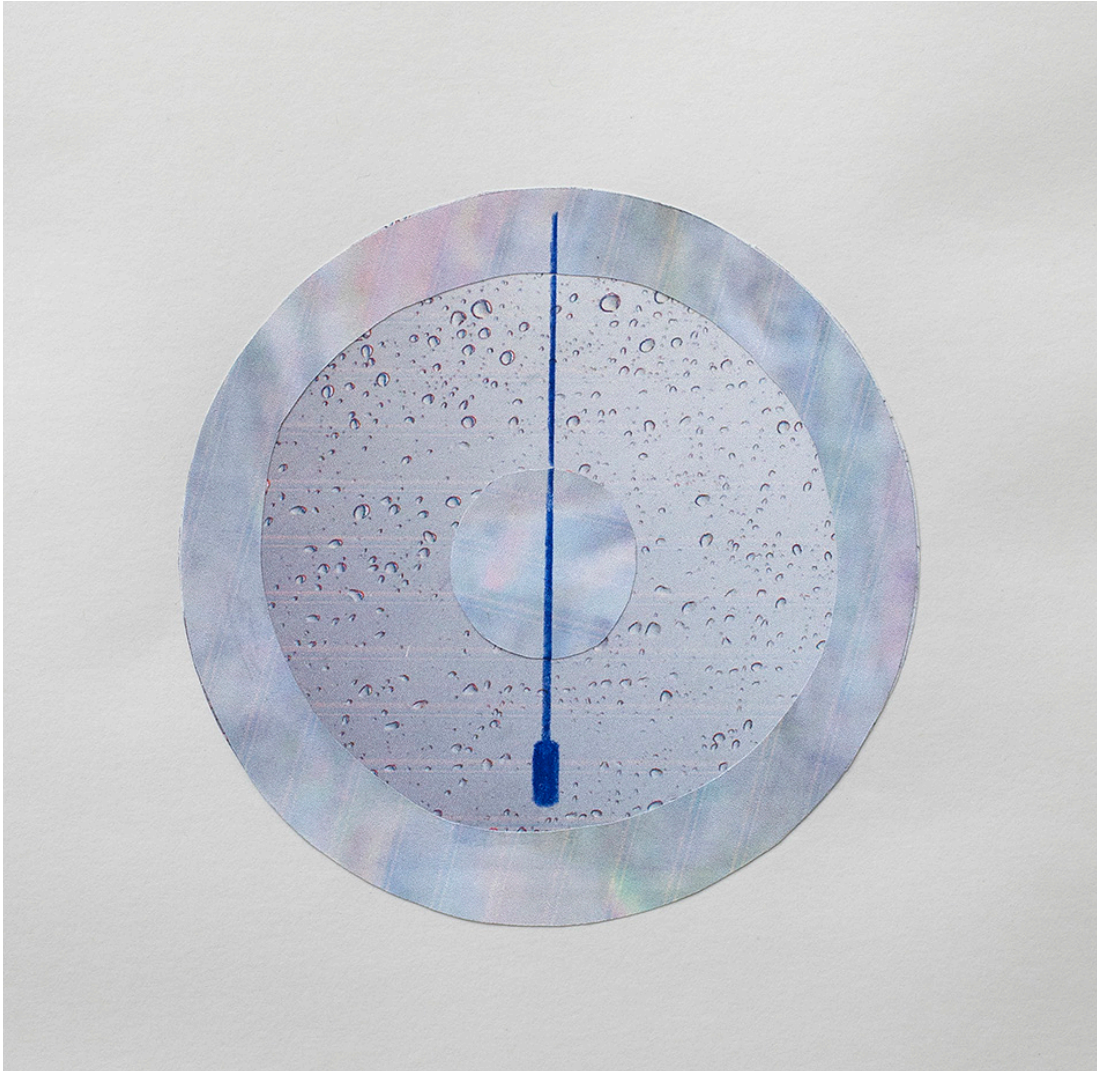
GREGORY BAE



A tire spins atop a treadmill, moving constantly but moving nowhere. Suspended between motion and stillness, the tire turns and turns, governed by the monotonous loop of the black rubber belt that both propels and entraps it. As it undertakes this futile journey, the tire persists in the face of precarity and exhaustion—its fragile balance threatened at every moment, its rubber skin worn down from countless hours of contact. To watch the tire spin in Gregory Bae's *24-7, 365 (#5)* (2017) is to witness a display of failure: an object once destined to facilitate movement, rendered immobile before us. Failure, conventionally shamed within the dominant culture of "success" in the United States, carries generative potential in Bae's work, which embraces the messiness of malfunctioning, of being stuck, of lingering in incompletion. Through subtle manipulations of everyday objects, the artist stages scenes of failure that play with the forces of linear time, categorization, and productivity that structure contemporary life.

