

MAIA RUTH LEE

Nearing

June 13 – August 9, 2025

Mai 36 Galerie is pleased to present *Nearing* by Maia Ruth Lee, the artist's first solo exhibition with the gallery. Marking the culmination of her *Bondage Baggage* series, Lee spans sculpture, painting, and installation for the show.

Raised between Nepal and South Korea and currently based in Salida, Colorado, Lee brings a transnational perspective to her work, often examining the symbolic and material residues of movement and belonging. For Lee, art serves as both a map and sites for memory – tracing dislocation, reframing loss, and reconstructing new visual vocabularies from fragmented cultural inheritances.

Bondage Baggage began in 2013 with Lee's investigation into the wrapped luggage of migrant workers, which she started documenting at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu, where she grew up. These makeshift bundles – bound with rope, tarpaulin, and plastic – appeared both universal and deeply personal, sparking associations with family, labor, movement, protection, and the precarity of migratory life. Over the years, Lee catalogued nearly a hundred of these parcels, gradually translating their sculptural logic into her own evolving series of artworks. Using similar utilitarian materials like textiles, tarps, cords, she constructs objects that register compression and containment while also speaking to fragility, resilience, and the emotional weight of displacement. At once intimate and anonymous, the works reflect the tension between what is held together and what threatens to come undone, offering a poetic language for diasporic experience.

Over time, these sculptural forms evolved into large-scale paintings that flatten and abstract the original structures, resulting in works that resemble atlases, blueprints, or encrypted manuscripts. These compositions resist legibility, offering instead a meditative visual language of mirroring, repetition, and coded form. Echoes of alphabets and cartographic grids surface – not to explain or locate, but to invoke a state of continuous translation. In Lee's hands, the map becomes a metaphor for movement rather than destination, for memory rather than measure – inquisitive of how stories are stored, transported, lost, or transformed.

The exhibition's title, *Nearing*, speaks to a kind of suspended arrival – a gentle trajectory toward something sensed but not yet reached. In the context of divination, where the artist encountered the term through the I Ching, *Nearing* suggests an intuitive pull toward a place of inner knowing or belonging – not necessarily a physical home, but a psychic or emotional home. This sentiment resonates throughout the exhibition, where sculptures are dispersed like seeds poised to germinate, and canvases extend beyond the gallery walls, reminiscent of Korean prayer flags that signify new beginnings and communal gathering.

Lee's recent palette, marked by earthen ambers and muted sepias, draws from her surroundings in the American West and introduces a sense of stillness, scale, and grounded introspection. Her works summon an atmospheric quiet, where systems of meaning – linguistic, cultural, material – are dismantled and softly reassembled. Language, in Lee's work, is not written or spoken but embodied: held in texture, gesture, and form.

Nearing is both an endpoint and a beginning. It gathers years of artistic exploration into migration's aesthetic, emotional, and political resonances. Across forms and formats, Lee offers a reimagined archive of diaspora – not as rupture, but as an evolving act of making and remaking, of carrying and letting go.

Maia Ruth Lee (b.1983, Busan, South Korea) received a BFA from Hongik University in Seoul and attended the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver. She has held solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, Colorado; Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, NY; Tina Kim Gallery, NY; François Ghebaly Gallery, LA; and Primary Nottingham, Nottingham, UK. She has participated in numerous group exhibitions including the Aspen Art Museum, Colorado; 2019 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, NY; Fotografiska Museum, NY; Gio Marconi Gallery, Milan and Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich.

Lee was the recipient of the Gold Art Prize in 2021 and the Rema Hort Mann grant in 2017. Her work is held in the public collections at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Syracuse University Art Museum. Maia Ruth Lee is co-represented by François Ghebaly in Los Angeles and Tina Kim Gallery in New York.

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