

Margaret Lee  
*bad, immediately*  
Jack Hanley Gallery, NY  
January 7 - February 6, 2021  
[exhibition link](#)

[margaret-lee.com](http://margaret-lee.com)



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*Suspense arouses expectations but what good are expectations if they inevitably end in disappointment. Been thinking about ways up, out and around but I keep coming back to accepting that bad immediately is just fine.*  
- ML, 2021 NYC

Bisecting the gallery in Margaret Lee's exhibition *Bad, Immediately* is a new sculptural installation comprised of rope and nails. The suspended rope, which is tangled midway between ground and ceiling, snakes along the gallery's floor, and ends in a knot. A sense of heaviness is suggested by the placement of coils on scales. Nails tenuously hold the arrangement together. The cord's fraying fabric anticipates strain.

Ropes have been making the rounds in Lee's work. In the artist's previous exhibition at Jack Hanley Gallery, *I'm not taking (this) seriously* (2016), a large, freestanding sculpture featured a rope slung over a wall. A knotted loop on the back of this was attached to a single screw, while twelve plaster bananas hung on the front. Ropes, for Lee, express the ambiguous potential of infrastructure. Such objects can carry a gallows humor, or invoke a feeling of being twisted. Concurrently, however, ropes can hold things and spaces together, or foreground the possibility of connection. Their value is defined by their use. They are relational objects.

A meditation on infrastructure likewise informs the eight new abstract paintings featured in the exhibition. These have been rendered in an understated palette of white, black and magenta. Torn sections of newspaper are embedded into the ground of the canvases, some more legible than others. Care has been given to the preparation of each canvas, giving the gesso a compositional presence. The application of paint in lines, patches and rectangles bring to mind the incidental markings that are often visible on the walls of urban buildings and passageways. The presence of grids and simple color gradients further recalls the built environment. In this series, the painting's ground can be interpreted as a metaphor for the base—the fabric of material relations upon which economic value is created. In their spare, non-representational poetics, the paintings weigh the possibility of what the sociologist Herbert Marcuse described as a “double reality,” where refusal is possible, established language and images fail, and form holds the contradictions that point toward psychological or social transformation. By calling the eye toward the canvas, the artworks consider the competing pressures that are contained in an object's surface.

Through these sculptural and painterly gestures, *Bad, Immediately* reflects on the frustrations of moving up and putting out. Yet while grounded in a degree of suspicion toward the present, the exhibition, as its title subtly intimates, seeks to move past the here and now. Letting go of current expectations can, in certain instances, lead to the understanding that things can change. Driven by this observation, the exhibition searches for an artistic language that signals beyond what is immediately given, and towards a vision of a world that is rebuilt from bottom to top.



# ARTFORUM



Margaret Lee  
JACK HANLEY GALLERY  
March 2021

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

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Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 03, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 04, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"





Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 05, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 06, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 07, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 08, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"





Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 09, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I.*, 09, 2020  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 10*, 2020  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 11, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"





Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 11*, 2020  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 12, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 13, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"





Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 14*, 2020  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"





Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 15*, 2020  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 16, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 17, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 18, 2020*  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"





Margaret Lee  
*B.I., 19*, 2020  
oil paint, newspaper on linen  
50" x 68"



