

LEE BULL

IT'S A LONG WAY UP THE SIDE OF BUKHAN MOUNTAIN TO LEE BULL, the northern outskirts of Seoul. It's not the tallest mountain in the area, but it rises steeply above the city, overlooking the presidential palace at its base. The air is crisp and clear here, and three huskies jump out into the driveway as my car pulls up to a humble two-story house with a concrete brutalist façade. The 44-year-old Lee, best known for her porcelain and silicone monsters, lives here with her husband, James. It seems far from a studio that can accommodate her grand designs and high-tech

ON A MOUNTAINTOP OUTSIDE SEOUL, THE GROUNDBREAKING ARTIST EXPLORES TECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN PERFECTIBILITY.

BY BARBARA POLLACK PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW ROWAT



Yet on the ground floor, in two adjoining rooms that serve as an office, Lee maintains her “think tank,” where she designs, plans and fabricates most of her sci-fi-inspired sculptures. Diminutive yet self-assured, she is the antithesis of a diva, dressed in a sweater and trousers in muted grays, her eyes owl-like behind thick-rimmed glasses that mask her gentle expression. Occasionally, her husband, a Korean American writer and critic, steps in to help with translation. Through it all she maintains a sense of humor, laughing when words fail.

Lee first came to international attention in the late 1990s for her “monsters”: half machine, half Venus de Milo meditations on the female form of the future. She also created “karaoke pods,” gleaming capsules in which visitors could sit and sing written-out lyrics to piped-in music with no audience or outside interference. These early works explored the body, both representing it and using it as a metaphor for the fallibility of technology. Their striking power led to Lee’s being included in major exhibitions worldwide, from “Au-delà du spectacle,” at the Centre Pompidou in 2000, to “Global Feminisms,” at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007.

Although she uses a freestanding shed for larger pieces and rents a warehouse space in downtown Seoul, it’s in the quiet of her mountaintop house that Lee conceives her ideas about the collision of beauty and technology. It’s also here that she, with a handful of assistants, develops

these ideas into material forms that look as if they’d been produced in a special-effects studio.

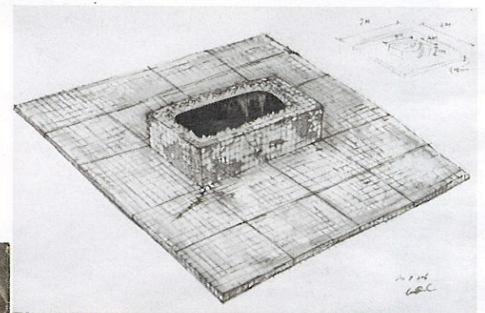
The house offers spectacular views of the city below, a panorama reminiscent of *Blade Runner*, especially at night, when Seoul turns on its neon lights. It is easy to see the influence of this landscape in Lee’s latest series, “Mon grand récit” (“My Great Tale”), begun in 2005 and featured in her show this past winter at the Cartier Foundation in Paris. That exhibition included 12 pieces: six of them combinations of crystals and metal chains on metal armatures that hung like surreal chandeliers, and six resin sculptures stationed on the floor, like mammoth molten rock formations, reflecting the gleaming surfaces of the light-filled Jean Nouvel architecture. These works, simultaneously delicate and imposing, were inspired by the utopian plans of 20th-century visionary artists and architects and were presented as fragile ruins of a long-gone modernity.

When I visited her studio, that exhibition was still on, but Lee was already planning her next New York solo gallery show, which opened May 8 and runs through June 14 at Lehmann Maupin.

It features two works from the Cartier exhibit—*Bunker* (M. Bakhtin), a huge black fiberglass boulder that visitors can enter, and a piece from Lee’s “After Bruno Taut” series, a sort of inverted chandelier with a filigree of chains and crystals—as well as three new sculptures from the “Infinity” series, dioramalike landscapes embedded in mirrored vitrines. Her office had »



From above; tallation in Every New Now, at the Foundation; Gravity in Velocity drawing for and Earth, works in progress studio; After Bruno Taut (Beware of the Future), 2007; and Bunker, 2001.





