

Blinds and Bells: Haegue Yang's Retrospective at the Leeum in Seoul



Haegue Yang, Courtesy the artist.

At Haegue Yang's exhibition at the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul, "Shooting the Elephant 象 Thinking the Elephant," the visitor will encounter installations and sculptures composed of bright brass bells, electric fans, light bulbs, and Venetian blinds, all involved in a dance of movement, light, texture, and sound. At the start of the exhibition, visitors are invited to don garlands of bells, wearable sculptures the artist calls *Sonicwears* (2013/2015). In one installation, different scents are emitted periodically into the air. Based on these works alone, one could be forgiven for thinking that Yang's work is primarily concerned with the senses: sight, sound, smell, and touch. But this is just one layer of Yang's work, a surface reading, and while no less true, of course, and no less satisfying, a deeper plunge into the work and its references and dialogues reveals a vast ocean of meaning underneath.



Haegue Yang, *Shooting the Elephant* 象 *Thinking the Elephant*, installation view. Courtesy Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art.

"*Shooting the Elephant* 象 *Thinking the Elephant*," on view until May 10, is [Haegue Yang's first solo exhibition](#) in her native country of South Korea in five years. Based in Berlin, Yang is perhaps best known for her installations comprised of arrangements of Venetian blinds—a sculptural motif she introduced in a work entitled *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements – Blind Room* at the São Paulo Bienal in 2006, and continued to use in installations at the Venice Biennale (where she represented South Korea in 2009), *DOCUMENTA* (13), and numerous other commissions for major art institutions like Haus der Kunst and the Walker Art Center. Venetian blinds—with their binary properties of folding/unfolding, and transparency/privacy—provide a rich visual and sculptural framework, as well as an apt metaphor, for many of the themes Yang is interested in exploring, including issues of barriers, borders, and dispersion.



Haegue Yang, *Seoul Guts – Medicine Man* (left), 2010; *Seoul Guts – Washing and Cleaning* (right), 2010; *Multiple Mourning Room* (back), designed in collaboration with Manuel Raeder, 2012. Courtesy Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art and Greene Naftali, New York.

An astute observer of Yang's work in this exhibition will note the overwhelming prevalence of everyday materials—metal stands mounted on casters, like one might encounter in office furniture or clothing racks, umbrellas, artificial plants, cell phone charms, light bulbs, kitchenware, envelopes, chairs and tables—and note how each element reaches for cultural referents to individuality or community life. A group of light sculptures entitled *Seoul Guts* (2010) loiters in a corner of The Leeum's expansive gallery, each one an intuitive assemblage of everyday materials draped across a mobile garment rack, standing at about the height of an average person; like a person, each sculpture betrays its individual eccentricities, carries itself in a particular way, and seems to hold on to these personal affects as extensions of themselves. *VIP's Union* (2001/2015), on the other hand, is comprised of borrowed furniture, serving as an artwork and a rest area for visitors to the museum; the oddly matched tables and chairs, lent by local residents and workers of Seoul, form loose groups and alliances within the space, visually approximating the concept of a community.



Haegue Yang, *VIP's Union*, 2001/2015. Courtesy the artist.

Citadella (2011), an installation composed of 186 Venetian blinds suspended in a labyrinthine arrangement of corridors and rooms, invites comparisons to a village or town, albeit a rather mysterious and dark one. It's here that visitors are misted with scents (artificially composed and branded with comfortable, natural names: Mountain Mist, Ocean, Fresh Cut Grass, Rainforest, etc.), while moving spotlights send roving shadows through the slats of the blinds. A video essay projected within the installation, *Doubles and Halves – Events with Nameless Neighbors* (2009)—documenting poor residents of Ahyun-dong, Seoul, where the artist lived for a time, and homeless people staying in the Biennale park of Venice in the off-season—provides ghost-like inhabitants for the Venetian-blind passageways.



Haegue Yang, *Cittadella*, 2011. Courtesy of Kukje Gallery, Seoul.

Yang's grandest sculptural gestures in The Leeum's Jean Nouvel-designed space are manifested in three towering straw edifices, modeled after a Mayan pyramid, the Indonesian ruin of Borobudur, and the Russian Islamic mosque Lala Tulpan. Collectively titled *The Intermediates* (2015), a body of work devised specifically for this exhibition, the sculptures pose in an in-between state, between scale model and real building, between the ephemeral and the everlasting, between the natural and the artificial. The figure statues placed between the structures resemble raffia-wrapped shamans—intermediaries between the human and the spirit world, between civilization and nature. The material of straw was chosen because of its "universality"—in nearly every culture, no matter its geographic location or time period, straw appears as a familiar folk material—but here the straw is all artificial, made of a filmy, flaxen-colored plastic, thwarting any kind of nostalgic sentiment for a shared, primitive past.



Haegue Yang, *The Intermediate – Lion Dance on One Leg* (left), 2015; *The Intermediate – After Borobudur* (right), 2015.
Courtesy the artist.

Lest one imagines Yang's work casts its eyes only on the ancient past and our everyday present, references to art history also come into sight. At the entrance of the museum, suspended high above the viewer, a new work, a modular Venetian-blind structure, invokes Sol Lewitt by reproducing one of his iconic sculptures of repeating cubic forms, enlarged and hung upside down. And *Boxing Ballet* (2013/2015) replicates the historic, geometric costumes of the Triadic Ballet by Bauhaus painter, sculptor, and choreographer Oskar Schlemmer, their distinctive forms covered by gold bells.



Haegue Yang, *Sol LeWitt Upside Down – Structure with Three Towers, Expanded 23 Times*, 2015. Courtesy the artist.

But where is the eponymous elephant? Nowhere in Yang's exhibition will you find any visual indicator of the great grey beast. Yang's elephant, rather, is literary, drawn from two written works: "Shooting an Elephant," an essay by George Orwell, and *The Roots of Heaven* (*Les Racines du Ciel*), a novel by Romain Gary. In both stories, the elephant serves as a metaphor for nature, and humans find themselves in confrontation with it. Both stories, notably, are entwined in the ugly circumstances of colonialism. This virtual "elephant in the room" points to another, very important, undercurrent of Yang's work: her "interest in how colonial history affects and transforms us."



Haegue Yang, *Boxing Ballet*, 2013/2015. Courtesy the artist.

Yang's installations and sculptures, in their formal qualities, their materials, and their cultural references, echo the vast human sensorium, intellect, and capacity to create. Whether or not the visitor can catch all the references and underlying meanings to the works, however, is not necessarily of importance to the artist. In a recent interview in *Ocula*, the artist explains, "My driving interests and motivations are often concrete, but my artistic language is one of abstraction. Abstraction is, for me, a way of thinking and working through collective and individual narratives across different histories, generations and locations. They coincide and overlap, becoming comprehensible on a personal level in linguistically unexplainable ways." Understanding Yang's work and its myriad references and allusions, then, is not the crucial factor—it's the experience that truly matters. In the end, Yang's work is primarily concerned with expressing what it means to be human, the nuances of which are infinitely varied and discrete.



Haegue Yang, *Cittadella*, 2011. Courtesy of Kukje Gallery, Seoul.

--Natalie Hegert

<http://www.mutualart.com/OpenArticle/Blinds-and-Bells--Haegue-Yang--s-Retresp/A6FD78A302A21643>