

A LOOP REPEATS ITSELF

**Kari Rittenbach on Margaret Lee
at Jack Hanley Gallery, New York**

"Oh, no, you have never loved me.

You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me."

Henrik Ibsen, "A Doll's House," 1879

If the awkward double negative in the title of Margaret Lee's third solo exhibition at Jack Hanley Gallery, "It's not that I'm not taking (this seriously)," undoes itself semi-apologetically in a circuitous fashion widely commented on, and sometimes condemned, in various US lifestyle media – e.g., Tracey Moore, "Google Exec: Women, Stop Saying 'Just' So Much, You Sound Like Children," *Jezebel.com*, July 2, 2015; Alexandra Macon, "6 Things Working Women Should Never Write in Email," *Vogue.com*, Oct 16, 2015; or even the feminist-seeming "Sorry, I ain't sorry" of Beyoncé's "Lemonade" – then Lee's subtle attempts to plumb the patriarchal structure of the contemporary art world through similarly obsequious strategies of ineffectual (gendered) deferral perhaps draw more steadily into view. Meanwhile, an enigmatic press release supplies only a handful of cold, coded sentences; this scant bit of text plus three colorful, neatly contained sculptures comprised the entirety of the show. But where, exactly, is the joke?

As a hyphenate fixture of the post-2008 New York art world,¹ Lee addressed the titular problem of seriousness here by deflating the narrowly object-oriented nature of recent contemporary art production (readymade sculpture, stock-animation digital video, "bad" painting), disavowing the conceptual apparatus' claims to autonomy in an expanded field of circulating cultural, consumer, and contextual value. It may be worth

noting that Lee staged two presentations earlier this year in explicitly commercial environments: her diorama-like installation "Having it Both Ways" unfolded across six storefront windows of the Barneys New York on Seventh Avenue; and "Concentrations HK: Margaret Lee," sponsored by the Dallas Museum of Art, was staged in the Ilse Crawford-designed, 2-Michelin-Star restaurant-cum-contemporary salon Duddell's, in Hong Kong. Lee's sculptural practice riffs on the mainstream assimilation of modernism as aesthetic style (i.e., divorced from ethos and its clear standards, however banal, of haute-bourgeois taste) peddled to an aspirational, if debt-ridden, and now dwindling middle class. This approach, which traces the devolution of abstract theory into easily replicable typological form, was already evident in Lee's 2012 "Triangles and Fruit (fitting in)" – a kitsch, Brancusi-like "Endless Column" with added storage in the form of pantry shelving. Among other such bastardized design objects, Lee's artworks traverse multiple channels of the luxury consumer market, a system which, it must be acknowledged, includes even "critical" art, thus intensifying the delicate frisson between exchange- and symbolic value that ensures art's economic exceptionalism.² This tension is literalized in Lee's "handmade-readymade" plaster fruits, which are ubiquitous in her installations. Hinting at a plausible ripeness, they optically whet appetites while withholding the possibility of material nourishment. In the gallery as in the department store window, fake fruit softens the sterile hygienic character of mass production, collapsing sign into referent, as if encouraging the viewer to accidentally apprehend the modish living room arrangement, and the sculptural display, as something "real," too.



"Margaret Lee: Its not that I'm not taking (this) seriously," Jack Hanley Gallery, New York, 2016, installation view

To return, then, to New York and the tin-ceilinged room of Hanley's renovated Lower East Side storefront, Lee undertook a somewhat dubious task with a different modernist trope: the decorum of the theory-minded, subjectivity-loaded artist, full-stop. That is to say, the artist as mythical, non-hyphenate cowboy, who operates within a valorized framework, apparently constrained only by the limits of his own talent and, perhaps, wit. Eschewing the domestic forms and Dalmatian-like dots common to her earlier work, Lee transformed the "flattening" image-filter of allover spots into a series of cartoonish chutes or portals, poking veritable holes into the structure of each sculpture on display; a shift from cute (compliant) pattern to perceptibly empty void.

In "Fountain (this is how it goes)" (2016), a cement moat containing a delicately stepped configuration of miscellaneous items from Lee's studio featured a bucket, a ladder, chrome-plated paint cans, a tray, and a handful of brushes – all bathing in beautifully clear water pumped gently through a looped garden hose. Polished steel

spigots cut crosswise through two successive cans directed the falling water's flow. As a play on the lingering hangover of studio practice post-Duchamp, the cleanliness of the artist's tools, in this piece, suggested a stylistic pose: little engagement with any contaminant, let alone paint.

Atop a standalone pedestal, a work titled "10 Gallon Hat (and the hole)" (2016) traced an imaginary bullet hole won in some loony OK Corral through Beaver felt, dyed baby blue. The hat's actual volume measures far less than its name says; so the imagined sharpshooter's dead-on aim scans as a sly wink at masculine braggadocio. At the same time, the possibility that its etymology may in fact be derived from further south (rather than any legendary capacity to water horses) – from *tan galán*, or gallant, hat – reiterates the complexity of (white) cultural misappropriation in the lonely ranger drama of the all-American spaghetti western, wherein difference and alterity are background actors to the central male protagonist, among other narratives.³



Margaret Lee, „10 Gallon Hat (and the hole),“ 2016

For “12 Bananas (strung up)” (2016), Lee traded the hole as pipe/tube for a set of a dozen simple metal loops that linked each perfectly yellow “banana” to a single strand of rope, the loose end of which was carefully tossed up and over a temporary divider or modular wall. The hooked phalluses seemed as though they might have been cast aside after Josephine Baker’s “Danse Sauvage”; a notorious costume, or indeed, inverse chastity belt. On the other side of the wall, Lee’s rope formed a small and sinister noose.

In their playful non-specificity, or pent-up timidity, Lee’s sculptures, here, worked towards deferral – of habituated meanings, genres, and protocols. Their form is non-heroic, even cartoon-like, kind of funny. But what could be more serious than seeing the system for what it is – holes and all? The real problem is operating despite the fact, and not only because of it.

“Margaret Lee: It’s not that I’m not taking (this) seriously,” Jack Hanley Gallery, New York, October 13–November 13, 2016.

Notes

- 1 Margaret Lee is a New York-based artist and the co-founder, with Oliver Newton, of 47 Canal gallery. Seldom have reviews of Lee’s work not fixated on this dual activity. See Alice Gregory, “One Woman Show,” in: *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, August 20, 2013, pp. 172–74.
- 2 See for example, Isabelle Graw, “Artworks and Luxury Goods: Close Relatives or Distant Acquaintances?” in: *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Berlin 2010; and Daniel Spaulding/Nicole Demby, “Art, Value, and the Freedom Fetish,” *metamute.org*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/art-value-and-freedom-fetish-o>.
- 3 Clint Eastwood cut his teeth in Sergio Leone’s “The Man with No Name” trilogy, smoking cigars from a Beverly Hills shop in “A Fistful of Dollars” (1964), an unofficial remake of Akira Kurosawa’s “Yojimbo” (1961). Leone later described his anti-hero: “Eastwood, at that time, only had two expressions: with hat and no hat.” See: <http://www.cinemadelsilenzio.it/index.php?mod=interview&id=17>.