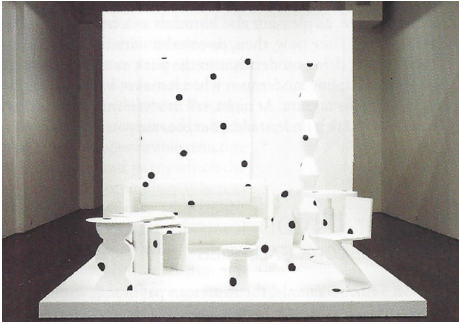


ARTFORUM

Margaret Lee

Jack Hanley Gallery



View of "Margaret Lee," 2014

No need to walk in. You could see everything through the window from the street. Atop a platform, before a freestanding wall, several items: a Rietveld chair, a Vitra stool, nesting tables by Superstudio. Hanging from the wall, a painting. Standing to the right, Brancusi's *Endless Column*. Also, a dog—or rather, a cutout silhouette of a dog, its two-dimensional head tilted upward. Everything was painted white, with scattered dots. Black, grapefruit sized dots.

Such was Margaret Lee's "closer to right than wrong / closer to wrong than right," an ensemble of facsimiles fabricated out of MDF and covered in gesso. Apparently Brancusi duplicates are trending: Josephine Meckseper's solo exhibition at Andrea Rosen Gallery this past November featured a wood replica of *Endless Column* within a glamorously dark vitrine. To passersby glancing through the gallery window, Lee's display likely telegraphed a commensurately obvious equivalence between modernist sculptures and department-store commodities, yet her appropriation was at once precise and more eccentric. "Closer to right" recalled the first installation of *Endless Column* after the opening of the Museum of Modern Art's new building in 2004, where it shared a platform with five other Brancusi sculptures. MoMA's Architecture and Design Department deployed a flotilla of similarly scaled platforms to showcase its furniture collection. Writing in these pages, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh alleged that, by yanking *Endless Column* off the ground and jamming it into a cluster, MoMA's curators had subjected its "extraordinary egalitarian radicality" to a "principle of domestication." There's little to suggest that Lee was consciously responding to Buchloh's charged metaphor, but her placement of a prop pup beside an ersatz *Endless Column* certainly roused the dormant implications of a "domesticated" Brancusi—which is to say, a domesticated modernism.

Through prominent as an artist, Lee is arguably better known as a curator and a partner at the gallery 47 Canal. She willfully entangles this triad of professional designations by collaborating on individual works with artists from her gallery, exhibiting with the equally multifaceted Matthew Higgs and Emily Sundblad, and situating the exercise of selection and arrangement at the center of her practice. Often Lee pairs chic, perversely appealing objects—such as a vintage Hermès horse-head ashtray—with casts of fruits and vegetables she paints by hand. At their best, these couplings trigger a low-key, uncanny hum. Confronted here with mainstream modernist totems like Brancusi and Rietveld, Lee dispensed with fruits in favor of a flat dog and black dots. Unfortunately, this Pop stylization of a Dalmatian's distinctive hide behaved less like the fur on Meret Oppenheim's teacup than like the coat coveted by Disney's Cruella De Vil. The effected rendered Superstudio's nesting tables as cartoonish designs within reach, not objects of tantalizing desire.

In their very failure to animate modernism's psychic residues, however, Lee's dots made a statement, a point that those with the professional designation "art historian" shouldn't concede, but should probably consider: For the multitasking artists of Lee's milieu, modernism is housebroken, as pleasant and harmless as a framed poster from Monet's Giverny. Time now, then, to cohabit with modernism as one would with a pet. Bring modernism to the park as a pretense to meet other singles. Discipline modernism when it makes a mess. Post photos of modernism on Instagram. At night, tell modernism your problems—not because you think it understands, but because you find it comforting.

-Colby Chamberlain