

Projects 57 : Bul Lee, Chie Matsui : the Museum of Modern Art, January 23,- March 25, 1997

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57

bul lee/chie matsui

projects

**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

January 23, - March 25, 1997

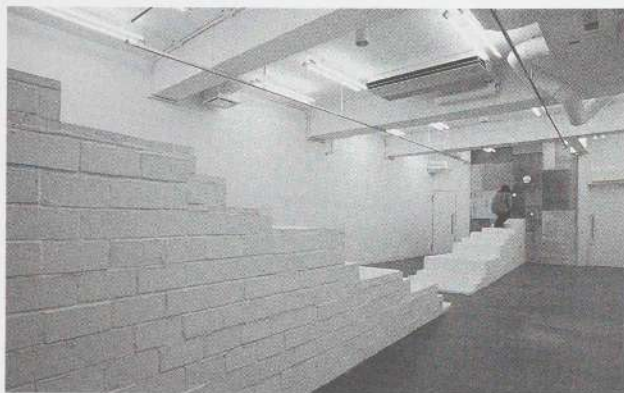
Installation has recently emerged as a major avant-garde movement in Korea and Japan. It is the medium of choice for young artists who wish to break with institutionalized art forms prevalent in museum and gallery spaces. Though hardly new in Asia—its roots reach back to the interdisciplinary events of the 1960s—the all-embracing nature of installation encourages the extravagant gesture that characterizes an avant-garde. The medium is confrontational in both form and content, and as such, it is a staple of alternative art galleries found in most urban centers.

Women artists find installation especially attractive. It's contemporary; no fossilized tradition sets its boundaries. No hierarchy, male or otherwise, dictates the rules of installation. Artists are free to use whatever materials they wish, including domestic items typically associated with a woman's place in society. In Japan and Korea, where social norms are narrowly defined, this freedom is liberating.

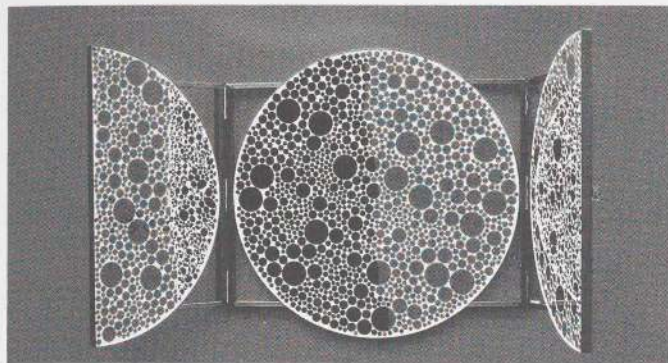
Behind a modern veneer of skyscrapers and Reeboks, Korean and Japanese societies remain rigidly structured. People receive their assigned place at birth, and during a lifetime most do not stray far. Women are expected to be demure and subservient. Some pioneering women fight to achieve a broader range of possibilities, and through this struggle they find a freedom outside the norm.

chie matsui

Chie Matsui, the daughter of a Buddhist temple family, learned early in life to hide her emotions and follow the established path. Growing up in the industrial city of Osaka, she pursued the traditional art of brush and ink. In a move that broadened her horizons, Matsui enrolled as an art student in Kyoto, the old cultural capital of Japan. Here she focused on textile design. The training, which emphasized structure over content, set the style of her early work.



Chie Matsui. *Untitled*. 1992. Installation: lead, bricks, slacked lime. Shown installed at Art Site, Fukui. Collection the artist. Photo: Tomoaki Ishihara



Chie Matsui. *Labor 12* (detail). 1995. Installation: mirror and iron. Shown installed at Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo. Collection the artist. Photo: Norihiro Ueno

In her first exhibitions, a series of architectural pieces, Matsui guided viewers along narrow corridors, up and down stairs, and onto cramped viewing platforms. The confined areas epitomized space as people experience it in Japan.

The focal point of these works was a view of an abstract landscape seen through a small hexagonal cutout in a wall. The vista included symbolic statements such as a large spool of blue thread unraveling for the duration of the exhibition. One of the few ways these works transcended convention was in their materials. Instead of traditional rice paper screens and wood, Matsui built her structures with white cinder blocks.

With the deaths of her parents and grandmother, Matsui lost the authoritative influence of her immediate family. She stopped constructing reserved architectures, and turned her gaze inward. Her new work explores interiors, presented as lived-in spaces with domestic allusions.

