



MATERIAL AGONY

Domestic, mobile, and anthropomorphic, rooted in the domain of hybrid combination rather than sublimation, Haegue Yang's sculptures reveal the inner beauty and significance of materials—both of which don't really need to be put on a pedestal.

interview by YASMIL RAYMOND

Series of Vulnerable Arrangements – Voice and wind, 2009
Installation view, New Museum, New York, 2010
Photo: Benoit Pailley
Courtesy: Kukje Gallery, Seoul



5, Rue Saint-Benoît, 2008
Installation view, Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow, 2010
Photo: Roman Syslov
Dohmen Collection, Aachen

YOUR PREFERENCE FOR UTENSILS AND ORDINARY EVERYDAY OBJECTS, WHICH CARRY A SENSE OF FAMILIARITY AND RECOGNITION, PROVIDES AN ENTRY POINT TO YOUR WORK. YOUR DELIBERATE ALTERATIONS OF THESE READY-MADES, HOWEVER, TRANSFORM THE OBJECTS INTO AWKWARD AND UNCANNY FORMS WHICH ARE OFTEN INFUSED WITH ABJECTNESS. HOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND THIS DUALITY IN YOUR WORK?

Frankly speaking, I don't regard the combinations of different materials as a "duality" because I work in the domain of joints, arrangements, combinations, shifts, and juxtapositions of materials, narratives, and figures. What is more interesting to me is how much the materials remain what they are: abject, poor, and not necessarily sublime—and yet they color the air around them with significance. I don't want to make the objects and things I use more beautiful than they really are. As a sculptor, I feel like a servant who must present the things around us in the most abject and yet dignified way. Familiarity is often nothing but a trap that our thinking is caught in; I start works when my mind has woken up to a mysterious moment of enlightenment.

For instance, when I saw the sign for "air and water" at a gas station, I suddenly focused on the loose joint of these two words and the context that enables them to function in daily life. In everyday life, the main function of the gas station is the distribution of petrol, so "air and water" only mean the little things you could do additionally, something very marginal and not primary at all. For some reason, these two words seem so pure, even profound, and unconnected to the specific and concrete organization of life. These two words stand on the sign like a messenger, as if to remind me of all the profound marginalized elements. Of course, that momentary experience was only significant on account of the close, daily connection

to the gas station. So, in a way, the duality of context and purity are interdependent, and this creates significance for me. In most cases, both thinking and making are firmly based in reality; but there is a gap, or even a crack that can cause that duality to disappear, leaving behind something else.

THE ABSENCE OF BASES SEEMS TO BE A CONSCIOUS DECISION IN YOUR WORK. YOUR FORMS SEEM TO REJECT THE NOTION OF A "BASE" BOTH LITERALLY AND CONCEPTUALLY; YOUR WORK APPEARS TO BE IN A PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION, MUTATING INTO NEW CONFIGURATIONS. CAN YOU COMMENT ON YOUR AVOIDANCE OF THE PLINTH AND PREFERENCE FOR MOVABLE STRUCTURES, AND HOW YOU RAISE THE MATERIALS FROM THE GROUND?

It's a new question to me. I haven't been asked by others—I haven't even asked myself—about the physical features of the light sculptures made with racks, self-supporting structures on casters, independent of any other platform or plinth. In the beginning, I was using IV stands, which are designed to move around easily with the patient. The simple structure of an IV stand, with its hooks to hold something, was all I needed. As you could see in the first light sculpture at *Sadong 30*, all I was focusing on was the delicate and rather fragile feature of the stand.

In 2007, I used the clothing rack instead of IV stand because I wished to get more "flesh" than skeleton. I was interested in a chunky and bulky appearance, implying more capacity for expression, something more generous—as if Buddha went through an extreme fast, and afterwards got big, without any guilt. The quality of mobility is crucial to me: it animates the sculpture and puts the process of "unfolding" into action. Lifted by casters, the sculptures are ready to depart, without showing any traceable change of loca-

tion. Movement is a constant and dynamic process of losing balance and regaining it. I guess that, in some sense, all of my sculptures are struggling to lift themselves, to unfold their own movements. *Warrior Believer Lover* (2011) best demonstrates the charged-ness of movement. With Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* playing three times a day, the sculptures seem to vibrate, to express their fundamental immobility—as well as virtual mobility—in a most restrained and charged way. Here, I finally saw more than “lifting”: each object seemed to rotate, jump, and even respond to the sound of the music. The domesticity of the sculptures is mostly articulated by the materials and their hybrid narratives. But they also build another type of domesticity, which is the true location of them as a being.

For me, most of domesticity contains this type of invisible movement, a minimal vibration—so minimal that, like an atomic vibration, we can't see it. My idea of domesticity may be very idiosyncratic. To me, domesticity feels like a ghost, because it's a location defined by inner desire, yet unspoken and containing an inner space, an interior-life. We will never govern this interior space thoroughly; it requires each of us to be cultivated and managed, which means that domesticity leads to the notion of life management, “*sallim*” in Korean. This led me to make a life-sized sculpture of my kitchen in Berliner flat-studio, called *Sallim* (2009), also on casters.

THERE IS A MATERIAL AGONY IN THE SERIES OF VULNERABLE ARRANGEMENTS, WHICH DIFFERENTIATES IT FROM THE EXCHANGE BETWEEN PERCEPTION AND OPACITY IN YOUR LARGE-SCALE ENVIRONMENTS, WHICH USE VENETIAN BLINDS TO DELINEATE BOUNDARIES WITHIN THE SPACE. I SENSE AN INTENTIONAL CONFLICT BETWEEN MATERIALS IN THE WAY YOU USE ONE OBJECT TO IMPLICATE OTHER OBJECTS, AND IN THE WAY THEY OCCUPY EACH OTHER'S SPACE. HOW DOES THIS CONFRONTATION MANIFEST ITSELF IN YOUR THINKING?

“Material agony”—I like how you named my incorporation of different materials on clothing racks. I started to collect materials wherever I went. It was a process somewhat similar to how I collected the footage for the first and second video essays of *Trilogy* (*Unfolding Places* and *Restrained Courage*, both 2004). I was travelling frequently for shows and I just shot with a tiny camera that fit in my pocket whenever I encountered something to capture. I often work with this principal of waiting for accidental corresponding moments, which I diligently try not to generate by myself. My “material agony” is also peaceful—except for the fact that I always carry quite a bit of luggage. The whole process of collecting is effortless and casual, rather than rigidly structured.

My work using venetian blinds is different. I use color swatches and often feel frustrated with my choices—even if I am not so ambitious in terms of color, since it is an industrial product and the choices are limited. So I am rather passive aggressive in my way of dealing with the color and materiality of the aluminum surface. Now, going back to your questions about the conflict between the venetian blinds and the space they are hanging in: without the boundaries and articulations provided by the blinds, the space cannot unfold a narrative, and remains without any distinctive integrity. The blinds cannot really fully occupy a space without our gaze navigating through them. They are very ghost-like objects to mobilize in a physical space. They are like criminals, swindlers, shamans... They're there, yet ordinarily unrecognized; they are rather hidden, or imprisoned, willingly or unwillingly. The more I work with venetian blinds, the more I project all kinds of possible interpretations onto them. Right now, I'm so deeply absorbed in a relationship



From top:
Non-Indépliable, jaune, 2010
Non-Indépliable, la tour bleue, 2010
 Photos: Nick Ash
 Courtesy: Galerie Wien Lukatsch, Berlin

MONO: HAEGUE YANG

with this material that the meanings are almost automatically multiplied. However, there are ways to explain why the semi-transparency of this material intrigues us in terms of our perception. One way is to focus on how they are dangling from the ceiling and floating in the space, which is very confrontational and comforting at the same time. They block our sight, but at the same time, they let our sight rest on their surfaces, when otherwise it might have wandered restlessly in an empty space. Also, the sense of body is ambivalent, in that as we walk through the blinds, we feel protected and blocked at the same time. In some sense, I see every painting as “visual blockage,” because our sight is captured by the surface of a painting and yet yearns for that particular blockage to be challenged. Sight soon escapes from it and freely wanders, searching for either emptiness or another blockage.

*Light House (Osram): Foxed
in the Forest, 2008*
Photo: Haegue Yang
Courtesy: the artist



AUTHOR

YASMIL RAYMOND is curator at Dia Art Foundation, New York. More recently, she was associate curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (2004-2009) where she organized exhibitions of works by Tomás Saraceno (2009), Tino Sehgal (2007) and Kara Walker (2007, with Philippe Vergne). She has written articles and essays on Mircea Cantor, Inigo Mangano-Ovalle, Todd Norsten, Kiki Smith, Kara Walker, and Haegue Yang.



JUST AS THERE ARE DOMESTIC REFERENCES IN YOUR WORK, THERE IS ALSO A SENSE OF HUMAN SCALE IN THE PROPORTIONS OF YOUR FORMS, WHICH ARE NEVER MONUMENTAL: I WONDER IF THIS DIFFERENTIATION PLAYS A ROLE IN THE WAY YOU THINK OF SPACE.

In most light sculptures, the anthropomorphic aspect is unmistakable. It is based in the fact that light sculptures are one of the few studio works I do, which means that I cannot really exaggerate their scale, studio space being so limited. My working space—which used to be a flat, rather than workshop or factory—doesn't allow them to get much bigger. I somehow have grown into this domestic working space, so that I obey the rules it imposes on me.

Now I have a slightly bigger studio space, and yet I still live and work in the same space. As a studio, it feels intimate; as a flat, it feels rather anonymous, less cozy. I have become more conscious that this way of working at home, like a "bedroom producer," influences me consciously and unconsciously. The light sculptures became anthropomorphic not only because of the scale but also because of the relationship that developed within my studio-flat situation. I see them and live with them. The other types of works, which I usually produce by ordering parts I assemble on site, are not anthropomorphic.

But I am not saying that they are intimate to me. Having a relationship with something in a living space is full of agony: my emotions jump from pleasure and comfort to hatred and contempt. The main thing about this intense relationship is that it does not let me rest. My home-work space is conflictual, rather than peaceful, even if I do often feel a routine quietness, similar to peace.

HOW DO YOU RELATE TO THE GENERATION OF ARTISTS THAT PRECEDED YOU? I AM MAINLY THINKING OF THOSE WORKING WITH A SIMILAR APPROACH TOWARDS MATERIAL SPECIFICITY. YOUR WORK PRESENTS A REMARKABLE SYNTHESIS OF REFERENCES WHEN IT COMES TO PHILOSOPHY, POLITICAL THEORY, AND CINEMA, BUT I HAVE FREQUENTLY WONDERED WHO PROVOKED YOU EARLY ON.

When I came to Germany in 1994, to study at the Stedelschule, I started to study senior artists and their works while working on acquiring the language. It was a tremendous task to learn about German artists like Georg Herold, with whom I studied; it required so much cultural understanding, ranging from history, politics, society, and lifestyle, to questions about attitude and modes in everyday life. I think this process was very enriching, because I was in such a poor situation to understand much, yet so comfortable with not competing with anyone. Each artist seems to be an open vocabulary, which was once unknown. Artistic eloquence is rooted in sophistication of humor, sarcasm, etc.

I feel very indebted both to conceptual and socio-political work. I believe that the only courage I can achieve originates in this very modest and honest acknowledgement. I presented my work, *A Series of Vulnerable Arrangements – Domesticity of Community* (2009) at the Carnegie Museum of Art alongside several early video pieces by Martha Rosler. When museums decided to start acquiring my work, I wished to present my work in a manner different from its precious presentation in the Arsenale at the Venice Biennale. This proposal was based on my curiosity about my work's modest existence next to those legendary works, works that "speak"! ♦