Lee Bul's studio is awash in projects, including the large untitled piece hanging in the center of the room, from her "After Bruno Taut" series. Opposite: Lee with fiberglass figures from Thaw (Takaki Masao).

THE JDIO

pen-and-ink drawings pinned to its walls and Styrofoam models on every ledge, including a miniature of *Bunker* in foamy blue and an Erector Set version of one of her largest works, *Aubade*, an aluminum structure with LED lights that rose more than 13 feet at the Cartier Foundation.

"I don't know when I started," Lee admits when asked how long it took to prepare for her current shows. Her creative process involves extensive reading and research, blueprints and model making before she even decides to begin on a work. "I start to sketch or just write about my ideas and put them up all over my wall in my studio, and every day I watch this grow into a map of ideas until one day I think, 'Maybe I can make this more concrete and specific,'" she says.

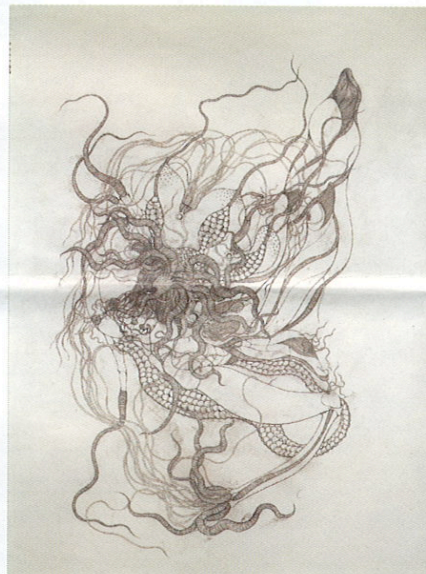
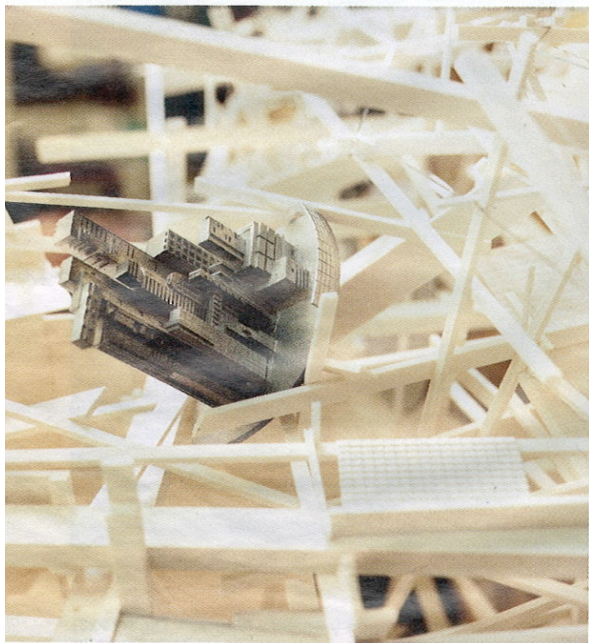
"Mon grand récit" is something of a departure for Lee, comprising otherworldly landscapes based on failed or unrealized 20th-century utopias that she studied. She first took up this idea in 2005, during a residency in New Zealand in which she became fascinated by that country's history and quirky mythology. Since then she has also drawn inspiration from a wide range of modernist projects, including the Russian Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin's unexecuted tower, *Monument to the Third International*, and *Alpine Architektur*, the German architect Bruno Taut's plans,

designed during World War I, for glittering cities in a world at peace.

Lee's projects have always been built on a foundation of theoretical writing. Her bookshelf is lined with English and Korean texts on utopias, notably Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, with its magical accounts of fictional lands. Lee recalls her confusion when she participated once in a panel discussion and an audience member asked how she knew so much about Western culture. She replied, "I never knew this was only yours." Lee now explains it this way: "I grew up studying this field, so I never think about this as 'Western' history or 'Western' culture."

Lee is mainly self-taught in these matters, having gotten her only degree, a BFA in sculpture, from the highly conservative Hongik University, in Seoul. She was born in 1964 in a remote village where her dissident parents were hiding from the South Korean military government. The prejudice against her parents influenced both her career choice and her career path: Art school was one of the few options available to a child of dissidents, and her slow acceptance in the Korean art world was partially due to the insecure position of her parents in the country's society.

