

JACK HANLEY GALLERY

Margaret Lee
Life Lines

On view April 25 - May 25, 2024
Tuesday - Saturday, 11am-6pm

Sometimes lines are drawn that mark us off distinctly from everything else. This delimitation is deceptive. What once appeared solid and impenetrable reveals a shakiness, bringing to light that which was once believed to be forgotten. Impressions emerge and point to the indissoluble bonds that keep us from falling out of the world, away from untenable illusions and closer toward that which can be grasped. - M.L., NYC 2024

Paintings have held prominent positions within Margaret Lee's artistic practice, often incorporated within larger sculptural installations, playfully manipulating the object and image relationship. For her 5th solo exhibition at Jack Hanley Gallery, the paintings on view need no sculptural substantiation.

A persistent yellow radiates across the canvases, marking a distinct palette shift away from the pink and more severe black, white and silver paintings produced between 2019-2023. This seemingly simple color transition was not without its difficulties and forced a letting go of certain attachments resulting in the painter's hand resisting a repetition of gesture, line and form. Newness and innovation were not the goal but rather a reorientation of relations within the mind and thus a reorientation on the canvas. Lines once crucial in holding together previous compositions now appear broken. Non-representational forms fall off the edges. An anxious hand produces shaky marks and accidental drips. While one might assume these are worrying signs, the frenetic movement through each canvas is reassuring. Things are not stable nor are they stagnant. Being unconcerned with resolution isn't the same as carelessness. Rather, it is a reminder to revive efforts to exist in the world by some means or other.

Margaret Lee has organized and exhibited work at numerous venues domestically and internationally including Misako & Rosen Gallery, Tokyo, Japan, The Windows, Barneys, New York, Concentrations HK: Margaret Lee, curated by Gabriel Ritter, Duddell's x DMA, Hong Kong, China, Made in L.A, 2014 Hammer Museum Biennial, Los Angeles, 2013 Biennale de Lyon, de, da do...da, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, Caza, curated by Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, Bronx Museum, New York, NO MAN'S LAND: Women Artists from the Rubell Family Collection, Rubell Family Collection, Miami, New Pictures of Common Objects, curated by Christopher Lew, MoMA PS1, New York, and Looking Back, White Columns, New York, amongst others.

Public collections with works by the artist include: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Dallas Museum of Art, Dikeou Collection, Aïshti Foundation, Rubell Family Collection, and the Astrup Fearnley Museet.

For more information please contact Sophie Becker at sophie@jackhanley.com

CULTURED

ART

How an Encounter With a Much-Derided Self-Help Book Changed Margaret Lee's Practice Forever

The artist's new exhibition with Jack Hanley found its legs in Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* and a studious excavation of psychoanalysis.



Margaret Lee in her studio. All photography and artwork by Lee.

Julia Halperin April 22, 2024

Margaret Lee was in the midst of the most intense creative block of her life last year when she did something out of character. She opened up a self-help book: Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*.

The 1992 cult classic has been subjected to a fair amount of derision for its hokey, woo-woo approach to "creative recovery." When, during the second week of the 12-week program, the book instructed Lee to hang a sign in her workspace calling on the "Great Creator" ("I will take care of the quantity, you take care of the quality," it read), she felt her cynicism welling up like a sneeze. "You feel every part of your brain being like, No way, no way, no way," Lee remembers. "But I'd never had artist's block like this before, and nothing else has worked." So she kept going.

The fruits of her labor are on view in “Life Lines,” which opens on April 25 at Jack Hanley Gallery. The brushy abstract canvases bathed in sunny yellow represent a significant departure for the artist, who is best known for making hyperrealistic plaster-cast sculptures of produce (potatoes, watermelons, tangerines) that toy with our relationship to capitalism and desire.

Lee threw herself into painting during the pandemic, when supply-chain problems and shuttered foundries made it difficult to produce sculpture. The transition coincided with her deepening study of psychotherapy, which taught her to push back against her tendency to over-intellectualize feelings and experiences. “I thought therapy was you being very explicit about your problems, and having your therapist bear witness,” she says. “That was [also] what my sculpture was—building an argument.”

Reading psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud, Mária Török, and Nicolas Abraham—as well as *The Artist’s Way*—gave her permission to loosen her grip in both life and art. In her own therapy, she worked to cultivate a truer, almost pre-verbal version of herself. “Becoming inarticulate is an extremely scary thing,” Lee says. “It’s the most vulnerable I’ve ever been.”

As an artist, “becoming inarticulate” meant rejecting the silver and black hues she’d been working with previously, which she felt were too cool and detached, and embracing warmer, softer colors like mauve, blue, and yellow. It meant stripping the works of all sculptural elements with which she was previously associated. It meant preparing rigorously (through sketching, color theory, exercise, and writing) so that she could truly let go when she stepped in front of the canvas.

In recent years, Lee has been thinking about her early sculptures differently. Her father immigrated to New York from South Korea and worked as a greengrocer, but his business never got off the ground. Years later, Lee used fruits and vegetables as her entrée into the elite art world. “When I was making those watermelon and potato sculptures, collectors would tell me funny stories, like, ‘My housekeeper put it in the fridge!’” Lee says. “I used the very thing my father attempted to enter the American middle class with, to gain access to these spaces.”

In contrast to her confident sculptures and installations, the paintings in “Life Lines” embrace uncertainty. They aren’t striving for anything in particular and they don’t need your approval. Lee has always been a multitasker: She continues to work as an assistant to Cindy Sherman and volunteers in her Chinatown neighborhood (although she no longer works at 47 Canal, the gallery she co-founded).

