm. The girl, with her smooth hair, bare feet, and fancy-looking dress, may mourn only a meager event—perhaps she has been stood up for a date—and the cliché of her feelings may be only a stick figure emotion like the simple geometry of the child's swing set. Yet on this drama of a girl who is no longer a child, Crewdson invests all the powers of a thunderstorm, as if the clouds and trees and unworldly heat and light of such



a moment all conspired to radiate this girl's sorrow into something the universe itself has taken note of.

Hopper's paintings also bring the heavens down on American places. The best term for his scenes is "charged." In *Cape Cod Evening* (1939), one of his most famous paintings, a woman stands sternly while a man, sitting on the step of a white wooden house, tries to call the family collie by gesturing with his right hand (fig. 11). The collie looks away, its attention focused on some sound or sight off to the left. (Originally the painting was to have been called *The Whippoorwill*.) Wild elements intrude on the troubled domestic scene. Bluish-green pine trees loom at upper left, and one of the branches crosses the tidy white lines of the house. Parched grass half submerges the dog and extends to the house's doorway.⁸

That grass is like the hair raised by static electricity on a forearm. The energy might be a Eugene O'Neill-style sign of the characters' emotions—the painting with its New England dysfunction is rightly compared to O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* (1924).⁹ The dark-clad woman stands like the ominous trees, the forest of her thoughts; the collie and man, low to the grass, rhymed with the house, are the white of some world foreign to her. But the energy also makes it seem that the emotions at this one spot had awakened a vibration in the stars. The rustling of the grass, no less than the crowding darkness of the forest, portrays a cosmic awareness of some small human situation. The grass raises like the collie's tail, the branch twitches across the house, and the shadow at lower right sinks and sways, breathing like a dog. As in the conventions of a horror movie, where the animals are always the first to sense some otherworldly force, the collie pricks its ears at something the human beings do not discern. In *Cape Cod Evening*, an American place is not a place unless it receives some cosmic shadow, some vibrating current, or both. In it, a place, to be a place, must ripple with an energy as if what happened there (some trite spat, some ground for divorce, whatever it is) mattered to the gods.

Choi follows in this line. His photograph of the trampoline, house, and split-branched tree, taken in 2010 (see fig. 9), contains many of the same basic elements as Crewdson's elaborate *Beneath the Roses* tableau. It even shares some features in common with *Cape Cod Evening*. Along the separate track of his own question, Choi follows in this tradition of American mystic melancholy. But his photograph is just a preliminary work, made a year before the video at the same site in Loma Linda, and the elements in it—the tree, the house, the trampoline—are still only a sketch of possibilities. Each has its own



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Edward Hopper, *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. John Hay Whitney Collection, 1982.76.6.

potential yet lacks the depth that this same place would gather in the video. It is, in other words, only in video that Choi has achieved the effects that Crewdson and Hopper have gotten in photography and painting, only in video that he has evoked the isolation of American places at chance and ceremonial moments, and has made that isolation seem a fact of the heavens. It is worth knowing therefore why Choi changed his medium.

That turn from photography to video was dramatic, sudden. It took place in Loma Linda on March 3, 2011, where Choi had arrived the previous day with the start of the Yale spring recess. On that March 3, he was photographing a man pruning a tree in his yard (fig. 12) when the man invited him inside the house. There, the two began to talk about photography, and the man brought out photographs that his father had made many years earlier. The man then asked Choi if he wanted to meet his father, and when Choi, not knowing what to expect, said yes, the man brought him into a bedroom, where the father lay dying, in his last days of life, in a hospice condition. Choi, with trust and permission gained, and not prepared to experience



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Richard Choi,
Loma Linda, California,
March 3, 2011.

what he was experiencing, began photographing the dying man. While he did so, he accidentally pressed the video button on his camera. Realizing later what he had done—that he had filmed the dying man instead of photographing him—Choi came to see that the duration of video caught so much more of the emotion of the unfolding experience for him than the frozen stillness of a photograph.¹⁰

That primal scene informs *Trampoline*, filmed five months later in the same town, at a house only about two miles away. It is difficult to deny the video's hushed gravity, even its religious solemnity. "The Inland Empire was the place where I began seriously reflecting and thinking about life and death—and about what that meant for me," Choi wrote to me. "The work became more about a reflection on the ending of things and about how I didn't want things to end."¹¹ Not for nothing did Choi decide to show *Trampoline* and the video of the dying man together at the next formal critique of his work in fall 2011, when he returned to Yale for his second year ready to tell his peers and teachers about his turn to the new medium. *Trampoline* has the intensity of a religious rite. It can seem like a kinetic altarpiece, a kind of Leonardo or Raphael in time, with the boy Jesus and his companion playing happily—yet foretellingly—as a sad Madonna and St. Anne attend. Call it the *Loma Linda Madonna*, or the *Altarpiece of the San Bernardino*

Master, or the *Virgin of the Trampoline*. The ringing of the cell phone is like the wormholes in that altarpiece—all part of the beauty.

But the scene of the dying man most informs *Trampoline* in a slightly different way—one that brings us back to Crewdson and Hopper. The dying man in his bedroom gave Choi the example of an epicenter, a hushed place on earth where one momentous event was happening. The accidental shift from photography to video coincided with this intensification. It was not that Choi's previous pictures lacked seriousness or feeling. The remarkable tree outside what he would soon discover to be the house of the dying man shows Choi's ecstasies in potential, at the ready. So, too, this photograph is like the beginnings of a Hopper such as *Cape Cod Evening*—the basic vocabulary of house and tree and yard and absorbed persons all present, the fallen wiring of downed branches seeming odd and unsettling in a Hopper-like way. But what was missing in photography for Choi, right up to and including this picture made on the cusp of his realization, was the absolute urgency of one place, one confrontation, where, as it were, the energies of the universe would gather and somehow—who could predict how?—be sacramentally displayed. The encounter with the dying man was the equivalent for Choi of Jacob wrestling with the angel, some new and stronger and more wounded person emerging from the cosmic encounter. The scenes he wanted to film—scenes such as the ones in *Trampoline*—would themselves then be epicenters, quickened to a greater intensity and beauty, so that when we observe this one location in time, we feel that what we see is not arbitrary, that we witness a scene even whose chance motions take on power and purpose, that the clear skies rain on this spot.

This epicenter power is what unites Choi with Crewdson and Hopper, whatever their differences. By a feat of art, each rescues from the level ordinariness of American life a quickened, intensified sense of one place in time—a place such as Loma Linda, California—making us feel that vaster forces concentrate there. Crewdson calls these forces “beauty, sadness, alienation, and desire.” Hopper's commentators call them by similar terms. Choi calls them life and death. The vibration of the camera at the start of *Trampoline* is that of a person struggling with the sky.

- 1 William James, quoted in Linda Simon, "William James at Stanford," *California History* 69 (Winter 1990/1991): 339.
- 2 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Auguste Rodin* (New York: Dover, 2006), 12.
- 3 Choi, e-mail to the author, June 4, 2013.
- 4 Choi, communication with the author, June 2013.
- 5 Gregory Crewdson, "In a Lonely Place," in *In a Lonely Place* (New York: Abrams, 2011), 15.
- 6 For Crewdson's affinities with Hopper and Lynch, see *ibid.*, 13–20.
- 7 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 639.
- 8 For an excellent account of this painting in a very thoughtful book, see Walter Wells, *Silent Theater: The Art of Edward Hopper* (London: Phaidon, 2007), 148–51.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 10 Choi, e-mail to the author, Aug. 23, 2013.
- 11 Choi, e-mail to the author, June 4, 2013.