After graduating from Hongik, in 1987, she circumvented South Korea's »



Clockwise from above: A detail of an untitled sculpture in progress; *Monster Drawings No. 3*, 1998; an installation view of *Monster: Black*, 1998, flanked by two *Cyborgs*, at the Artsonje Center in Seoul; Lee in her idea lab; *Untitled*, 2003, at the National Gallery of Victoria; and *Vanish (Purple White)*, 2001.



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stubbornly conventional art world by creating public performance art, producing fantastic costumes with multiple protruding limbs and wearing them into arenas such as the airport and downtown shopping districts. These controversial works gained her international recognition. In 1997 Barbara London, a curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art, invited her to create a project space there. Lee submitted *Majestic Splendor*, a towering vitrine filled with funeral lilies and sequin-covered dead fish. The walls of the gallery were lined with more fish, perfumed and vacuum-packed in plastic bags. The stench that nonetheless resulted was part of the point of the piece, highlighting our unease with nature's messier side, and the work was removed after only a few days because of complaints from the museum staff.

In 1998, Lee was a finalist for the Guggenheim Museum's prestigious Hugo Boss prize, and a year later she received an honorable mention for *Majestic Splendor* when it was included in Harald Szeemann's "Aperto" exhibition for young artists at the 48th Venice Biennale. She was also one of two artists shown in the Korean pavilion at that Biennale.

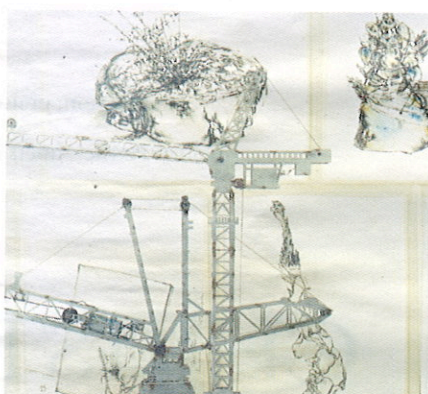
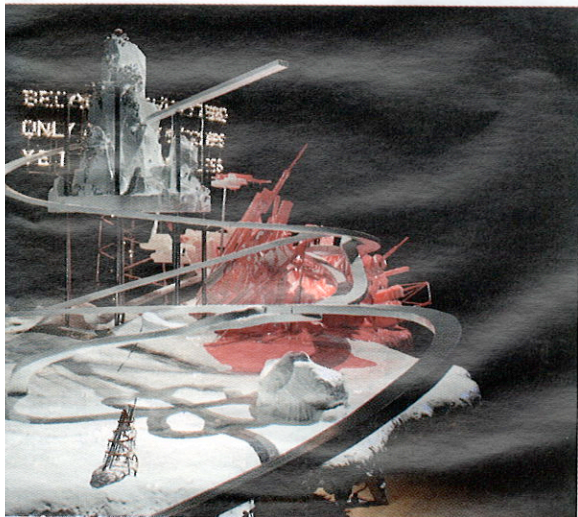
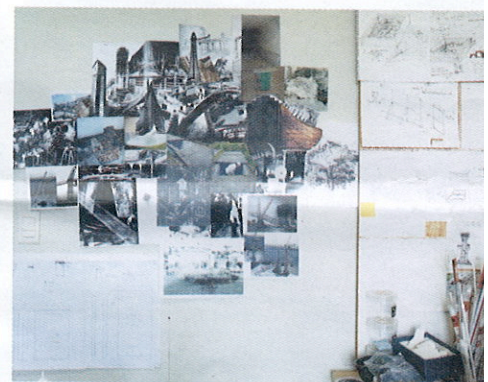
By then, Lee was well-known for pieces such as *Cyborg Red*, 1997, and *Cyborg Blue*, 1997, silicone casts of archetypal female figures from classical art reconstructed with machinelike parts. These sculptures were often interpreted as feminist critiques of face and body enhancements. "Once

they started to call my work these things, nobody tried to look at it another way," Lee says. With her karaoke pods, featured at Venice and in her 2002 solo show at the New Museum, the public came to understand that her artistic concerns are more universal, including how everyone interacts with technology.