Now, she’s allowing her art to be about the process of making and the process of processing. “What’s flowing is a very anxious, shaky line, which I’m kind of excited for,” Lee says. “I’ll make more paintings. It’s a practice. Each one is not so special.”

“Life Lines” will be on view from April 25 through May 25, 2024 at Jack Hanley Gallery in New York.

Margaret Lee: Life Lines Jack Hanley Gallery



Margaret Lee: Life Lines
Jack Hanley Gallery
177 Duane Street, New York, NY 10013
April 25–May 25, 2024
By EDWARD WAISNIS June 12, 2024

Margaret Lee's work exudes confidence. Having turned away from her earlier iteration of an installation and sculpture-based practice, and applying herself to collaboration and curating, the focus is now firmly on painting, a move she started around 2018–2020, perfecting her craft ever since.

Lee's attention has turned from temporal secular work to concerns in the realm of the incorporeal, the ethereal and the psychological. Suffering what she has referred to as a 'block' during the pandemic, and with supply chain disruptions affecting her ability to work on sculpture projects, a delving into cognitive 'self-help' led her to the time-worn poetry of painting. Hence, one must conclude from the title of the show, painting provided something essential at an especially trying time for Lee.

Riffling through iterations of abstraction that echoed the efforts of Günther Förg, René Daniëls and Raoul De Keyser, Lee has settled on her unique amalgam, having seemingly brought in a strong visual reference to the paintings of Robert Motherwell of late, and distilling her experience to a rigorousness with devotion to lyricism and variation. The latter aspect plays out in the installation, somewhat akin to the panels of a comic strip, particularly when viewed serially en masse and in situ, as presented in the context of this exhibition. One can even envision this sequentiality being purposed into a flip-book allowing the compositions to dance and morph through a low-rent presentation of animation. What I am recognizing is the sense of movement in the work.

All of this lends to a preface positing that environment and experience directly impact the artist's output. Nothing new here. What matters is the results. Lee after having experimented with materials (from plaster cast fruits and vegetables often coupled with stainless steel to nails and screws driven through lengths of black painted dowels) and form (from voluminous to flat and emblematic) she has forged a neuro romantic take on abstraction. An accomplishment made in light of the craft's floundering through several decades, the fervent rise of Neo-Expressionism, et. al., and a half-baked attempt to label from time to time—I am thinking of zombie formalism as a particularly caustic example—and emerging in the now firmly planted new century with strength.



The compartmentalization found especially in Lee's earlier paintings, as well as the sporadic arrangements in the new work, leads me to posit that echoes of experience the artist gained through her previous endeavors reside in her compositional choices; there is the whiff gallery space and the implements used to create and arrange it to be found here, I believe. Something of dealing with the rag-tag art spaces of perennially hip New York enclaves, as evidenced by Lee's involvement with the 179 and 47 Canal Street spaces, of which she was the founder and co-founder, respectively. Less than a decade ago Lee was profiled as one of "The Most Respected US Contemporary Art Dealers of 2015" on Artnet News. Now she has thrown herself passionately in exploring this storied means of art making.

Eleven canvases, all 2024, all 58 x 56 inches, and all bearing the title LL, denoting shorthand for the exhibition's title, followed by numerical denotation, provides the field on which, Rubik's Cube-like, Lee shifts a retinue of fleshy blocks and hastily dashed strikes of the brush, all against unifying backgrounds of diaphanous yellow. The aplomb and volume of the blocks, mostly mauve, recall early-to-mid-Philip Guston's formulations of the 1950s and 60s, remarkably consistent, that is a few short years would evolve into the more accessible, though deeply coded, cartoon realism.

Standouts, amongst Lee's paintings, include LL 06, that is weighed down by a rectangular element which uncannily resembles the state of Idaho being pelted by what could be streaks of black rain. What is it about trying to find representation in abstraction? Did Lee intend the reference I registered? Any way you look at it the work fulfills the desire of perception. LL 23 carries the day through swagger, the dispersed forms bending, or leaning, against the elements, or an unheard rhythm. LL 24 builds and balances a dozen cylindrical forms into a regimented huddle with strong ties to Nicolas de Staël's compositional innovations; in a way it can be seen as a distillation of Cubism after Minimalism. The reference I found plausible in LL 08 is to British Modernists Patrick Herron and Howard Hodgkin. The outlier, still fine in its way, is LL 27, where we find crudely rendered mid-toned cyphers lying at the bottom third of the canvas that mimic upside-down "T" and "U" forms, bringing to mind the tactics of Georg Baselitz as well as those 'U' forms in Wade Guyton's inkjet printed paintings from a few years back. While all this referential noise knocks around in my brain, my body feels the assault of the casually rendered passages, as satisfaction sets in.



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Margaret Lee
LL 06, 2023
Oil on Linen
58 x 56 inches



Margaret Lee

LL 07, 2023

Oil on Linen

58 x 56 inches



Margaret Lee
LL 08, 2024
Oil on Linen
58 x 56 inches



Margaret Lee

LL 09, 2024

Oil on Linen

58 x 56 inches



Margaret Lee
LL 10, 2024
Oil on Linen
58 x 56 inches



Margaret Lee

LL 17, 2024

Oil on Linen

58 x 56 inches



Margaret Lee
LL 20, 2024
Oil on Linen
58 x 56 inches



Margaret Lee
LL 19, 2024
Oil on Linen
58 x 56 inches



Margaret Lee

LL 23, 2024

Oil on Linen

58 x 56 inches



Margaret Lee

LL 27, 2024

Oil on Linen

58 x 56 inches



Margaret Lee
LL 24, 2024
Oil on Linen
58 x 56 inches