

MIRE LEE

ZOLLAMT^{MMK}

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Look, I'm a fountain
of filth raving mad
with love

21.05.-04.09.22

Tubes, chains, and wires seem to resemble organic contraptions as they loop, glide, and snake around and into each other. These appliances are stiff or pliable when tension is applied, moving slowly yet fitfully. The water, oil, and grime flowing all around emphasizes the angular rigidity of the metal, while the plastic takes on a blurred appearance.

In a pretechnological sense, Mire Lee's installations recall a utopian horror that we seem to have long since rendered obsolete; they come across as humane in a way that contrasts with the cold, clean, digital technologies of the present day. People are more absent than ever in the face of these digital technologies, which makes the way they function even more brutal and inhuman. While the industrial nightmare seems increasingly to have faded out of sight in the West, it has become ever more ubiquitous in the Southern Hemisphere.

South Korean artist Mire Lee (b. 1988) is the recipient of the PONTOPREIS MMK 2022. In conjunction with the MUSEUM^{MMK} FÜR MODERNE KUNST, the Jürgen Ponto-Stiftung zur Förderung junger Künstler will henceforth award the PONTOPREIS MMK every two years. This augments a partnership that has existed since 2007, with a particular emphasis placed on supporting artists directly. The prize includes a solo exhibition at ZOLLAMT^{MMK} and an accompanying publication, as well as an endowment of 10,000 euros. In 2021, the jury consisted of Daniel Birnbaum (artistic director of Acute Art), Ulrike Groos (director of Kunstmuseum Stuttgart), and Susanne Pfeffer (director of MUSEUM^{MMK} FÜR MODERNE KUNST).

Conversation

Mire Lee / Susanne Pfeffer

SUSANNE PFEFFER Your installation conveys a sense of being in a factory or is reminiscent of an old science fiction film. Interestingly, there are no bodies present at all, but that's precisely what makes them so present.

MIRE LEE I use old construction materials and have an affection for a very worn-out and exhausted look. Concrete mixers, for example, that have been heavily used somewhere and carried tons of concrete, and now the old layers of concrete are part of the body. I love seeing this sort of thing. I really like this object, because it has a large mouth, but at the same time it seems speechless—or maybe not speechless, but it doesn't know how to talk, or it can't. It conveys this feeling of being very far from verbalization or languages. There is a stupidity in its volume—size, shape, and its inner depth—something that causes you to lose words. So maybe you have nothing to say in front of this thing, but I really like that reaction and feel the same way whenever I see heavy machines or industrial machines.

S. P. More massive, in a sense ...

M. L. Yes, exactly! Massiveness, perhaps, that's something I like.

S. P. We always have the sense that these machines are very old. But they are still extremely present and are employed daily at construction sites. When producing something or on construction sites, very little technology is used, the focus is more on physical labor. The idea of something handmade interests you a lot.

M. L. Yes. Because I think there's only so much you can aim at or reach for with better or more technology, because your body as a unit is limited, and so are the things you can do with it. You have ten fingers. Maybe you are no taller than two meters, no shorter than one meter. At the end of the day, there's not much difference physically between the past and now. Technology changes us mentally, but I always feel that there is a moment when you go back to working with your hands or body.

S. P. In the end, there are a lot of things that you can do only with your body and with your hands. Machines and construction sites are sober and impersonal in a sense, but you also show the film of your mother sleeping, and sleep is something very personal. It always feels a little strange to observe people sleeping, because they are at once present and absent. We are extremely vulnerable when we sleep, because our sense perceptions are especially limited. What interested you about filming your mother?

M. L. People immediately become like meat when they fall asleep. I find it endearing, and potentially sad, but also cute, because they are present but not clever anymore.

S. P. People always look innocent when sleeping. I couldn't imagine a sleeping person killing somebody.

M. L. Exactly. And the video of my sleeping mother was used for my solo exhibition called *Carriers* in Seoul in 2020. My mom was my carrier; a carrier as a metaphor, like my sculptures too. They carry my liquid, and then I had these formwork boards similar to the ones we are using at the ZOLLAMT^{MMK}. They are used to build molds for pouring concrete. So, in a sense, they "give birth" to the concrete façades of buildings just like my mother gave a birth to me.

S. P. With regard to the transgressive aspect of your works, there is a violence inherent in machines, as if they were not created *for* the human body but primarily *against* it. This transgression is particularly clear in the video with Veronica Moser. What interests you about it exactly?

M. L. I think it's similar to what I said about the concrete mixer: *Shit* is like the ultimate point that makes you speechless, and you have nothing to say in front of it. As an artist, as a thinker, you can contextualize everything, you can generate discourses about everything. Whereas *shit* is just what it is, and it's something so close to us, which we deal with every day, and it's also a metaphor for when something is bad or when something is just not working.

