

The Artist as Provocateur For Margaret Lee, art is a catalyst for social change.



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Words by Jessica Adams
Artwork by Margaret Lee

If you read any article about Margaret Lee, you'll quickly learn that she's a triple threat: a successful artist, gallery owner, and long-term assistant to Cindy Sherman, all at the modest age of 38. While this oeuvre is impressive enough, she also recently co-founded Art Against Displacement (AAD), a coalition in Lower Manhattan with a mission to defend the local community against the effects of gentrification and displacement. Just what can't Margaret Lee do?

It turns out there are a few things she can't do: support the patriarchy, be subdued by American politics, or stay quiet when witnessing injustice. Having grown up in the Bronx to South Korean immigrant parents, Lee was quickly entrenched in a medley of cultures and vantage points, lending her a keen eye for political nuances. She later pursued her curiosity of American commodity culture by majoring in history at Barnard College. During her junior year, she happened to take a sculpture class that made her realize her aptitude and passion for creative work, though she didn't begin practicing as an artist until she was in her late 20s.

Despite her unorthodox introduction, Lee seems to have harnessed a fine-tuned understanding of the mechanics of the art

worth of the artist, it's not connected to sales in any way. It's about making things the best condition you can, having the content, and having conversations that are very contemporary and relevant."

Lee is still touted as one of the original heralds of last decade's downtown art boom, though you likely won't see her name on any of the lists of top New York City gallerists, which predominantly feature white, wealthy men—men who are demolishing and re-constructing the spaces that many Chinatown residents call home. This disruption to a neighborhood that she has called home for the past nine years—and its savage impact on her fellow community members—encouraged Lee to take action through AAD. It's also the impetus for her own creative work as a gallerist and artist.

Lee cites Barack Obama's win in the 2008 presidential election as the catalyst for her gallery and studio practice: "There was a sense of optimism," she reflects. "For a lot of us, it was a time to be joyful and share. I was representing artists who were marginalized or ignored because they weren't white, or they weren't straight, or they were not this or that. I thought I was doing that work in the sense of helping artists who were not willing to go in debt to get an MFA. How



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world. She met other artists like it was second nature; or, as she put it, "communities magically formed." Given our conversation, I have the feeling that Lee is not so much magical as she is hardworking and ebullient: a woman with a passion for the world who draws in eager participants to her free-wheeling energy and prowess for positive change. Lee is the kind of person who casually inherits an unused storefront in Chinatown and makes it the backdrop to an after-hours, free-for-all party space for her fellow local artist community. It was here—with the noise, the 3 a.m. partiers, the illegal cash bar, the cops showing up on the street—that Lee had a realization: This space would be so much better, and more secure, as a gallery.

This was during the late-aughts recession, so Lee realized she was essentially the only person in Chinatown doing pop-up shows, given the crashing market. "If I'd done this a few years ago," she muses, "I'm not sure it would have been received as well." Her first space, 179 Canal, opened in 2009 and thrived for a year, until Lee decided to move the operation a few blocks east, to 47 Canal—which, following precedent, lent the new gallery its name. Despite the art market's financial woes at this time, they continued to show work despite not making sales, "which is actually really fun," Lee says. "You learn how to do it for the love of it. Your self-worth is the

do we get people opportunities? Those are the things I've always thought about in the art world, and now that I've done that for eight years, I can take those skills and conversations and apply them to a much larger, and sometimes more pressing, conversation."

47 Canal exhibits an array of artists, who are mostly young, and almost always working in less traditional media, such as installation and video. Lee explains that she looks for like-minded artists who are also fighting to have their voices validated in a society that might not value them, adding that the power structure of the art market often ignores these types of voices, or otherwise employs them solely to validate some sort of metrics of diversity and inclusion. Lee also emphasizes the importance of showing artists based on the content and strength of their work—not the saleability thereof. "We don't know how to sell paintings," she says, laughing. "Generally the way the market works, galleries make their money off of wall work—paintings first, and maybe photography. Sculpture is kind of like the cherry on top." For Lee, selling the artwork is almost a moot point; the work should be seen regardless of its value to a collector. And when she finds an artist she likes, she is quick to support them and offer them a show. "I listen to these voices," Lee says, "and when I find them, sometimes people get shows in three months and I'm



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like, 'Alright, are you ready?'"

