



**Art Radar**

*Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond*

## Redefining abstraction: Haegue Yang's search for the elusive elephant – video

Posted on [19/06/2015](#)

Korean artist Haegue Yang's recent exhibition at the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art cements her status as one of the leading international artists of her generation.

Art Radar summarises a recent video published by Mutualart about the defining, 'homecoming' show held in Seoul from February to May 2015. Haegue Yang speaks about her enigmatic works and the importance of feeling and experiencing art.



Haegue Yang, 'Cittadella', 2011, aluminium, Venetian blinds, aluminium hanging structure, powder coating, steel wire, moving spotlights, scent emitters (Campfire, Mountain Mist, Oudh, Rainforest, Cedarwood, Ocean, Fresh Cut Grass, Tamboti Wood), dimensions variable. Image courtesy Kukje Gallery, Seoul.

### Blinds, borders and dispersion

**Haegue Yang** (b. 1971, Seoul) certainly did not disappoint in her first Korean solo exhibition in five years, entitled "**Shooting the Elephant 象 Thinking the Elephant**". The work that greeted audiences at the entrance hall of the **Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art** was a mesmerising ceiling

installation that “repeat[ed] its geometric units arbitrarily to assume its form”, according to the *Mutualart* video.

Entitled *Sol LeWitt Upside Down – Structure with Three Towers, Expanded 23 Times* (2015), the newly commissioned piece was a clear homage to Sol LeWitt’s 1986 work. The installation was unobtrusively entrancing in its clinical, repetitive forms and colours that exuded a mystical beauty.



**[Click here to view Mutualart’s video on Haegue Yang’s exhibition “Shooting the Elephant 象 Thinking the Elephant”](#)**

The artist has featured Venetian blinds in works and commissions exhibited at the São **Paulo Biennial 2006**, the **Venice Biennale 2009**, **DOCUMENTA(13) 2012** and other major institutions like Haus der Kunst and the Walker Art Center. The Huffington Post **explains Yang’s aesthetic** as well as political interest in the unique sculptural motif:

*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*

### **Bells, smells and beyond**

Accompanying the hypnotising blinds installation at the entrance of the exhibition was *Sonicwears* (2013/2015), an interactive piece in which visitors were invited to don garlands of jingling bells. The narrator of the video explains the purpose of these ‘wearable sculptures’:

*The artist provides bells that signify sacred elephants at the entrance. The audience gets to enjoy her pieces while wearing the bells on their arms or bodies.*



Haegue Yang, 'Sol LeWitt Upside Down – Structure with Three Towers, Expanded 23 Times', 2015, aluminium, Venetian blinds, aluminium hanging structure, powder coating, steel wire, 350 x 1052.5 x 352.5 cm. Image courtesy Kukje Gallery, Seoul.



Also featured in the exhibition was the colossally-scaled Cittadella (2011), an acclaimed multi-sensorial installation that includes scent emitters as well as window blinds and spotlights. “[V]isitors are misted with scents [while] moving spotlights sen[t] roving shadows through the slats of the blinds”, writes The Huffington Post.

Simultaneously, a video essay, projected right into the labyrinth of scents and shadows, documents poor residents in Ahyun-dong, Seoul, and homeless people in the Biennale Park of Venice. The constellation of window blinds becomes a model for a village or a town, and the video images “provid[e] ghost-like inhabitants for the Venetian-blind passageways”, according to The Huffington Post. It is quickly apparent that Yang’s work goes far beyond the sensorial; Ocula observes that Yang’s abstract installations

*delve into a cacophony of social, historical and political narratives.*

### **The Intermediates**

Unveiled for the first time at the Leeum, *The Intermediates* series (2015) comprises sculpted models of buildings from different cultures made from artificial straw, including a Mayan pyramid, the Indonesian ruin of Borobudur and the Russian Islamic mosque Lala Tulpan. Multiple meanings are embedded within these silent, ethereal edifices that glow luminescent inside the Leeum’s majestic halls. Yang explains her concept in the video:

*I was interested in the notion of ‘folk’ [...] there is the idea of ‘us’: Who is ‘us’? What is ‘ours’? [...] Straw in each culture in civilisation [...] is [a] very universal material, and the title ‘Intermediates’ refers to the mediating role of this material.*



Installation view of “Shooting the Elephant 象 Thinking the Elephant” (2015). Left: Haegue Yang, ‘The Intermediate – Lion Dance on One Leg’, 2015, artificial straw, steel stand, powder coating, casters, Indian bells, plastic twine, knitting yarn, cord, Korean bridal crowns, 215 x 160 x 94 cm. Image courtesy Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Right: Haegue Yang, ‘The Intermediate – After Borobudur’, 2015, artificial straw, aluminium profile, powder coating, plastic twine, 275 x 489 x 585 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

The idea of an ‘intermediate’ is also present in the scale of the works, which are as Yang explains: “much smaller than the original, but then [...] much bigger than what we usually call ‘models’ in architecture”. Furthermore, synthetic straw is used instead of real straw, complicating the temptation to adopt a “nostalgic sentiment for a shared, primitive past”, writes *The Huffington Post*. The article summarises:

*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 search for the invisible elephant

The exhibition’s title “Shooting the Elephant 象 Thinking the Elephant” was inspired by George Orwell’s essay *Shooting an Elephant* and Romain Gary’s novel *The Roots of Heaven*. However, as the video narrator is quick to point out, the elephant is nowhere to be seen in the exhibition. Instead, the elephant is used as a metaphor. *Ocula* observes that the elephant is a metaphorical medium through which Yang reveals her thoughts on **“the coexistence between nature and man”**; meanwhile, *The Huffington Post* notes that both Orwell’s and Gary’s stories “are entwined in the ugly circumstances of colonialism”, and that:

*the] 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.”*

Finally, curator Tae **offers yet another elephant metaphor** to the *Korea Joongan Daily* – the animal acts as “an invisible medium, extremely vulnerable like endangered nature, but also powerful as our human imagination and aspiration”. Yang herself was quoted by the same publication in saying:

*Maybe the elephant is me.*



Haegue Yang, ‘Boxing Ballet’, 2013/2015. Image courtesy the artist,

## **Redefining abstraction and embracing experience**

Yang's extraordinary imagination manifests in works that are both conceptually and sensorially powerful. The artist has created a thoroughly unique language of abstraction that visually and sensorially translates her political motivations in subtle yet unforgettable ways. She tells *Ocula*:

*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.*

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URL: <http://artradarjournal.com/2015/06/19/haegue-yang-video/>