

ARTFORUM



Margaret Lee
JACK HANLEY GALLERY
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The visitor to Margaret Lee's latest exhibition at Jack Hanley Gallery, her first New York solo show in five years, might be forgiven for having thought they'd walked through the wrong door. In the main gallery was a series of abstract oil paintings titled "B. I.," 2020, each some five-and-a-half feet high by four feet wide, done in a calm restricted palette of lavender, gray, and black, with patchy rectangles the predominant motif. The canvases were simple, not overworked; sometimes the linen wasn't even fully gessoed. A few featured large, ambiguous, and roughly geometric icons—what you might call a ladder, a clock with one hand, and a sewer grate (or the bars of a prison window). All featured ripped-up swaths of the New York Times pasted to their surfaces, sometimes apparent to the naked eye and sometimes beneath the paint, visible only in ragged outline.

Lee is one of the last artists an observer of the New York art world would expect to be going AbEx. Her photographs and sculptural readymades have mostly been interpreted as commentary on modernism and design, channeled through the digital surrealism of the DIS magazine era. Consider some highlights of her oeuvre: the faux-vegetable rotary-landline sculpture Eggplant (phone), 2012; a life-size model of a room graced with ghostly facsimiles of objets by Gerrit Rietveld, Superstudio, and Vitra, patterned all over with black dots like motion-capture sensors (closer to right than wrong / closer to wrong than right, 2014); and even works featuring plumbing, in versions à la Robert Gober (Fountain [depressing drip], 2018) and Rube Goldberg (Fountain [this is how it goes] #1, 2016). Image and object, commodification and desire; it all seemed pretty straightforward. The new show didn't entirely abandon these strains of her production: Running the length of the room was a single tangled rope that paused to weigh itself on three bathroom scales, nails piercing menacingly through its coils. In a smaller back room hung Roses (pre and post), 2019, a cyan neon work depicting the titular flowers and illuminating three largely black paintings from the series "Personalized Space," 2019, accoutred with lengths of dirty rope. The works suggested living-room takes on Clyfford Still, with just a hint of Jasper Johns.

Lee's work has been a little underregarded over the years, perhaps because she has taken on various art-adjacent roles, for example co-founding the episteme-shaping gallery 47 Canal. The unexpected turn of the new exhibition—titled, perhaps flippantly, "Bad, Immediately"—offered a chance for a reevaluation of Lee's corpus. What happens when you flip the script and view Lee not as a critic but as a poet? Her show's titles have always pointed more toward poetry's compression and recursion than toward critique. Consider 2011's "Waiting for ####" or 2016's "It's not that I'm not taking (this) seriously." The work has invariably concerned itself with baseline human necessities such as food, water, and home. The ropes and pipes recurring throughout her oeuvre are failed connectors—the hose that promises a stream only drips, the rope is tangled. The deflated aspect of these motifs suggests a skepticism about communication's ease, its possibility. The stark flatness of her photography, its contrasting of the 2-D and the 3-D, suggests the incapacity of that supposedly indexical medium as well. And the new rope sculpture intimates, with its nails and scales, a frustration with being quantified. The piece conjures a distant echo of Marcel Duchamp's sculpture—in his words, "a joke about the meter"—Three Standard Stoppages, 1913–14. Maybe modernism is inescapable after all.

Lee's foray into abstract painting, the most potent available signifier of art, suggests a grappling with art's capacities, even its use. The paintings themselves are strangely gripping, disinterested in accomplishment but neither tentative nor amateur. It's work that, temporarily, at least, has escaped the imperative to conceptualize and propound in favor of an emphasis on tactility and step-by-step improvisation. I suspect Lee would be the first to call this corny while also admitting that life is full of paradoxes. Is it easier to communicate if you don't make a statement? Lee's work might look like anything tomorrow, but for the moment it seems to have laid bare its concerns and taken on new depth in the most unexpected way.

— Domenick Ammirati