S. P. But it is also something that affects you directly because it comes from your own body. We all have a distanced relationship to it, which can perhaps also be traced back to its unpleasant odor.

M. L. If there are things charged with negativity, shit is somehow the purest form of that. There is something really absolute about it. I like the quality of it canceling all the other things that are going on. In an everyday sense, it's like: If you have problems with shitting, nothing else matters, you have to shit. It's like: "That's it." And then maybe nothing is important except having to shit. It really, truly brings you down to that level.

S. P. Right. At that moment it is truly existential.

M. L. Yes, on an immediate level. Also, when you are insulting someone, or when you are hating yourself, and when you say something like "shit," it ends the discussion. There is nothing to elaborate on it. The simplicity of it is what interests me.

S. P. If you consider the video about Veronica Moser from a feminist perspective, it is difficult to believe that she really likes to eat shit—or that a man's excrement is spicier and tastes better. I think that because she has been part of the porn industry, her only way of dealing with it is to affirm it.

M. L. Empowering herself, yes!

S. P. But it also feels so brutal.

M. L. That's interesting, because I believe a lot of the empowerment movements around prostitution, or prostitution as a choice, are actually far from reality. It is a really difficult and violent industry. But I believe a very small number of people do enjoy it, because if you are masochistic—masochists get their kicks from different things, and someone's kick can include the violence, the violent quality of the industry as well—then the whole thing is the kick, if that makes sense. I don't know about Veronica Moser, but she seems pretty real to me.

There is always a minority within the minority. Let's say, the prostitutes or the people who are involved in prostitution are a minority as a class, because they *have* to do it, or because their background is such and such, or for whatever reason. And then, inside the scene, you have someone like Veronica Moser. If she is enjoying herself, then that includes the evil quality of the industry—not only the industry but how the whole thing works, and how the world believes it

works. It's not just about her individual morality. If her kick involves all of this, it's somehow a wider perspective. For me, it gives me a broader view, rather than just a criticism of pornography or contentment with female subjectivity or freedom. All these aspects are entangled.

S. P. In recent years, some rather disturbing books about Korean women have been published, such as Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Cho Nam-Joo's *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*. Unfortunately, they describe only too well the situation for women living in patriarchal structures worldwide. But these novels also describe how powerful men still are, especially in Korean society, where there seems to be no place for strong women. In both novels, that situation is described as really harsh, and the only way out is either to go crazy and violent or to get out of the situation. Can you identify with this, and how much has it influenced your work? Violence plays such an important role in your oeuvre.

M. L. I grew up in a patriarchal society, yes. Conflicts are present all the time even when they are repressed. Traumatic experiences from humiliation often come to the surface only later, because you don't realize how bad it is while it's happening. In *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*, humiliation is a collective feeling: not only the individual but the whole society is involved in this. Reading this affects me very deeply, because everybody has had this experience. Maybe your own mother had to embrace patriarchy more, so that hurts more than the events you experience yourself. Humiliation is a strong word, but it's true, because it's something that remains in your body. Even if you are emancipated and educated, it's too late, because it's already implemented. And you can't change anything later. There are many negative elements here, but they are also very interesting. I think conflicts are interesting in their essence because they are always multilayered. That definitely inspires me.

For one side of the walls of the ZOLLAMT^{MMK}, I am using quotations selected from works by the Korean poet Kim Eon Hee. Her oeuvre has been a great source of inspiration for me for years. There's a lot of imagery of excrement and the body in her poems, and she also has a set of poems about motherhood. This is not explicitly addressed in her poems, but a lot of them derive from her personal experience while she was nursing her own mother in her final years. To put Eon Hee's work with the video of my mother

and Veronica Moser somehow made perfect sense to me, and that was something I really wanted to do with this project.

S. P. Something I've noticed in all your works is the sound, usually produced by machines: even though the noises seem almost incidental, they are introduced deliberately. How would you describe the role of these sounds in your oeuvre?

M. L. I really like it when I am dragged down to a different mode of perception, where I look at art or when making art. In the case of my work, the sound has nothing to do with conceptualization. It usually results from what I use. It might keep spectators from interpreting, because sound is something so present and something you can't avoid. I also think it makes you super conscious of your body, being in there. Because you are looking at art, and then you can disappear and forget that you are there, that you are looking at this thing and thinking about this thing.

S. P. So you want the visitors to feel their bodies.

M. L. Yes, I think so. That's nice!

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This booklet is published in
conjunction with the exhibition

Mire Lee

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Mire Lee, *Horizontal Forms*, 2020

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