In Bae's hands, a Goodyear tire morphs into a canvas, its rubber face meticulously adorned with lines of acrylic paint. Arranged into three concentric layers—the innermost shaded in yellow, the middle in pink, the outermost in blue—these lines emanate from a central void like soft rays of sunlight, transforming a found object into a landscape painting, a tire's weathered skin into an expanse of sky. While reminiscent of a horizon, the color palette also carries specific resonance within the context of South Korea. The sam taegeuk, a tricolored version of the taegeuk symbol featured on the country's national flag, embellishes surfaces ranging from fans to walls to logos, including the emblem of the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics. A ubiquitous color combination within Korean visual culture, the sam taegeuk's swirl of blue, red, and yellow signifies the interconnectedness of heaven, Earth, and humanity, expanding the notion of landscape in *24-7, 365 (#5)* beyond the physical realm and into metaphysical terrain.[1] While the rotation of the tire mirrors the spiral of the sam taegeuk, it also blurs the image of the horizon, abstracting the landscape painting into a revolving, modernist meditation on concentric circles and primary colors.

At once an abstraction, a horizon, an American commodity, and the sam taegeuk, *24-7, 365 (#5)* approaches the simultaneity and multifariousness of being in the world as a diasporic subject, a first-generation immigrant, an Asian American, and a Korean American. As it labors to maintain balance, so too does it wobble between identities, inhabiting the crossroads between movement and stillness, between mundane everyday object and poetic meditation on failure. Contingent upon its context and its viewer, the effect of *24-7, 365 (#5)* remains flexible, responsive to who is looking and

24-7, 365 (#5), 2017. Installation view: Dull Magic, Unisex Salon, New York, May 13–June 17, 2017. Photo: Brian Hubble.

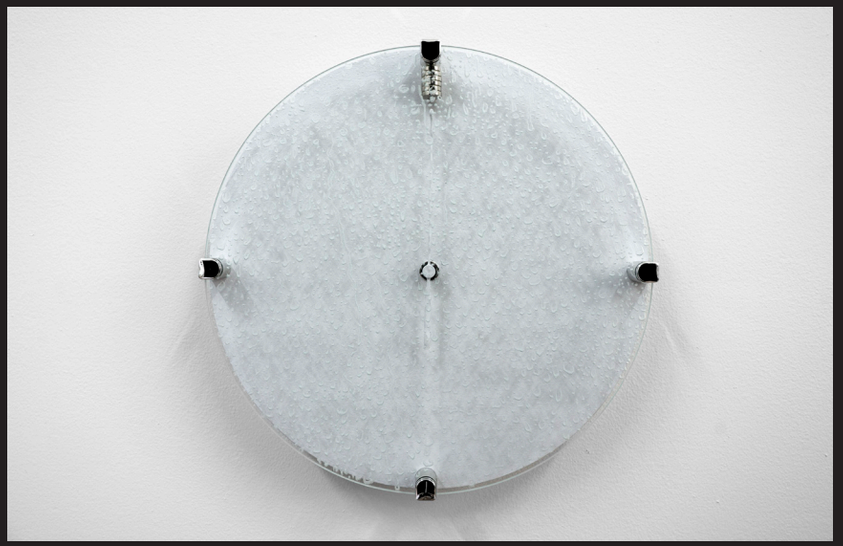
LEFT: The sam taegeuk, a variant of the taegeuk seen on the South Korean flag. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. RIGHT: Official logo of the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korea. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

what they need from an artwork during the moment of encounter. At the same time, the installation also acknowledges the inevitable failure of representation, challenging an artwork's capacity to ever fully reflect its subject. *24-7, 365 (#5)* refuses immediate legibility, transparency, and fixity—both physically and conceptually—proposing instead that an idea as layered, paradoxical, and shifting as identity exceeds the bounds of figurative representation. As it wavers between roles, Bae's work lingers within the near and the incomplete, bearing traces of Korean visual culture that remain open-ended enough to evade strict categorization, yet discernible enough to be sensed by those who know.

