

Reviews April 2021

April 2021 | By Charlene K. Lau

Page 1 of 1

Haegue Yang

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada

Rather unceremoniously, Haegue Yang's retrospective, 'Emergence', at the Art Gallery of Ontario greets the visitor with a selection of sculptures made in the last decade: goofy monsters crafted from all manner of everyday things, including bells, straw, food-truck ventilation fans, ski jackets and a towel printed with the outsized image of a US\$500 bill. But installed here on an elevated platform, rather than on the floor as they usually are, these anthropomorphic and zoomorphic alien forms – *The Intermediate – Dragon Conglomerate* (2016), a fringing white spheroid à la Nick Cave's 'Soundsuits' (1992–ongoing), is particularly otherworldly – seem too precious. After this static parade of creatures, the exhibition abruptly turns a corner into a gallery dedicated to Yang's art-school days in Frankfurt, jammed with arte povera-esque explorations in materials like pasta and wire.

As with any retrospective, Yang's practice of the past quarter century expands and contracts in the exhibition. At times, the works are compromised by the museum's rigid layout: a series of origami objects, framed on the wall and scattered on the floor (*Origami Dust – Side Effects and By Products* [2004/2012] and *Origami Dust* [2004/2018]) stand alongside two *Sol LeWitt Vehicles* (both 2018) – towering white sculptures comprised of venetian blinds hanging from powder-coated aluminium frames. Other areas have been so compressed that the exhibition verges, at points, on claustrophobic. These curatorial cramming techniques work occasionally, as is the case with *Non-Indépliables* (2006–10), a whimsical field of collapsible drying racks covered in colourful textiles, yarns and hanging lights – objects that look alive albeit freeze-framed in their callisthenics-like poses.

Some awkward layouts and placements unfortunately detract from Yang's grand designs. 'Boxing Ballet' (2013–15), a series of tall figures on casters crafted from brass bells, electric fans and other metal and steel components that reference Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadisches Ballett* (Triadic Ballet, 1922), squeeze into a smaller gallery leaving very little room for viewers when human handlers listlessly activated the works. An artwork of this scale requires the luxury of space; without this, it shrinks from its potential or original intent. On my first visit, I was bumped by *Sonic Figure – Mesmerizing Pirouette* (2013) – a swinging humanoid pendulum made from clusters of brass bells (its head and stylized collar) and an array of white metal rings (its hair) – unaware that my body

took up so much space. The crowding of bodies, sentient and otherwise, was amplified by COVID-19 anxiety. By my second visit, the room capacity was limited to six people.

A series of 'Lacquer Paintings' (1999–ongoing) – chipboard *tableaux* made with mesh bags, seeds, hair, insects, dust and other detritus varnished onto their surfaces – ran along walls throughout the exhibition, sometimes feeling out of place. Yet, looking at the work altogether in this way allowed viewers to see Yang weave in and out of ideas – domestic, industrial, thematic – returning to them at various points in her career.

Yang's global appeal is noteworthy, with concurrent shows taking place at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Manila, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul and Tate

St Ives in Cornwall. In the autumn of 2019, I took a visiting curator from Asia to see the choreographed activations of Yang's sculptures in her exhibition 'Handles' at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The curator dismissed it as 'too Western', missing the point of the artist's idiosyncratic and expansive practice. Yang's *oeuvre* functions like a history of the self through extended material exploration, unconstrained by limiting stereotypes on national, cultural or racial identity. As an encyclopaedic appreciation of humble stuff, an obsession with materiality and endless exploration of ideas cobbled from everywhere and anywhere, 'Emergence' surprises and rewards the viewer with its volume and deep inquiry into the life of things and being in the world.

— Charlene K. Lau

Haegue Yang, *The Intermediate – Dragon Conglomerate*, 2016, artificial straw, powder-coated steel frame and mesh, casters and plastic raffia string, 1.8 x 1.2 x 1.2 m

