

# Art in America

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Interviews Nov. 23, 2011

## The Dealer and Her Fake Watermelons: Q+A With Margaret

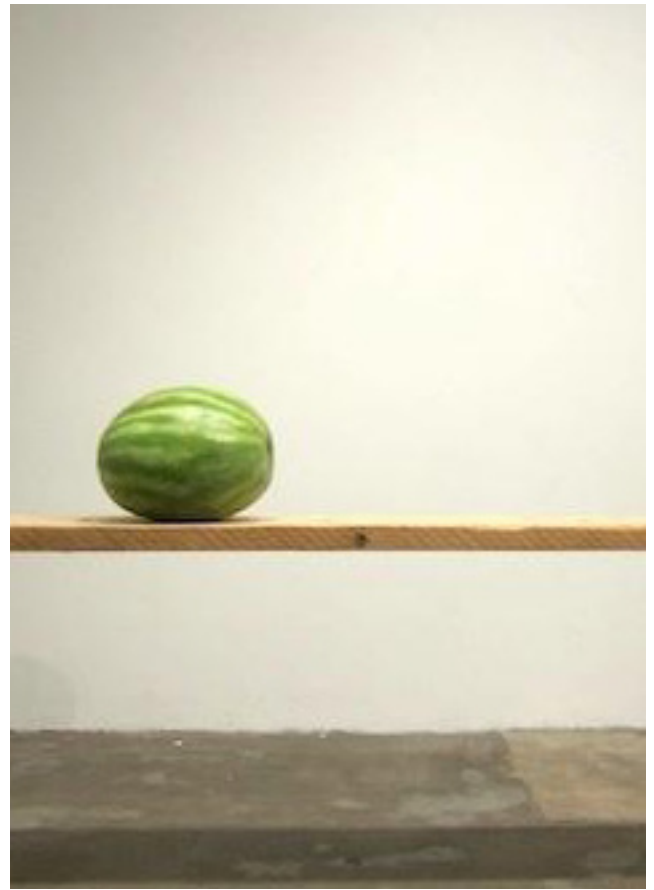
by Nicholas Weist



Margaret Lee, *Jungle Curtain (Is it so wrong to be excited about 2012?)*, 2011, oil on muslin, 10 x 27 ft.

Margaret Lee is an artist, curator and art dealer whose practice is shaped by collaboration and ideas of the readymade. In 2009 Lee founded the alternative space 179 Canal, which reopened last year down the street as a commercial gallery called 47 Canal. Some of the artists she shows are her collaborators as well, and her curatorial projects often include them or their joint projects.

Lee's current solo show at Jack Hanley features a large, painted-jungle curtain with a Frank Gehry-like curve to it. Lee has frequently made simulacra, like individually cast potatoes, hand-painted to look like perfect replicas of the original. Here there's a cast and hand-painted watermelon, a zebra skin made on painted linen mounted to the wall with upholstery braids, and a color photograph that has the watermelon and a boot in it, positioned against white tile. The jungle motif stands in for dark questions about the future, recalling a prehistory (or post-apocalyptic vision) where humans fight for survival amongst a tangle of menacing flora and fauna.



NICHOLAS WEIST How did you come to the motif of the jungle?

MARGARET LEE I'd wanted to make a huge jungle curtain, so people, when they approached it, could sense all the things that the jungle represents: darkness, anxiety, fear, being lost, wildness, the primitive. But in the end I thought it would be better as a design object, with a curve and hanging on grommets. It became more of a sculptural piece than a painted backdrop.

WEIST The name of this piece is Jungle Curtain (Is It So Wrong to be Excited for 2012). 2012 is of course known to host the end of the world, change of consciousness . . . is that anxiety something you're tapped into?

LEE Sometimes in science fiction movies, the apocalypse becomes the past. The destruction of the world as we know it gives birth to new possibilities. For me, it's about waiting for the unthinkable to happen. The show is called "Waiting for ####." The number signs, though they are supposed to stand in for 2012, can be read as stand-ins for expletives. Waiting for shit. Waiting for fuck. We all know where we're headed, and no one is optimistic. The art market has peaked! And we're all just scrambling. Trickle-down may end, and what are we doing? We have to figure out a new way to live! But here I am, still making products. Why?

WEIST The zebra skin and the watermelon are very convincing fakes. They are also unique objects that speak with the rhetoric of editions. How do you reconcile those poles?

LEE I love to strike that balance. I want to give you exactly what you want and not give you anything at all. The name of that zebra is Zebra (huh/what). And that kind of sums up my practice: yes it is a zebra, no it's not a zebra.

People ask if the watermelons are an edition, but actually each one is unique. It can't be editioned because there's only one mold per watermelon, and they're all hand-painted! Even though a second watermelon or a third might have the same general shape, they would all look different.

I recently told someone, “I made everything in this show myself.” And he said, “What?! No one does that anymore!” I’m interested in what happens when you move away from editioning, from the mass-produced readymade. When you incorporate the hand, but then work hard to remove it. Someone can buy an object that’s one of a kind, but really there’s another one that looks exactly like it.

WEIST Apropos your zebra, I love Ed Ruscha’s aphorism about how bad art is “Wow! Huh.” And good art is “Huh. Wow!” I feel like your work is “Wow! Huh. WOW!” Everyone loves verisimilitude and your sculptures could end there, but they continue to engage complex ideas after the shock of craftsmanship has worn off.

LEE I was obsessed with Ed Ruscha’s *Babycakes with Weights* book (1970) in college. It might actually be the first piece that really informed my practice. The simplicity of actualizing a concept—it was exactly what it said it was going to be, showing a baby and cakes and pies with the weight of each item, but a total surprise as well. There’s such a nice balance between giving enough but not giving too much personality. I saw the de Kooning show at MoMA and thought, “Wonderful! So much feeling.” I could never, ever do that. I don’t want to give that. That zebra is as honest as I get.

Especially when I collaborate, I always like to try to be neutral. I like to be the stable one that my collaborators can bounce off of. For instance, Michele Abeles came over and we made an oil painting together [currently on view at Renwick Gallery]. It was her first oil painting, and since I am a more technically proficient painter, I encouraged her to “use” me, in a sense, to achieve the painting we both wanted, on top of using her own hand and brush technique. Sharing skills comes into the gallery, too. Josh Kline, who currently has a show up at 47 Canal, wanted to cast hands. Since I used to do mold making, we made algae-form molds together. Although when it comes to the gallery it’s not collaborating, it’s facilitating.

WEIST Are there other ways that your experience as a dealer or curator has found its way into your work?

LEE Practice makes perfect and you’re always learning on the job. If an artist tells you that they want to make something or fabricate something, you help them figure out how to do it. It’s learning how to make things happen. I trouble-shoot! I problem-solve.

WEIST But you’re a gifted producer of objects, too! Your sculptures are extremely lifelike even though they are hand-made.

LEE You know, I don’t value that. I don’t value that at all. I enjoy making artwork—always will—but could never be happy making objects that have only one function. For my 2010 *White Columns* show that I organized with Michele and Darren Bader, my handmade potatoes were readymades to be used and exchanged within the exhibition, which itself was part curation and part collaboration.

It’s more difficult to make objects by hand, but that connects me back to a basic idea about making art. I also need to start installations from zero, divorce myself from the objects I’ve made and start utilizing them as if they are readymades. Maybe it’s a bravado thing. Going up and going down. I can do this. So what? Who cares?