Lee's own art practice is an amalgam of her work as a gallerist and activist: forthrightly political, unapologetic, and very much open to new perspectives and opinions. While she works mostly in sculpture, her materials vary radically: her 2016 exhibition at Jack Hanley in New York, *It's not that I'm not taking (this) seriously*, included paint cans, brushes, a ladder, a hose, power cords, running water, concrete, beaver felt, polished stainless steel, MDF, pine, casters, plaster, acrylic paint, and rope—which together make up three pieces in sum. *Fountain (this is how it goes) #1* seems to be the leftovers of a construction scene, though the composition is quite considered; the water runs through a hose and into a paint can in a nearly Rube Goldberg fashion. *10 Gallon Hat (and the hole) #1* mostly appears as such: a comically oversized cartoonish blue felt hat with a stainless-steel hollow tube piercing the middle. And lastly, *12 Bananas (strung up) #1* is a pseudo-readymade gallery piece: a single wall on casters adorned with nothing but a string of bananas hanging down the middle.

So, what does it all mean? Lee's press release reads more like a poem: five short lines written diaristically, ending in, "Let's see what happens with the release. Would you want that in your house?" To

those already familiar with Lee's work, there are thematic queues to pick up on. First, a genuine interest in (as well as contempt for) the formulaic displays-cum-showrooms that most galleries deem necessary for sales. Second, a humorous gibe at the cultural associations we all take for granted but still feel insecure about—the banana as phallic symbol, namely (though Lee says she wishes she could rewrite that whole story).

Yet there's an undercurrent of meaning brewing just below the surface. When asked about her exhibition at Jack Hanley just before the 2016 presidential election, she explains, "I thought we were going to have a female president, so that show was really optimistic." The bananas, aside from being a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the power of marketing, also symbolized taking down the patriarchy. "We're going to string it up, put it away," she muses. The hat, on the other hand, was a symbol of femininity, "not the phallus," she emphasizes, "but the void. The hat is a symbol of masculinity, and I put this symbol of femininity straight through it." She associates this with the current #MeToo movement, and wonders why women are made to be the receptacle that men get to touch.

So much of what we think we know and understand about the world is ingrained within us from a deeply steeped media presence,

I was representing artists who were marginalized or ignored because they weren't white, or they weren't straight, or they were not this or that. How do we get people opportunities? Those are the things I've always thought about in the art world, and now that I've done that for eight years, I can take those skills and conversations and apply them to a much larger, and sometimes more pressing, conversation. — Margaret Lee



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The way in which I use my objects is, I know you want that, but now I want you to peel the onion: Why do you want that? There's a lot of ourselves that we hide from ourselves, and I think when you peel back the onion of desire, you get very close to what you're maybe ashamed of.

— Margaret Lee

Lee says, to the point that we may not even understand our own desires anymore. "You might think your taste is something you were born with, but let's not forget that you've been reading magazines, watching TV, listening to radio, there's advertising everywhere. So what is your natural taste?"

This fascination began for her in college, when she focused on American capitalism at the turn of the 20th century—the innovation of consumer desire. "I find it fascinating that we can trace back the roots to why department stores look a certain way," Lee says. "What's the difference between that and the art market, in a way? Galleries are showrooms. But I like to play with this idea."

In 2016, Lee was invited to create custom window displays at two Barneys New York locations in uptown and downtown Manhattan. The installations were impeccably produced, and in photographs, they look as though they were purely glossy pages in a magazine spread. The surreal environments incorporate custom-made pieces (a cactus sculpture, a custom metal refrigerator) alongside clothing and accessories pulled from Barneys racks (a Dries Van Noten faux-fur jacquard cape and a Maison Margiela 5AC bag in silver, for instance).

While Lee enjoyed the opportunity to make her work look at home in a department store, she says, "It also [created] a sense of anxiety because the way in which I use my objects is like, I know you want that, but now I want you to peel the onion: Why do you want that? There's a lot of ourselves that we hide from ourselves, and I think when you peel back the onion of desire, you get very close to what you're maybe ashamed of."

For her most recent traveling solo show, *Margaret Lee: ...banana in your tailpipe* (at Marlborough Contemporary in London earlier this year, and Misako & Rosen in Tokyo last fall), the work is a direct reflection on the current political climate: a disdain for patriarchal burdens and a vote of support for the #MeToo movement. As she muses in the exhibition's press release:

Taking turns can mean feeling things out but it is sometimes hard to know whether the tables are turning or if we are going in circles. There are times when XXX = <3 but also times when it is quite opposite. Let's try to get on the same page ... shall I put a banana in your tailpipe, so you know how it feels?

