

Art in America

MAY 2014

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



View of Margaret Lee's installation "closer to right than wrong/closer to wrong than right," 2014, MDF, plywood, oil paint, gesso, canvas; at Jack Hanley.

MARGARET LEE

Jack Hanley

Like many people who look at a lot of art, I am often guilty of "drive-by" viewings—I crane my neck to take in as much as possible via a gallery's window without breaking my stride, or else I pop in and out, assessing the room quickly in a single glance. Margaret Lee's second solo at Jack Hanley Gallery (which has a large, street-level picture window) seemed designed for just this kind of looking: it consisted of a crowded domestic tableau of nine individual sculptures (all works 2014) arranged on a low rectangular plinth in front of a stage backdrop. Lee reproduced several pieces of iconic modernist furniture in fiberboard and gesso, such as the Gerrit Rietveld Zig-Zag chair, a Vitra cork stool and Superstudio's nesting tables. She also included an assortment of art (or at least artlike objects), including (*Endless Column* by Constantin Brancusi), a copy of the titular sculpture, and *Dot Painting*, a loose quotation of Damien Hirst's notoriously repetitive canvases or an allusion to Yayoi Kusama's eccentric environments.

Rounding out the group was a fiberboard model of a sitting Dalmatian, whose markings provided the color scheme for the entire display. Every item, including the canvas, was painted with evenly distributed black polka dots on a white ground. When viewed head-on, the graphic pattern effectively flattened the three-dimensional objects. If glimpsed quickly through a picture window, the installation just might have been mistaken for an especially large image.

Last year, Lee installed a similar, smaller-scale work in the window of P!, a gallery directly across the street from Jack Hanley. Black polka dots adorned a group of fruit-shaped objects that

were arranged on a spotted pedestal. That piece was part of a series of shows at P! dealing with copying and reproduction, and it might be useful to consider both projects from that perspective. In her recent exhibition, not only did Lee copy modern art and design objects and repeat the spot pattern that is becoming her signature, but the overall grouping of objects seemed to invite further reproduction as visitors armed with smartphones inevitably snapped pictures. (Surely many visitors were inclined to take selfies while standing in just the right place so as to appear immersed in Lee's polka dot world.)

The visual flattening of the objects also pointed to a potential flattening of cultural hierarchies. The installation looked like a furniture showroom in which the painting and sculpture were staged in the same way as the "good design" objects and the kitschy dog. Brancusi's austere abstract artwork and Lee's riff on painting mingled with the Design Within Reach knockoffs. But rather than demonstrating how much of contemporary art is merely glorified design, Lee's project effectively elevated everything on view into the rarefied sphere of ambitious art. Indeed, given her rapidly rising stature, Lee's (*Nesting tables* by Superstudio) in Ikea-grade faux wood may one day be more sought-after than any luxury "original."

There is a slickness and easy cynicism in Lee's approach that makes me wary. Yet even as she deftly navigates art-world contradictions, Lee's project dramatizes the instability of art objects. Here "sculpture" and "painting" were pointedly intertwined with other classes of things (architecture, design and kitsch) and looped into extensive networks of image production and reproduction.

—Claire Barliant