These rooms are in no way islands of comfort. They are aggressive, filled with grotesqueries that would be at home in the world of the Brothers Grimm, or in horrific Japanese folktales. Like her Kyoto colleagues Yasumasa Morimura and Teiji Furuhashi of the performance group Dumb Type, Matsui turns to the outrageous to express her disaffection with a convention-bound society.

Matsui's recent series of installations, *Labor*, features the *sanmenkyo*, a three-part folding mirror commonly found on a woman's vanity table. The mirror belongs to a bride's trousseau. A woman enters marriage with the *sanmenkyo* and two other household objects—a *futon*, bed, and a *tansu*, small chest of drawers.

The *sanmenkyo* is an interface between a woman's private persona and the restrained face she carefully arranges for public appearance. Typically, at the *sanmenkyo*, she is making herself beautiful for a man's gaze. That is the image cultivated by advertising, which encourages a Japanese woman to remain forever a girl-child.

For Matsui, the *sanmenkyo* also elicits sorrowful memories. As in most Japanese homes, her mother lacked a private place of her own. During Matsui's childhood, her mother escaped from marital tensions by retreating to her *sanmenkyo*. She would sit in a corner enfolded in the mirror's arms, quietly alone.

In *Labor 39* (1997), Matsui's mirrors have metamorphosed. They are now shattered fragments embedded in a large circular saw blade, twenty-four inches across. The triptych mirror that recalled her mother's peaceful moment of reflection has become a vicious instrument suitable for a Texas chain saw massacre.

The walls of the installation are layered with masses of fake fur, stained a bright red the shade of tawdry lipstick, or menstrual blood. The matted fur screams *cheap, false, vile*. This is not the fur of soft, sophisticated sex suggested by a mink coat. Only lurid sex would fit in such a vulgar setting.

The installation reads like a panel in a *manga*, a kind of serialized pulp fiction in comic-book format. Widely read by all ages, the weekly installments feature the mutilation of young women and the chopping up of salary men. Though violent and aggressive, *mangas* are no more than escapist fantasies. *Labor 39* is viscerally real.

While respectable citizens on subways and buses immerse themselves in *manga* tales of mayhem, little girls in pink dresses ride along nearby on their matching bicycles carrying identical pink schoolbags. Modern Japanese society, Matsui insists, can no longer rice-paper over its cracks. Her work stands as a challenge to the myth of harmony that the country presents to itself and to the world at large.

bul lee

Bul Lee's life, like her art, was marked from the start by outrage. Born to parents who led fugitive lives as political dissidents, she has produced installations and performances that strike at official authority. While studying sculpture at art school in Seoul, Lee spurned hard metal and stone. She



Bul Lee. *Sorry for Suffering—You Think I'm a Puppy on a Picnic?* 1990. Twelve-day performance, Tokyo

turned instead to soft materials, "feminine" materials, drawing on her mother's experience as a seamstress sewing handbags.

Sewn sculptures of body parts, mostly oversized buttocks, breasts, and vaginas, predominated in Lee's early work. Some pieces stood alone as objects, and others she appliqued and wore. In a provocative action, Lee flew into Tokyo's Narita Airport with cloth fetuses and entrails hanging from her dress. Security detained her only briefly, and she continued her outrageous performance on the fashionable streets of Ginza and at the Meiji Shrine.



Bul Lee. *Diet: Programming III*. 1992. Performance, Sagak Gallery, Seoul. Photo: Sang-yoon Lee

In her next series of performances, Lee dealt more directly with the female body. She discarded her wardrobe accessories, and her clothes. Draped only in a white screenlike fabric, Lee had words slide-projected onto her body. As the text—sexually charged Korean idioms—played over her figure, she struck a series of poses, by turns seductive, charming, and sexy. Her favored vignette was the portrayal of *am ne*, the Korean term for a woman's body odor, which women everywhere do their best to minimize. Lee's performance took its cue from the literal meaning of *am ne*—the scent of an animal in heat.

Five years ago, Lee's night stroll through a Seoul fish market struck an olfactory note. Her idea mated scent and sexuality, flesh and desire, with inevitable decay. Gathering a school of freshly caught fish, Lee tarted up their silvery scales with bright sequins and sealed them individually in ziplock bags. These pretty creations could fit in a *Min Wa* folk painting, where plump fish swimming in ponds are popular metaphors for fertility. Pinned to gallery walls, the fish gave off a noxious odor as they decomposed, while the sequins kept their sparkle.

Lee's message is pungently clear—beauty is fleeting, especially for ornamented women. Feminine desirability

is a social construct that makes few allowances for corporeal deterioration.