For Lee, the overriding theme that connects these earlier works with her more recent landscapes is the issue of perfectibility: the human craving to create or pursue an ideal that often fails or, worse, produces monstrous results—cosmetic surgery, industrialization or fascist governments. "My work has always been a representation of a desire to transcend limitations," she explains. "So the transition has been to move from the body to the broader idea of social structures."

When asked if her concept of unsuccessful utopias is rooted in the recent history of South Korea or, (continued on page 182)

+ WEB EXCLUSIVE See artandauction.com for unpublished images from our shoot of Lee's studio and her works.



se from above: on grand récit: e everything... 05; a hands-on ork; a preparatory collage for a rat work about atic architecture"; a detail of vation, 2007; 7, 2008, hanging in the studio; rious works in ress, including for Mon grand it: Europe 07.

ed from page 107) case law on the legality of deaccessioning to generating funds, and courts have generally approved such transactions if in the “public interest.”

Moreover, there are many examples of museums selling works to fund themselves—invariably to the dismay of the larger museum community, which sees the works as held in trust for the public. Consider Virginia’s Randolph-Macon College, which last November sought to reduce a large operating deficit by selling at Christie’s four pictures from its Maier Museum of Art, including the important George Bellows painting, *Men of the Docks*, estimated at \$10 million to \$15 million. A local group succeeded in temporarily blocking the sale by contending, among other things, that it was unethical and violated the college’s policy. The plaintiffs eventually withdrew the case because they couldn’t post the \$1 million bond required to keep the injunction in place. And since the college, unlike Fisk, is not legally restricted from disposing of works, it may decide to proceed with the sale.

“There’s no ethical restriction on using sale proceeds to *conserve* works of art collection, right?” Joel asked us, sotto voce.

My response: This is a gray area, since some professional codes, such as those of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), seem to permit it. But I learned that the AAM and the AAMD strongly criticized Vermont’s Shelburne Museum for its 1996 sale of sculptures and pastels by Degas and Manet at Christie’s and its use of the \$3.2 million in proceeds for conservation and education. Similarly, the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University was lambasted for auctioning at Christie’s 11 paintings by artists such as Renoir, Paul Gauguin, Lautrec and Vuillard and using the \$3.65 million in proceeds in part for conservation and to advance the museum’s “educational role.” Critics argued that the Rose had set a terrible precedent by converting a portion of its collection into cash—“selling one of your children to feed the others,” according to the director of another museum.

The next conference speaker noted that some institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, will sell major works only through auction. “Does that mean American museums are required to sell through auction?” Renée asked nervously before being shushed by the crone sitting behind us—who gave Thomas’s chair a hard kick for emphasis.

As it turns out, the Met’s was a special case. It voluntarily agreed to sell major works only after a New York state attorney general investigation into its controversial 1973 decision to quietly deaccession paintings that had been purchased by the philanthropist Adelaide Milton de Groot. The Met needed the money to purchase Velázquez’s famous 1650 *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*. In her will, de Groot had inserted a “wish”—which the Met argued was nonbinding: if the museum disposed of any of her works, it would give them to the Metropolitan Museum. Although the attorney general did not pursue legal action, the Met did change its policy by making deaccessioning more transparent.

The day’s final speaker suggested that deaccessioning is much less common in Europe because museums there, unlike in America, tend to be state funded and therefore regard their holdings as inalienable public property. But we told Renée that times are changing, at least in the U.K. Just in February the Museums Association, whose 1,500 members include museums and galleries in the U.K., reversed its 30-year ban on deaccessioning and announced that institutions should make themselves more flexible by disposing of works. The change was partly prompted by the efforts of the National Gallery, in Surrey, to maintain itself by auctioning two important Victorian paintings at Christie’s London this month: Albert Joseph Dubouché’s *Jasmine*, estimated at £600,000 to £800,000 (\$1.2–1.6 million), and Coley Burne-Jones’s *The Triumph of Love*, estimated to bring £600,000 (\$799,000–\$1.2 million).

