

Blue Oyster Art Project Space

16 Dowling Street, Dunedin
Tuesday–Friday 11am–5pm,
Saturday 11am–3pm
www.blueoyster.org.nz
admin@blueoyster.org.nz

Designed by Amy Yalland, Index
www.index.org.nz

Specific Objects

Yona Lee

1–26 July 2014

Opening: Tuesday 1 July, 5.30pm

1

Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 181–189.

2

Julia Lomas speaks of the “convenience store as a ‘sordid space’ where mid to low grade objects of dubious quality are arrayed unpleasantly”. See: Julia Lomas ‘Reading Sordid Space: Modern Convenience Stores and Tangential Structures’ in *Tangential Structures*, Yona Lee, (Wellington: Enjoy Public Art Gallery, 2013): 22.

In her exhibition ‘Specific Objects’ Yona Lee employs delicate systems of counterbalancing to create freestanding sculptures that hold themselves up with strategically placed supports. Lee bends chrome-plated steel rods into dynamic formations, placing her attention on the line, weight and balance of the structures to elicit a certain kind of visual tension.

Working from a factory in Onehunga, Auckland that specialises in the manufacturing of sign holders, trolleys and display racks, Lee commandeers the company’s industrial methods of fabrication and commercial language of display for her own ends. She customises her steel sculptures to include hooks, nodules and prongs fitted for the display of particular objects—in this case items that have been excavated from the Blue Oyster.

Lee’s stand alone sculptures in ‘Specific Objects’ mark a departure point from previous installation works seen at Enjoy (2013), Te Tuhi (2012) and the Artspace Mezzanine (2012) where her focus appeared more pointed towards site works utilising the architecture of these spaces. For instance, Lee’s exhibition *Tangential Structures* at Enjoy presented spidery steel forms draped from the gallery’s rafters to pack in and clutter the entire space. Whereas in her installations at Artspace and Te Tuhi, stainless steel rods were installed to fit in tensile forms between the ceilings and floors. The works in ‘Specific Objects’ are instead more singular, poised and autonomous from the spaces that they occupy.

Lee takes her exhibition title ‘Specific Objects’ from Donald Judd’s seminal minimalist text written in 1965, in which he passionately espouses his views on the use and effects of industrial materials in sculpture. In this text Judd wrote:

Formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, Plexiglas, red and common brass, and so forth. They are specific. If they are used directly, they are more specific. Also, they are usually aggressive. There is an objectivity to the obdurate identity of a material...¹

Lee’s evocation of this text traces the shift in ideology around the material object. Here Judd’s notion of the ‘Specific Object’ (one, seemingly of pure form and objective materiality) becomes a counterpoint to contemporary conceptions of the material object as amorphous—as continually constituted by the slow warp of cultural thought. Contemporary thought perhaps also sees the material object as one that can be readily co-opted by the ideological forces of capital. These ideas are drawn out by the way Lee commandeers languages of commercial display in her work (think: magazine racks, sunglass holders, shoe props) in which her sculptural forms becomes complicit with the everyday, kitschy and ‘sordid spaces’ of commerce—the emptied out and streamlined gallery space paralleled to that of the showroom or shopping mall, where what is paramount is the interface; the ease of visual consumption.²

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This logic of ease is, however, twisted by Lee's comical treatment of the commonplace languages of commercial display. The works soaring forms that utilise the industrial materials and sober dialects of minimalism, become absurd display racks for forlorn and forgotten items—support systems for sundry objects from a metal paint roller frame to a wine glass. For instance, the twisting steel form of one sculpture extends out in a grand gesture, glinting chrome plated rods proffering to the viewer; a single worn and blackened workshop glove. In another sculpture, a network of steel tubes are welded together to create a display unit that ensnares a single shoe.³ On the objects she chooses to display in her sculptural forms Lee writes:

I'm interested in the things that are usually hidden, and things that are not a subject matter but rather a supporter... These banal objects or tools are humble in that they don't demand other's attention of their existence. My desire is for these hidden objects to receive the same amount of focus as the work itself and reveal their hidden beauty. Their humble existence is beautiful.

Lee's attention to humble, everyday objects recalls Alexander Calder's work *Bird Cigarette Holder* (1928). Although Calder (1898-1976) is best known for his hanging mobile works, he also made many household items such as this one. Fashioned out of thin wire, Calder's rudimentary cigarette holder in the shape of a bird is a quirky object that borders on the utilitarian and the fanciful. His methodology of working

3

This could be compared to Fiona Connor's empty newspaper racks and magazine stands in *Notes on Half the Page* (2009) shown at Hopkinson Mossman, Hamish Win describes this work as a "melancholic relic of real-world societal change" See: Hamish Win 'Immaterial Transformations' in *un Magazine* 6.2 (2012): 9.

Yona Lee is a Korean born artist who lives and works in Auckland, she gained an MFA from Elam School of Fine Arts in 2010. Inspired by the sculptural languages of minimalism and constructivism, Lee works with sculptural techniques such as welding to create site-specific installations. Recent exhibitions include *Tangential Structures*, Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington (2013), *Line Works*, Artspace, Auckland (2012), *Composition*, Te Tuhi Centre for the Arts, Auckland (2012), *Constrained Organism*, Open Window, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (2011).

Georgina Watson currently resides in Dunedin and works as a freelance curator and writer.

is evident in this piece, in the eloquent twists of wire and the raw ends where it has been dexterously snipped away. Similar to Lee's roving and looping steel forms, this modest work of Calder's demonstrates a joy in the absorbing qualities of making; in the act of drawing in space, following lines of flight and spontaneously emerging forms.

The languages of commercial display: glinting, chrome, welded forms, hooks, stands, cases and nodules are captured by Lee and worked into a dance of lines, weights and balances where arbitrary objects are lifted to attention though specifically tailored angles, elegant gestures and considered lines of sight. There is a melancholic air about Lee's new works, a longing for Judd's 'obdurate' materiality, undone and liquefied in today's era of post-production and immaterial labour, that suggests a radical shift in the ecology of the object.

Georgina Watson