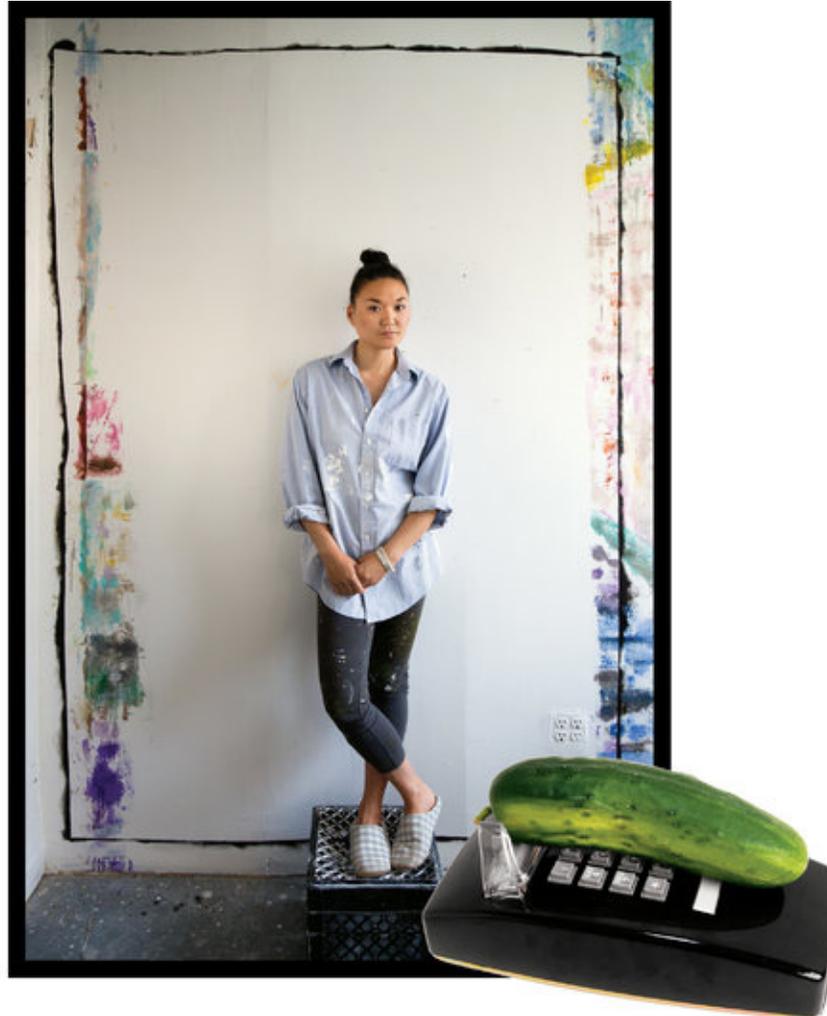


Art Market | Margaret Lee's One-Woman Show

CULTURE | By ALICE GREGORY | AUGUST 20, 2013, 6:25 PM



Photograph by Ilona Szwarc. "Cucumber Telephone," 2012: Courtesy Of Margaret Lee And Jack Hanley Gallery.

The artist and gallery owner Margaret Lee in her studio on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Lee's work, like "Cucumber Telephone," consists of plaster casts of fruits and vegetables which she attaches to everyday objects.

"Twenty dollar buy-ins!" Margaret Lee yells. "No art dealers!" The A.C. unit — just barely offsetting the summer heat — is functioning more like a white-noise machine, drowning out her voice and blending all the commotion together into a sound that can only be described as "fun."

It's a Tuesday night, and 47 Canal, the Lower East Side gallery Lee opened with her boyfriend, Oliver Newton, in 2011, feels like a party. Everyone here seems to know everyone, and all are damp. Due to the intolerably hot weather, the standard gallery-greeting — a light embrace followed by a faux kiss on each cheek — has been replaced by dejected apologies and reluctant

hugs. Otherwise though, the mood is festive. Beers are circulating, and a man in a blue wig and floor-length gown writhes around on a graffiti-covered spiral staircase installed for exactly this purpose.

A small back room has been turned into an improvised casino, and Lee, 33, is playing croupier for the night. She bounces around with the aggressive good nature of a carnival barker, as guests — many of them friends — thrust bills in her face. In exchange, they can play a round of dice. The winner will get his or her choice of any of the works currently on display.

Strange and beautiful, these potential prizes hang from the pressed tin ceiling by a system of buckles and black leather straps. The artists, Kerstin Brätsch and Debo Eilers, have suspended an array of colorful objects — a Rubik's Cube, a solidified blob of pink goo — in between see-through sheets of Mylar. The effect is rave-meets-morgue