“In that case, I’m catching the next flight to London,” Renée said, climbing into the plane. “There’s a museum in Sussex with some darling decanters.”

Despite the many interruptions, we did learn at least one important thing at the conference: No matter where you stand on deaccessioning, it’s not an easy job. ☐

(continued from page 72) more pointedly, the model of Communist North Korea only 35 miles away, Lee responds that although Korean history may appear to be different from the West’s in its details, the challenges of globalization and technology are essentially the same everywhere. But one piece in the Cartier Foundation show, *Heaven and Earth*, does refer specifically to the famous volcanic lake at Mount Beakdu, on the North Korean–Chinese border, a site South Koreans are not allowed to visit. Lee presents it as a gleaming bathtub ringed by mountain peaks and filled with a noxious black fluid that gives off a foul smell.

“Lee Bul’s work is like a dream being transformed from one reality into something else. We don’t know whether it belongs to a world of today or a world of tomorrow,” says the artist’s American dealer, Rachel Lehmann, of Lehmann Maupin (Lee is represented by Thaddeus Ropac in Paris and PKM Gallery in Seoul). Despite the fact that, according to Lehmann, there is a long waiting list for Lee’s pieces, prices remain fairly reasonable for an artist of her stature, from \$20,000 to \$90,000 for works in her current solo show. “Collectors connect emotionally with this work,” says the dealer. “They see an individual language, they see an original beauty, but they also see the quality of the craftsmanship, and they are moved.”

Lee’s manual methods might be surprising, given the high-tech gloss of so much of her art. Her female cyborgs look as if they were produced with CAD software, which generates three-dimensional forms. But there is no computer in her office. Instead, Lee works out most of the shapes by hand before sending the molds to a fabricator to produce the synthetic limbs in silicone or porcelain. Her approach to the utopian landscapes is even more hands-on. For the monumental inverted chandelier of *After Bruno Taut*, she and five assistants assembled the complex metal frame and then applied thousands of lengths of chain and crystals. Only the most daunting works, such as the life-size resin *Bunker*, are made outside the studio.

The detailed handiwork is most evident in the pieces of “Mon grand récit,” such as *Sternbau No. 5*: a small mobile draped with hundreds of tiny chains and ropes of crystals that was featured in the Lehmann Maupin booth at New York’s Armo Show in March. In Lee’s studio there’s a small worktable where spools of chain are arranged by size and hue. Another artist might outsource such labor-intensive production, but Lee finds that she must supervise every step of a work’s evolution and is unsatisfied with results reached in a more routine fashion.

For her, scientific and philosophical inquiry must be joined to painstaking techniques in a way that harks back to some of art’s greatest achievements. “I remember when I was six or seven years old,” she says, “I read a book about Leonardo da Vinci, and I thought that to be an artist would be like that, to challenge everything and make it look great.” ☐

The Reporter: Sonnabend

(continued from page 37) In the end, the auction house and the dealers split the property.

Others in the art world share Gagosian’s and Zwirner’s enthusiasm. “It is nice to know the market can be bigger than the duopoly of Christie’s and Sotheby’s,” says Mary Hoeveler, the former managing director of Citigroup’s Art Advisory Service, in New York. “There are other ways to go.”

Still the Sonnabend coup left out many significant players, including the paper magnate Peter Brant. The Greenwich, Connecticut, collector made some of his first purchases in the 1960s from Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, in Paris, including a Warhol “Disaster” painting for which he paid \$35,000 in 1969. “I was not given the opportunity to buy anything,” laments Brant, “but you have to give credit to the dealers who put it together and to the collectors who made up part of the group.”

The auction houses, of course, don’t see it quite that way. As one high-ranking specialist puts it, “The number of disappointed people who have spoken to us about not having the opportunity to buy is an indication of what would have happened if you had gotten the billionaire titans bidding against each other.”

George Sutton, a stock market analyst with the Minneapolis-based firm Craig Hallum Capital who tracks Sotheby’s shares, sees wider consequences. “Anytime a private sale happens, it’s a concern” for the investment community, he says. “It’s a surprise and a disappointment for the auction market—and a bit of a revenge for dealers.” ☐