

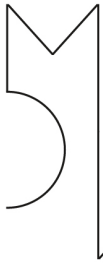
Seulgi Lee  
*SLOW WATER*  
08/09 - 08/10 2022

Upon entering, the sound of metal balls clanging against each other resonates throughout the gallery. For a moment, you imagine yourself at the controls of a pinball machine like those painted by Wayne Thiebaud in 1962. However, there are no flashing arcade machines; instead occupying the space are three wooden sculptures entitled *BAGATELLE*. Crafted by a Parisian woodworker, they are white oak reproductions of a Bagatelle board, an indoor table game invented in the 17th century and an ancestor of billiards and Japanese pachinko. The game consists of a tilted board with balls that fall into holes drilled in various places, while brass spikes arranged in arcs disrupt the ball's path. At first glance, the three boards presented here bear the same characteristics as the original object: similar scale, rounded contours, metal spheres, and a cue to propel them. However, upon closer inspection, the small pins scattered across the three game boards form geometric structures different from those appearing on the historical model. Indeed, the semicircular arcs give way to a more complex geometry. Circles, diagonals, and triangles are drawn between the holes whose backgrounds are painted with colors historically associated with the avant-garde: red, blue, yellow, and green. The studded lines trace the simplified contours of a woman's body, like a wink to the *trou-madame*, a medieval version of the Bagatelle game. We remember the perforation boldly covering Marcel Duchamp's piece *The bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even* (1934). Here the female body is more than naked, it joyfully welcomes the metal marbles directed by the skillful cue. Seulgi Lee's game, which presents itself as a social device for the audience (the artist deviates from the "Don't touch the artworks" rule somewhat), seems to crystallize the early modernist ideals in its questioning of the double dichotomy between art and life, and art and craft. Seulgi Lee entrusts the craftspeople with their drawings and photographs of the object, asking them to produce the game boards. The artist is interested in the discrepancies that occur during the elaboration and production of the work: the original model was the result of a first interpretation by Seulgi Lee in her sketches; these are then interpreted by the woodworker in a second phase. These new sculptural versions of the Bagatelle game result from an operation of translation that is dear to the artist: "I try to work on language systems by using craft. I attempt to offer craftspeople something that they already know how to make, an object that looks simple, but that can slightly surpass their usual practice".

Near the indecent game boards, a blanket is installed: *U: Friend with whom we used to play stilt (wooden horse) = Old friend* (2022, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels) (*U: The water in which an ax has been boiled = tasteless*, 2022, Jousse Entreprise, Paris). Being enveloped in words and color is the ambition of U, a set of quilts that Seulgi Lee has been working on since 2014. Made in the Korean *Nubi* tradition (a padded quilting technique), these handmade textile objects were sewn line by line by artisans in Tongyeong according to an over 500 year-old tradition. This quilting technique retains heat by allowing air to circulate through the impressions created by the cotton padding. These blankets were very common in Korean homes until the 1980s. Symbolic animal figures were sewn onto the cotton fragments in silk thread and could be detached for practical purposes, allowing the parts with bodily contact to be washed. Then, in the 1980s, they began using simple colored strips as ornaments. In Seulgi Lee's

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compositions, the colored strips have been replaced by a more complex geometry. Like *BAGATELLE*, each blanket operates as a translation from a statement in oral tradition into textile form. Chosen by the artist for its whimsical and humorous accents (the subtitles given to each *U* testify to this), the blanket "enunciates" a popular proverb by way of colored abstractions. To glide into the *U*, a letter whose shape is also a receptacle, means plunging into Korean vernacular tradition, and dreaming of such "tropes" in which proverbial stilts (*échasses*) and axes (*haches*) meet, as the titles suggest. If these abstractions bear witness to the dream of a fusion between art and craft envisaged by historical modernism, they also reject, in their reference to functionality, the dream of a pure, intransitive abstraction that emerged in the formalism of the second half of the 20th century.

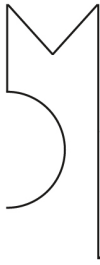
Once again, in the Jousse Entreprise gallery, Seulgi Lee confronts the public with a modernist symbol, taking a resolutely anti-narrative standpoint and singing the praises of flatness and frontality by means of an immense wooden grid suspended from the ceiling. Here, Mondrian's grid is observed from below and not from the front. Dozens of slats criss cross each other, suspended in air, recalling the Korean tradition of *Moonsal* (a lattice door made of woven wooden slats that delimits space in traditional houses); the intertwining lines of Chinese characters, and the geometric mashrabiya shown at the Museum of Wooden Arts and Crafts in Fez (Morocco) which fascinated Seulgi Lee during a visit in 2019. Like *BAGATELLE*'s marbles moving across the geometric board structures, the audience wanders under the grid whose subtle gradations of color have diverse origins, such as an artificial waterway in the 8th-century Korean villa of Poseokjeong, a Roman fresco in the Villa Livia, decorative *Dancheong* paintings known for their sophisticated polychromy, and the waterways of the port city of Incheon. The grid can be seen not only from below but also from the side. Its shape and colors change as the audience moves around. This grid, which in the history of Western modernism celebrates the principles of autonomy and purification, now allows the vernacular and folklore to seep in, referring to various ancestral craft traditions all at once: Korean, Moroccan, and Roman antiquity, not to mention the Yellow Sea. Sometimes you just have to look up to travel in space, time, and from one field to another in art and popular culture.

-Marjolaine Lévy

This text was produced on the occasion of Seulgi Lee's exhibitions at Mendes Wood DM Brussels (08/09 – 08/10 2022) and Jousse Entreprise (15/10 – 26/11 2022).

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Seulgi Lee has developed a unique artistic practice that is immediately recognizable for its use of color, gesture, simple but elegant forms and performance. In her work, she continually explores ordinary objects, everyday language and natural forms through sculptures or installations that are distinguished by a formal aesthetic. Despite (or perhaps because of) her deference to bright, cheerful colors, Lee has described her sculptural practice as utilitarian, invariably linked to the power, fragility and contingency of the body: her works are tools, available at hand, used by those who are close. She is particularly interested in folk crafts and enjoys collaborating with master craftsmen, such as Korean quilters from Tongyeong and traditional basket makers from Mexico. Her artworks often employ a more user-friendly vocabulary to describe craft and challenge arbitrary distinctions between a formal, polished sculptural syntax and a more popular design or aesthetic.

**Seulgi Lee** (Seoul, 1972) lives and work in Bagnolet, France.

Her recent solo exhibitions include *SLOW WATER*, Incheon Art Platform, Incheon (2021); *DONG DONG DARI GORI*, MMCA National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul (2020); *LE PLUS TÔT C'EST DEUX JOURS MIEUX*, La Criée Centre d'Art Contemporain, Rennes (2019); *DAMASESE*, Hyundai Gallery, Seoul (2018) and *COPROLITHE!*, Mimesis Museum, Paju (2015).

Lee's recent group shows include *Frequencies of Tradition*, KADIST Foundation, San Francisco (2022); *The Poetic Collection*, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul (2022); *Stories of Abstraction. Greenberg's Nightmare*, Fondation d'entreprise Pernod Ricard, Paris (2021); *Rituel.le.s*, IAC Institut d'Art Contemporain Villeurbanne, Lyon (2020); *The moment of Giyeok (first Korean alphabet)*, Seoul Arts Center, Seoul (2020); *Home is a home is a home is a home*, galerie Jousse Entreprise, Paris (2019); and *Korea now !*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs de Paris (2015).

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