Margaret Lee  
“Bad, Immediately” at Jack Hanley Gallery, New York, 2021





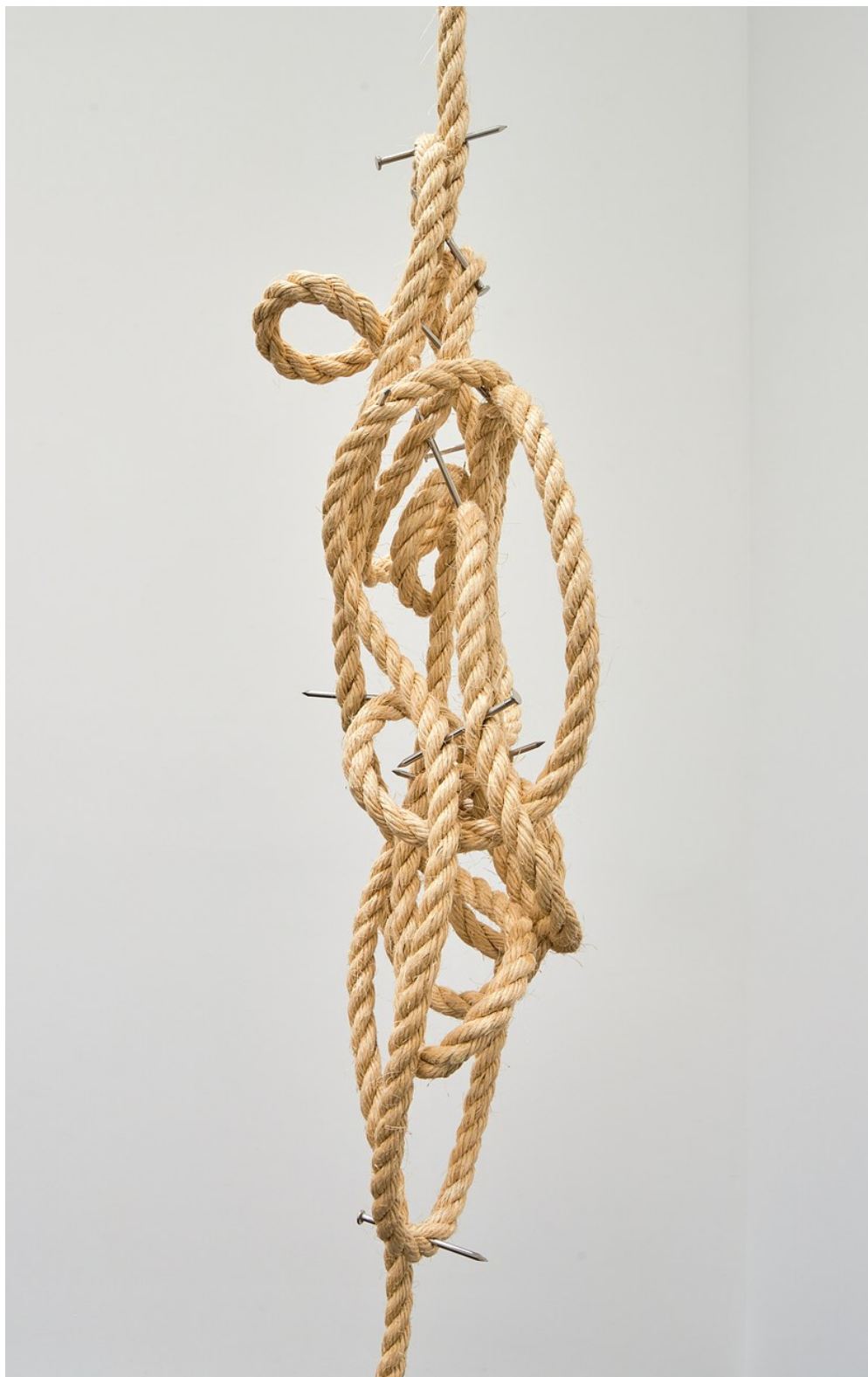
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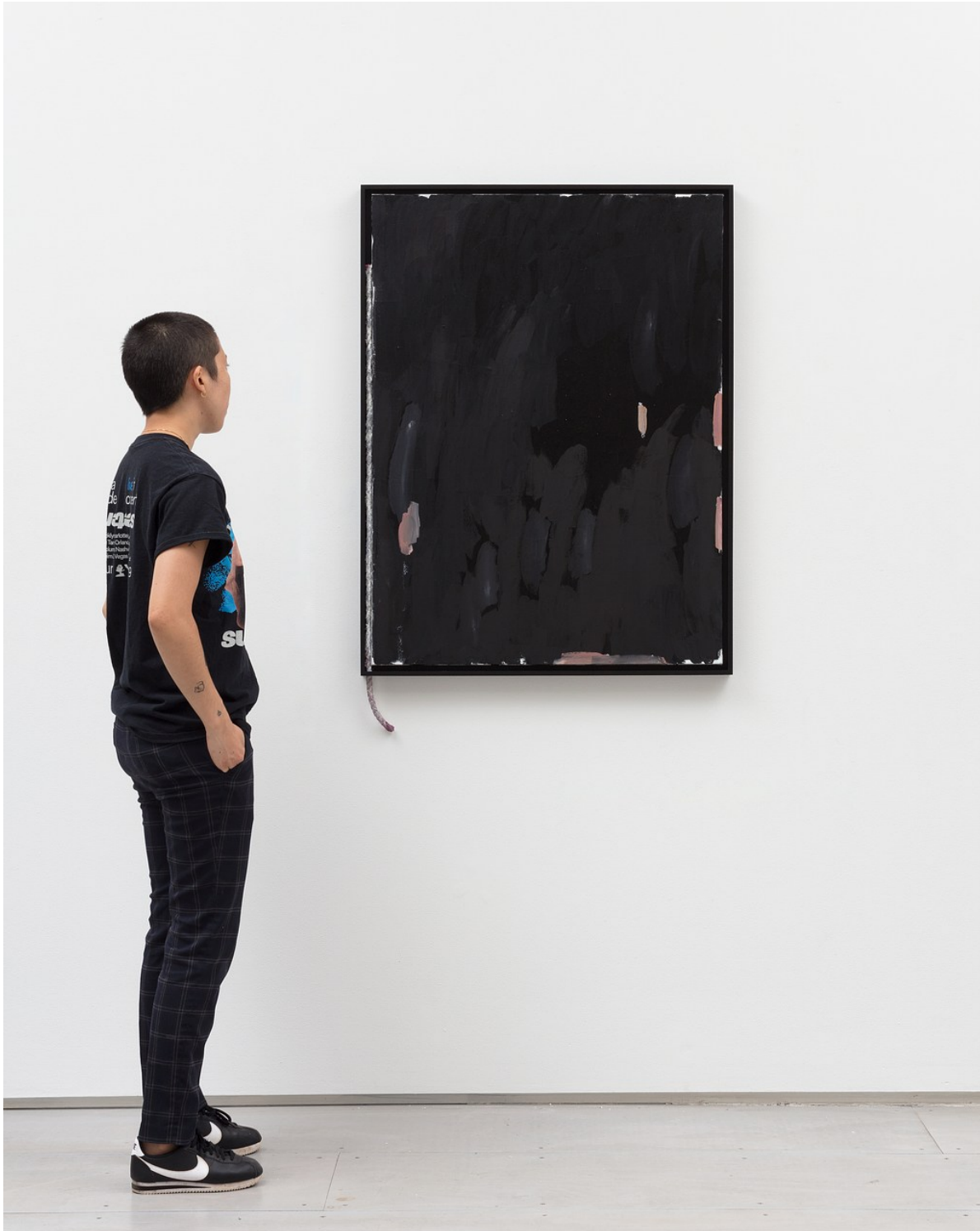
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Margaret Lee  
*Personalized Space, 04, 2019*  
Canvas, newspaper, oil paint, oil pastel, rope  
framed: 41 3/4 x 31 3/4 inches



Margaret Lee  
*Personalized Space, 04*, 2019  
Canvas, newspaper, oil paint, oil pastel, rope  
framed: 41 3/4 x 31 3/4 inches





Margaret Lee

*Personalized Space, 05, 2019*

Canvas, newspaper, oil paint, oil pastel, rope

framed: 41 3/4 x 31 3/4 inches



Margaret Lee

*Personalized Space, 05, 2019*

Canvas, newspaper, oil paint, oil pastel, rope

framed: 41 3/4 x 31 3/4 inches



Margaret Lee

*Personalized Space, 06, 2019*

Canvas, newspaper, oil paint, oil pastel, rope  
framed: 42 x 34 1/2 inches



Margaret Lee  
*Personalized Space, 06, 2019*  
Canvas, newspaper, oil paint, oil pastel, rope  
framed: 42 x 34 1/2 inches