A first-generation Korean American, Bae made the first edition of *24-7, 365* while completing an artist residency in Seoul. This experience of diasporic travel—in particular, the artist's temporary "return" to his family's country of origin—echoes the movement of the tire, which also wavers between arrival and departure, approaching but never reaching an ultimate destination. Bearing "Goodyear Wrangler SR-A" across its face, the tire rotates at the exact rate one would need to move in order to traverse the circumference of the Earth within a year, conceptually undertaking an impossible journey around the planet. Going the distance alone, the tire remains suspended in a perpetual search for somewhere, something, someone—a home, a community, a companion—never to succeed and bound for placelessness.

Persisting in the face of failure and fatigue, *24-7, 365 (#5)* recalls the ways Asian bodies have been historically positioned as hyper-productive, undifferentiated, barely visible sources of labor within the American economy. As it strives to keep apace with the treadmill track, the tire conjures the nagging image of the quiet, compliant, and hardworking Asian American: constructing the transcontinental railroad throughout the nineteenth century, tending to farmlands and gardens on the West Coast throughout the twentieth century, and enduring the model minority myth today. While enacting the perseverance and exhaustion that characterize Asian American labor, *24-7, 365 (#5)* also stages the conditions through which this activity unfolds. The tire spins not of its own volition, but according to the tempo of the revolving rubber belt, a metaphor for the relentless pressures of an economy that insists upon speed, efficiency, and productivity. Within this framework, the tire's perpetual failure to move forward carries new resonance, suggesting that what might feel like progress—economic gain, property ownership, and professional success, achieved through adherence to the rhythms and demands of a market—may not lead anywhere at all. The failure to progress within *24-7, 365 (#5)* suggests the futility of keeping pace within an unsustainable economic and social system, urging us to imagine other ways of being.

In response to this proposition, *It Shall All Be Mine* (2015–16) enacts an alternative in which the thrust of time and capital are paused, allowing a single moment to expand ad infinitum. Within this series, magnets installed on the edges of atomic clocks prompt the hands to tick endlessly in place, frustrating time's ability to unfold in a linear sequence and renewing the same instant again and again. Like the tire in *24-7, 365 (#5)*, the clocks fail to fulfill their utilitarian function, instead becoming poetic vehicles that invite us to travel elsewhere in time: to moments we wish to relive, to shared experiences with loved ones, to fleeting feelings of belonging. Bae stages conditions in which the act of failure also offers the



It Shall All Be Mine (#2), 2015. Magnetized atomic clock, magnets, acrylic, and engraving on glass; 10 3/8 × 2 in. (26.5 × 5 cm). Courtesy of the Bae Family. Photo: Antonio Maniscalco.

opportunity to pause, to seek solace within stillness and memory amid pressures to move forward—and to forget. *It Shall All Be Mine* also intervenes into the natural cycles of the weather, as the rain drops engraved into the glass surface of each sculpture capture falling water, paused in descent.

Cloud-filled skies populate the *Black Hole of Love* (2016) drawings, graphite renderings of stills from *Groundhog Day* (1993), the cult-classic film premised upon the protagonist living the same day over and over again. When the movie was released in South Korea, it was given the title "사랑의 블랙홀," the English translation of which is *Black Hole of Love*. Originating from the death of a large star, a black hole is theorized as a dying entity that is frozen in its state of deterioration—a collapsing object for which time stands still. Like a black hole, the drawings exist in a state of suspended deterioration, preserved like precious memorabilia between two acrylic frames. *Black Hole of Love* brings time and decay to a pause, yet the project fails to repair the damage it enshrines—the acrylic frames are powerless to bridge the distance between the drawing's torn edges, which resemble lightning bolts emanating from the clouds or cracks in a marble surface.

Distance also persists within *One Coinciding Minute Felt In Rotation on 10.31.14 Seoul / 10.30.14 New York City* (2014), a two-channel video installation that confronts the romantic desire to be in two places at once. The installation displays nearly fifty minutes of footage documenting the sunrise in Seoul and the sunset in New York City, each unfolding simultaneously across the globe on October 31 and 30, 2014, respectively. However, each projection occupies opposite sides of a single screen, allowing the viewer to experience just one horizon at a time. By maintaining this distance between channels, *One Coinciding Minute* stages the inevitable failure of the viewer to see both projections at once, alluding to the ultimate impossibility of inhabiting two sites simultaneously.