In deference to Western olfactory sensitivities, the fish in *Majestic Splendor* (1997) have been sanitized. Each ziplocked fish pinned on the wall includes a chemical deodorizer, and the rest of the fish are refrigerated in a large glass case. Lee believes museum-goers in America are reluctant to acknowledge that decomposition and its odor are a natural part of life's cycle. As an added satiric touch, the installation perfumes its surroundings with a spicy fragrance redolent of a romanticized Orient.

Within the refrigerated glass case, a human-size net serves as a supporting structure, accommodating and yielding to its burden. Sequined fish, caught within the golden-threaded web, are entangled in a mass of black tresses, evocative of Oriental beauty. The shiny hair is pierced with hairpins once favored by Korean courtesans. Crowning it all, a lavish wreath of white lilies alludes to female purity and the Immaculate Conception. Another allusion, closer to Lee's experience, comes from a Korean folk notion that a person sleeping in a room full of lilies will die, asphyxiated by the flowers' lethal emanation.

The title, *Majestic Splendor*, is a literal translation of the Korean *Hwa Um*, which in turn comes from the Sanskrit *Avatamska*, one of the major Buddhist sutras. In contrast to Nirvana, which is largely a self-induced state realized by discarding all passions and needs, *Hwa Um* describes the state of spiritual enlightenment attained through sacrifice for others.

Recent events added a political connotation to *Hwa Um*. During the 1980s, when democratic institutions had not yet taken hold in Korea, a series of antigovernment demonstrations in the city of Kwangju turned violent, and soldiers killed hundreds of citizens. The government-controlled newspapers sardonically referred to the massacre as *Hwa Um Kwangju*, suggesting that the slain demonstrators had found a justified end in service to their cause.

Lee titles many of her installations *Hwa Um*, *Majestic Splendor*. The austere grandeur of the title contrasts with the trinkets pinned to the decaying fish, thus undermining the womanly virtue of self-sacrifice. Here, as in other works, Lee strips the facade of Korean society and reveals the dominance of male objectives in women's lives.

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Note: Names appear in Anglicized order, family name last.

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chie matsui

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bul lee

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Bul Lee. *Majestic Splendor* (detail). 1993.
Installation: fish, sequins, plastic bags.
Shown installed at Duk Won Gallery,
Seoul. Photo: Soon-shin Kim

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biography

chie matsui

Born Osaka, Japan, 1960. Lives and works in Osaka
M.F.A. in Textiles, Kyoto City University of Fine Arts, 1984

selected exhibitions

- 1995** *Art in Japan Today*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo
SITE Santa Fe, New Mexico
- 1993** *Out of Place*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada
- 1992** *ARTLab2: MISSION INVISIBLE*, New Pier Hall, Tokyo
- 1991** *Seven Artists: Aspects of Contemporary Japanese Art*, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Los Angeles
The Silent Passion, Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, Japan
- 1990** *Aperto*, Venice Biennale, Corderie dell'Arsenale
- 1989** *Recent Works 7—Hajime Imamura, Chie Matsui*, The National Museum of Art, Osaka
- 1988** *Archi Texture—From the Horizon of Fiber Art*, Spiral/Wacoal Art Center, Tokyo
- 1985** *Japanese Artists' Books*, Franklin Furnace, New York
- 1984** *Art Now '84*, Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Modern Art, Japan

bul lee

Born Yongwol, Korea, 1964. Lives and works in Seoul
B.F.A. in Sculpture, Hong Ik University in Seoul, 1987

selected exhibitions

- 1996** *Join Me!*, Spiral/Wacoal Art Center, Tokyo
- 1995** *Information and Reality*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
6th Triennale der Kleinplastik, Südwest LandesBank Forum, Stuttgart
Korean Contemporary Art, Kwangju Biennale, Korea
New Asian Art, Japan Foundation Forum, Tokyo
- 1994** *Unforgiven*, A Space, Toronto
Technology, Environment, and Information, Recycling Art Pavilion, Taejon, Korea
- 1993** *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
Plastic Spring, Duk Won Gallery, Seoul
- 1991** *Dish Washing*, Sonamu Gallery, Seoul
- 1990** *Artoilet* (installation), Total Art Museum, Jang Heung, Korea
Sorry for Suffering (twelve-day performance), Narita Airport, Ginza, Dokiwaza Theater, and Meiji Shrine; Tokyo
- 1989** *Cravings* (performance), National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul