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Lee Bul: Phantasmic Morphologies

Michael Amy

Who we are is determined to a considerable extent by what we are. The *what* includes our origins in time and place, gender, race, social status, sexual orientation, education, and political and religious convictions. Once we have this information, we believe that we know enough about a person to be able to classify and judge him or her. We have a tendency to embrace stereotypical thinking

The South Korean artist Lee Bul moves away from what we know - or what we think we know. Her work examines how the mind functions by exploring some of its dreams, ideals, and utopias. Interviews with Lee over the years have shown her to be a highly sophisticated and articulate thinker, with a wide range of interests in the history of ideas. The cultures of both East and West, and science and technology. Her work argues that everything is in a state of flux, that many of the notions we accept as laws are often the product of bias and can-therefore-be corrected, and that the imagination constitutes an all-conquering power. Surrealism is an important source for Lee's ideas and images. She understands imagination's ties to cognition and knows from firsthand experience how it can free one from physical and ideological bonds, thus becoming of critical importance to survival.

Lee was born in 1964 in a remote village in South Korea during the military dictatorship of Park Chung-Hee. Her political dissident parents were almost constantly on the move, which she says, "taught me certain strategies of survival. I learned that you can remain elusive, iconoclastic, alert to the fissures that you can penetrate in order to destabilize a rigid, oppressive system." Artistic expression was among the few possibilities open to the children of dissidents, and so Lee studied sculpture at Hongik University in Seoul. There, she was exposed to the dominant trends of realism in figurative art and Minimalism in the area of abstraction, which seemed interchangeable to her since they were both driven by rock-solid conventions that allowed no breathing space. Not only was Lee dissatisfied with these visual languages - which, in her view, cut off all possibility to move in new directions - but she was also disenchanted with the materials in which the forms were enunciated, namely stone and steel, with their connotations of immutability. She consequently began working with fabric, foam rubber, and sequins: "This ultimately freed me up to experiment with organic and sometimes phantasmic forms, imaginary morphologies emerging from my private perceptions and experiences and perhaps memories and dreams."

The performance *Sorry for suffering-You think I'm a puppy on a picnic?*, carried out over the course of 12 consecutive days in 1990, constituted a breakthrough for Lee and a break from standard practices in South Korean contemporary art. During this performance, Lee wandered about public spaces in Seoul and Tokyo, dressed in a costume that covered her body almost entirely, leaving only her head and hair exposed to view. Although she appeared in the guise of a biped governed by a firm vertical axis, swellings and protrusions in different areas of the "body" and the

pigmentation of the whole suggested a creature subjected to a metamorphosis gone hopelessly awry. The enormous bulge in front of the lower torso - with its three long protrusions dangling like helpless legs-signaled a second body growing out of the larger one, while the horrific swellings around the legs intimated disease. The large wing-like formations on the lower back resembled the claws of a crab, a reading reinforced by the red and white hues of the outfit (decorated with sequins in places), which recalled not only crustaceans after boiling, but also flayed bodies, prefiguring the Chinese artist Zhang Huan's muscle suit built up from slabs of meat (the latter was worn during the My New York performance, in New York City, in 2002). Lee says, "The 'monstrous' aspect of my work is about exceeding the prescribed boundaries, touching upon our fear and fascination with the uncategorizable, the uncanny:"

Here, Lee explored otherness-a subject she knew all too well as the daughter of dissidents living in a world in which surface appearances count for so much, she wanted to see what happened when the outer shell was grotesque through and through. "In the beginning, everyone in Korea dismissed these works as something that wasn't art. Then later, when discourses of gender and the body became fashionable, they were eager to place my work into those convenient categories. But I'm not sure this was helpful, either, because these categories soon became orthodoxies in their own way, placing limits on how a work should be 'read' and even what should be produced." This work led to the biomorphic abstractions *Sargasso*, *Monster: Pink*, and *Monster: Block*. These three sculptures (all from 1998) are filled with life - elongated and bulbous root-like forms fraught with erotic connotations that recall the hand-sewn phallic shapes jutting forth from shoes and chairs in Yayoi Kusama's sculptures of the early '60s.

Lee's lovely pen and India ink drawings on semi-translucent paper of the same year (1998) are as crisp as the drawings and prints of Schongauer and Bellmer, and as bizarre and sexual as the work of the latter master. Teetering between organic abstraction and figuration, they led to very different monsters - *Amaryllis* (1999) and *Siren*, *Supernova*, and *Chrysalis* (2000). The *amaryllis* is a flower, and the *chrysalis* is the pupal stage in those insects that undergo a complete metamorphosis. In Greek mythology, the sirens are the part-woman, part-bird creatures that lure passing sailors with seductive song and cause them to wreck their ships. Made of hand-cut polyurethane panels mounted on aluminum armatures and covered in immaculate white enamel, these suspended sculptures are designed to float freely in space. They achieve the likeness of something akin to an asymmetrical hybrid of plant and animal life, such as one could imagine floating in water, flying through the air, or cruising across the galaxies. The movie *Alien* (1979) comes to mind in the presence of these striking works, which have an aura all their own with their frightening combinations of biological and machine-like forms.

Monsters are dramatic deflections from the norm and almost exact opposites of the ideal. The sleep of reason, as Lee well knows, produces monsters. She lives in the southern part of a country that constituted the first major battlefield of the Cold War with its division in 1948 (16 years before she was born). She also knows that her monsters bridge time and place, reaching from popular fiction back to prehistoric times across both Eastern and Western traditions in order to explore antithesis. This desire to forge cultural links is particularly striking in an artist who lives in a nation technically still at war with its northern counterpart.

Lee explores both overtly physical and ideological systems of power. Her monsters clearly are not meek. *I Need You (Monument)* (1996), which consists of a huge phallic balloon with a marked entasis just beneath its center, roughly echoes the silhouette of the artist who is reproduced standing in a combination of fancifully titillating lingerie and traditional long outer garment and headdress. The colossal image deals with the cult of personality, a subject of particular pertinence to the north of the demilitarized zone, but also relevant to society and culture at large. Since prehistoric times, colossi have been used to underscore the power of the ruler, the deity, or the mythic creature. Unlike those precedents, which are made of stone, ivory, or metal to withstand the test of time, Lee's sculpture is soft and vulnerable, subject to disappearance by the mere prick of a pin. It is, in a sense, a monument full of hot air apparently kept inflated by a network of tubing and foot pumps. People were invited to stand around the base and pump away, in an act reminiscent of the nine vigorously pedaling male molds in the bottom half of Duchamp's *Large Glass*, who contemplate and lust for the unattainable bride floating above them. Here, the young, desirable, and voluptuous Asian woman stands superimposed on top of a grotesque phallic shape, ready to fulfill our fantasies-or perhaps not. Large, wide-eyed, baby-doll heads cover her breasts and lower abdomen, like sacrificial victims or bodies inhabiting and emerging from her own. In the preparatory photographs for *Hydra (Monument)* (1998), Lee appears in full accoutrement, assuming ritualistic crouching and seated poses. In Greek mythology, the Lernaean Hydra, a dragon-like creature with seven heads and poisonous breath, grew two new heads for each one that was lopped off. Being from a country that opens itself to Western incursions in an effort to contain the threat across the border, Lee aptly examines the exotic, oriental ideal as she believes it to be construed by the Western male - his initial desire to be seduced quickly replaced by the urge to conquer and possess. *Hydra II* (1999) suggests that this unequal meeting of East and West is fraught with peril. In fact, the title sounds like the name of a very special bomb. The colossal pink vinyl form - bearing the image of the artist at its center, sitting in front of a bright white foil symbolizing a burst of light-could be read as a creative take on the mushroom cloud (with numerous pointed phallic protrusions since war is a mostly male activity). The use of nuclear weapons was briefly considered during the Korean War, an act that could have launched a Third World War. As far as the phallic symbols are concerned, it is worth noting that totalitarian power in the two Koreas of Lee's youth was in the hands of so-called strongmen.

Lee is fascinated by certain chapters in early 20th-century Modernism, particularly those informed by the machine aesthetic, which she explores in her "Cyborg" series (1997-2000). Here, the human form and machine components are merged together, and Lee draws on two ideals in order to give shape to a third. The perfect forms and attenuated proportions of the body parts, which are exclusively female, have their source in ancient Greek sculpture. As is well-known, Greek culture-which was introduced into Asia in the wake of Alexander-lies at the root of Western civilization. The former constitutes a legacy that Lee cites to adduce the latter. However, the sexually charged, highly idealized female forms of her cyborgs also draw from Japanese manga and the world of fashion. Machines, such an integral part of the Industrial Revolution, stand in for Modernism and cool efficiency, offering an interesting take on the Greek sculptural tradition with their perfect, exclusively functional forms and their polished surfaces smoother than marble-the material elliptically evoked by the white-painted cyborgs: "One can't help but desire, and

desire to make, art that is sensuous, that isn't obsessed with justifying its own existence: 'Machines are designed to do what we are unwilling or unable to do, repeating it over and over again, flawlessly and without thinking. Significantly, outside of the religious sphere, women had limited rights in ancient Greece; and in manga and fashion, women are often objectified. Coupled to machine parts in the cyborgs, they achieve new powers and a different status-the third ideal-because cybernetic organisms contain both biological and electronic or mechanical parts, enabling them to overcome the body's physical and mental limitations.

However, pathos still obtains: like so many Greek sculptures, Lee's cyborgs come in fragmentary condition, thereby introducing imperfection into the paradigm of perfection. Here again, we have the intriguing dialectic of oppositions that Lee engineers so well. Since these incomplete cyborgs are suspended from the ceiling in spatial isolation-in other words, not arranged to enact a clear narrative - it is difficult to determine whether they are to be understood as beings in the process of being built, whether parts have gone missing and the figures are shown in their altered state (which seems otherwise perfect, devoid of dents or scratches), or whether the figures are, in fact, complete, with their asymmetrical bodies underscoring their post-human status.

Lee's work deals with the multi-layered meanings of the human body by examining the extremes that lie beyond it, namely the monster and the cyborg. She knows that while bodies exude powerful symbolism, they can also make us terribly vulnerable. In that sense, the bodies that we inhabit keep us captive. Interestingly, Lee's study of the body has led her to explore inhabited spaces as well, including pods and architecture. She says that her "work has always been a representation of a desire to transcend limitations. So the transition has been to move from the body to the broader idea of social structures. Her karaoke pods (2001) explore the dark side of technology and popular culture and their increasingly domineering role in our lives. Visitors enter and sing the written lyrics to the music, in singular isolation, as if embedded in a womb, cocoon, flying spacecraft, or submarine that renders them oblivious to the world outside-another frightening utopia.

Her recent sculptural series, shown at Lehmann Maupin Gallery, forms a visionary architecture built up of suspended lines and planes. Even a superficial familiarity with the work of the architect, urban planner, and author Bruno Taut reveals that the work of this German artist constitutes one of Lee's principal sources of inspiration, though she takes her forms to marvelous new heights of expression and fantasy. Rarely have I come across architectural ideas that I so wished to see realized in built form, and rarely have I delighted as much in letting my mind wander through imaginary constructions (created by Lee and her assistants from stainless steel, aluminum, wood, mirror, polyurethane sheet, glass beads, and acrylic mirror).

Since these works were initially untitled, it may be incorrect to view them solely as ideas for imaginary architecture, for the system of lines and planes, the opposing vectors of movement, the play with materials, color, and degrees of transparency or lack thereof-also draw from Vladimir Tatlin and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Lee recently affirmed that she is interested in "the utopian ideas generated by Modernism, especially failed or unrealized utopian ideas...I am reflecting on the process of how these visionaries conceived their ideas; that's why I focus on the failed or unrealized ideas" Though somewhat foreboding with their allusions to spacecraft, these

process-driven works are also about the pleasure of making and about the workings of the mind. Lee has described her working process as establishing a map of ideas "consisting of drawings and handwritten notes strewn across a wall in her studio and informed by her reading and research, which she aims to make "more concrete and specific."

Lee explored landscape in *Mon grand recit* (begun in 2005), which was featured several years ago at the Fondation Cartier in Paris. There, six seemingly liquefying arrangements of crystals and chains suspended from metal frames floated and sparkled in mid-air, as six crystalline resin structures rose from the floor in a system of shards. *Heaven and Earth*, consisting of black ink placed inside a tacky rectangular bathtub and surrounded by a snowy mountain range, referred back to the lake at the top of Mount Baekdu. "It's located in what is today North Korea, so for generations of

Postwar Koreans in the South, it has existed in their minds mostly as an ideal image, almost an abstraction ... [It] functions as a visual synecdoche, calling forth an entire period, its ideals and ideological battles, and the use of water torture to suppress free thought." Significantly, Lee admires Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* and *Last Judgment*: "In these works, I see the individual imagination engaged in a coy dance with the controlling orthodoxies of the day. Am I alone in feeling that there's too much sensuousness in Bosch's endlessly inventive depictions of the progress of sin? His prelapsarian Eden never seems as innocent as it should be, and his hell seems less an antithesis of his paradise than an oblique extension of it."