Chicago Works: Gregory Bae opens nearly one year after the artist passed away at the age of thirty-five. The exhibition is also the first museum presentation of Bae's work, marking the first opportunity for many of the MCA's visitors to experience the artist's practice. Both a memorial and an introduction, *Chicago Works: Gregory Bae* takes place in the wake of the artist's death while simultaneously celebrating the work he leaves behind,

Black Hole of Love (#2), 2016. Pencil on torn paper, encased in acrylic; 32 × 51 1/2 in. (81 × 131 cm). Courtesy of the Bae Family. Photo: Phil Peters.

asking us to hold a range of seemingly irreconcilable emotions at once—paramount among them grief and joy, melancholy and admiration. That the tragic circumstances of Bae's passing will inflect the reception of his work feels inevitable, yet sadly all too familiar within the history of Asian American artists—a narrative anchored by individuals who too died far too young, from Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (b. 1951, Busan, South Korea; d. 1982, New York, NY) to Tseng Kwong Chi (b. 1950, Hong Kong; d. 1990, New York, NY) to Martin Wong (b. 1946, Portland, OR; d. 1999, San Francisco, CA). This intimate correlation between precarity and recognition, reflected beyond the art world in the United States by the recent rise in anti-Asian violence, raises the question posed by art historian and attorney Joan Kee, "whether Asian bodies are visible only in the light of emergency."[2] Kee's proposal echoes literary scholar Anne Anlin Cheng's provocation that BIPOC people become visible in the United States only after they have endured discernible harm, as if documented trauma is the sole criteria through which attention can be earned.[3] Regrettably, the posthumous timing of Bae's exhibition perpetuates this systemic failure, and it is a profound shame that this show did not take place during the artist's lifetime.

As a way forward, we may be best served by looking to Bae's practice as a model: one that embodies an oblique relationship to time, questioning its linearity and imagining the possibility of an expanded present in which a tire fails to move forward and clocks tick in place. As we follow suit and consider alternative ways of being in and beyond time, perhaps we can address the issues of timing that continue to plague Asian American artists—the belatedness of recognition and the requirement of harm—and rewire our systems to prioritize life over death. If failure carries generative potential, as Bae's work proposes, the overdue presentation of *Chicago Works: Gregory Bae* offers an opening to scrutinize the flawed terms of Asian American visibility within institutions and to envision the possibility of new structures on the horizon.

1 "Taegeuk: The South Korean Flag," Asia Society, asiasociety.org/education/taegeuk.
2 Joan Kee, "For Asian Lives to Matter," *Artforum* 59, no. 7 (May 2021): 138.
3 Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Gregory Byungho Bae (b. 1986, Salt Lake City, UT; d. 2021, Chicago, IL) received a BFA in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he also served as a lecturer. In 2021, he founded Chicago API Artists United (CAAU) in response to anti-Asian sentiment in the United States. In 2018, he cofounded exhibition space Bill's Auto, Chicago. Solo exhibitions of Bae's work were presented at table, Chicago (2019); 4th Ward Project Space, Chicago (2018); Federico Luger Gallery, Milan (2017); The Mission Projects, Chicago (2017); Chicago Urban Art Society (2015); and Opsis Art, Seoul (2015). His work was also included in group exhibitions at Massimo de Carlo, Milan (2021); The University of Chicago (2020); 6018North, Chicago (2018); and UNISEX Salon, Brooklyn (2017). He received awards from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts; Chicago Artists Coalition; and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation.

MCA CHICAGO

CHICAGO WORKS: GREGORY BAE

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This booklet was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Chicago Works: Gregory Bae*, organized by Nolan Jimbo, Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow, and presented in the Dr. Paul and Dorie Sternberg Family Gallery and the Ed and Jackie Rabin Gallery on the museum's third floor.

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FRONT COVER: *Untitled 1 (It shall all be mine sketch)* (detail), 2017. Ink on paper; 14 5/8 × 11 3/4 in. (37 × 29.7 cm). Courtesy of FL GALLERY | WIZARD. Photo: Antonio Maniscalco. INSIDE COVER: *One Coinciding Minute Felt in Rotation on 10.31.14 Seoul/10.30.14 New York City* (still), 2014. Two-channel video; 49 minutes, 30 seconds. Courtesy of the Bae Family.