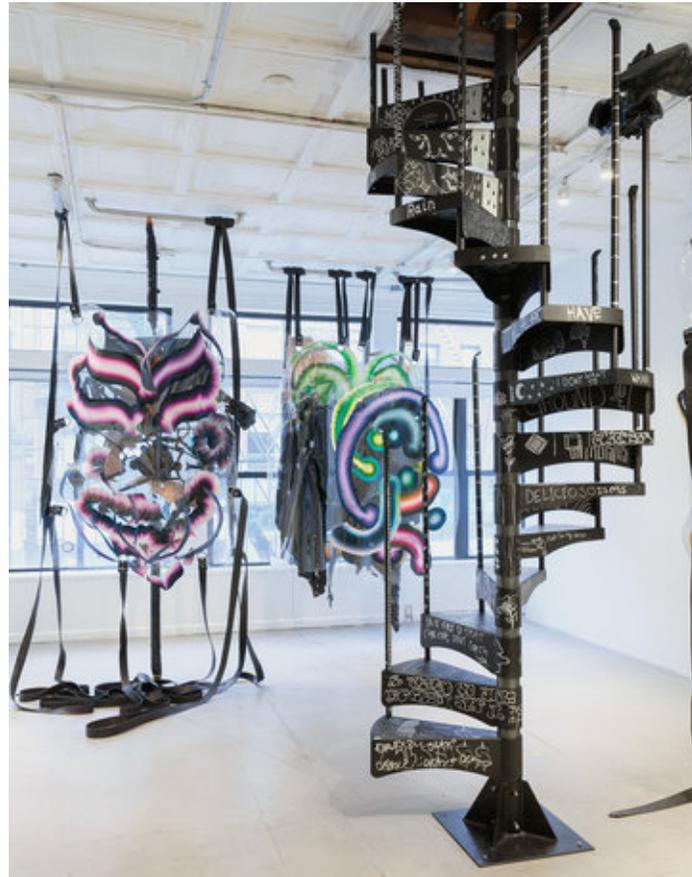


Photographs by Ilona Szwarc

From left: a wall in Lee's studio has inspiration images for her Lyon Biennial installation; in-progress pieces of produce.

When I visited the week before, none of this had been installed; we spent the hour upstairs, on the building's sixth floor, which Lee uses as her own studio. Somehow, in addition to founding and running 47 Canal, she is also both a widely exhibited artist (recent shows include Marianne Boesky Gallery and MoMA PS1) and the only studio assistant to Cindy Sherman, a job she's held for the last 10 years. There are not many people who would be capable of simultaneously running a gallery, making art and assisting one of the most famous artists in the world, and there are even fewer people who would do it as happily as Lee seems to. "It was good for me to see that you can be this amazing artist and not be an ego-driven, horrible monster," she says.

It's not a fate that Lee needs to fear; ruthlessness is not her M.O. 47 Canal serves as a kind of downtown clubhouse for a certain subset of young but smart, stylish but serious artists. And Lee, it could be said, is their den mother — but the cool kind who orders pizzas after openings and makes sure everyone knows there aren't any rules. In the conservative, postrecession art world, Lee has managed to carve out her own odd little corner where her closest friends do their most ambitious work. "It's like having my own mental institution," she says with a laugh. The pieces produced for and at the gallery are not sleek, nor are they obviously salable, but Lee's confidence remains intact.



"Kaya III," 2013, installation view at 47 Canal (New York, 2013): courtesy of Kerstin Brätsch and Debo Eilers and 47 Canal.

A recent show by Kerstin Brätsch and Debo Eilers at 47 Canal, the gallery Lee opened with her boyfriend in 2011

If 47 Canal is a mental institution, Lee is more a fellow patient there than its warden: as an artist herself, she understands the creative hurdles of her artists. "I feel like she knows my work better than anyone could," says the artist Josh Kline. "I trust her unconditionally." And when invited to participate in the Lyon Biennial, which opens next month, Lee automatically thought to ask her friend and 47 Canal artist Michele Abeles to collaborate on a multimedia installation.

As for her own work, Lee spent a few years making what she sheepishly refers to as "identity art." She quit that cold turkey and began casting fruits and vegetables in plaster and incorporating them into installations that included furniture: bananas on footstools,

cucumbers on telephones with a lighthearted surrealist touch. She began with a potato. “It was sort of my reset,” she says. “I just wanted to make the most basic thing I could think of. It’s a very democratic food; it’s not exotic at all.” There are no humans in Lee’s own work — no faces, no bodies — and there haven’t been for years. “I don’t like emotions,” she says, slyly. I ask if this could possibly be a reaction to working with Cindy Sherman for so long. She shrugs and says she had never even thought of it before.

Lee was named after Margaret Thatcher, and, like the Iron Lady, she is the daughter of a grocer. (This is perhaps the primordial influence of her produce fixation.) Her parents emigrated from South Korea and settled in the Bronx, where her father opened a bodega. When asked about her daunting schedule, Lee just shrugs. “I’ve never known anything but adults working hard,” she says. She and her older sister were allowed to take music lessons but no art classes, and she jokes that if her parents had just let her be an artist as a child, she’d be a doctor now. Lee attended Barnard College, where she studied history, and thought she was going to be a teacher — probably special education. “I always wanted to be around people who didn’t buy into the status quo,” she says. “And special needs people can’t buy into the status quo.” But plans changed her junior year, when she took her first art class. “It was the first time I ever excelled at anything in my life.”

Throughout our conversation, Lee refers to herself as working-class at least five times, and continually alludes to the art she makes and the things she likes as “perfect-looking.” “I grew up in a house where everything was wrong. My parents tried to be Western, but they didn’t get it,” she says, dispassionately. “I grew up with a Mona Lisa in my house.”

But what was once an adolescent striving for conformity has matured into a transgressive breaking of domestic rules. “I love having people tell me their cleaning lady takes my work and puts it in the vegetable drawer,” Lee explains. “In the West, it’s like you have your cupboards and drawers, and no one wants to see anything.” She pauses. “I like inserting the things that people try so hard to hide — usually from nature — you’d never just keep a watermelon on your sofa.”

This unpretentious giddiness is at the heart of Lee’s own practice, as well as that of the artists she shows. It’s a refreshing alternative to the defiantly gnomonic work that plasters white cube galleries. If there is a lesson to be learned from Lee and her cohort, it’s that true intelligence is not illegible. Nor is it self-serious. Despite her versatility and omnipresence and swagger, Lee, when asked, says she doesn’t feel comfortable in the art world. “I don’t know if anyone feels comfortable in the art world.” She makes a face. “I don’t know if that’s possible.” And perhaps it doesn’t matter. Lee seems right at home in the small, bright, very noisy alternate universe she has created.