"When I was coming up with this work, I felt like, we're being fucked in the ass by Republicans, and the patriarchy, and capitalism, and I can take no more," she elaborates. "As aestheticized as it is, how do we make change?"

Despite the polished and composed visual effect of the show—unblemished stainless steel, neatly composed shapes, minimal color, and empty walls—Lee is expressing both her frustration in fighting a seemingly endless fight, and her pervasive hope that the climate will eventually change for the better. Here, the titular banana has become a sinister device for violation, and Lee is frantically attempting to dismember its power: her stainless-steel rendition of the fruit hangs from a chain, as if castrated. Stainless steel also appears in the form of twisted and diminished tailpipes, which lie slumped on the ground—the antithesis of perceived-masculine muscle car equipment. And in the center of it all, a stainless-steel heart stands, defiantly, atop a pedestal: a reminder that there is, indeed, power in love.

This positive attitude is also employed in her work as a community activist through Art Against Displacement, despite the fact that she, too, could be labeled a gentrifier as Chinatown becomes infiltrated with art galleries. The irony does not escape Lee.

According to the Chinatown Art Brigade, another grassroots community organization, more than 100 galleries have opened in the neighborhood, over half within the last three years. This "hyper development," the organization frets, contributes to a rise in rent that pushes low-income tenants and small-business owners elsewhere.

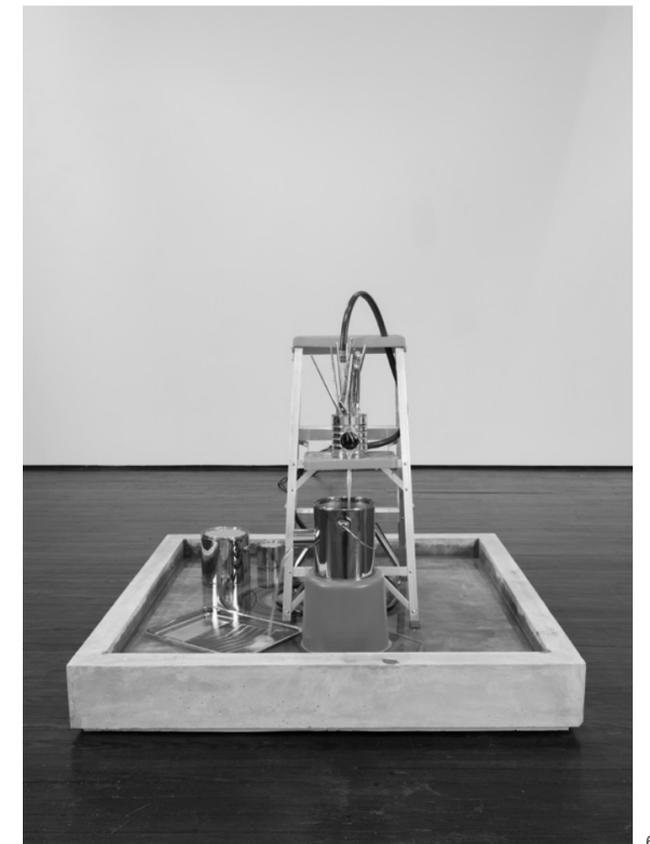
Lee admits this has been the first time she's had to come to terms with her impact as a gentrifier. "I'm Asian, I'm in an ethnic enclave, I really enjoy the culture, I'm from an immigrant family," she says. "There's a comfort level to that. But while we're here, it's not about just minimizing our presence, it's actually about maximizing how we use our presence to educate other people."

She considers Chinatown to be the community that raised her as an artist and gallerist, and she has used that relationship to foster a stronger community overall. AAD's first task was to study the Chinatown Art Brigade's pledge, which enumerates 10 goals for positive action, such as, "Learn about the history of the place you're occupying," "Support the businesses that are essential to low and middle-class people in your neighborhood," and, "Call out, shame, and stop developers who are using the 'Trojan Horse' tactics by relying on the so-called 'creative class' to open pop-up shops, commercial galleries, maker spaces, [and] high-end restaurants ... that activate real-estate investment in our neighborhood."

The members of AAD meet once a week, employing the pledge as a guidepost to set practical goals within the community. They also undertake intensive research, and have become active with other local grassroots organizations. Since the inception of AAD, its members write to local representatives, donate to residents who can't afford the lawyer's fees to defend their homes, and volunteered for their prospective city council candidate. Lee has also found ways to incorporate artists into the area's grassroots organizations. Most social justice groups have limited money, time, and resources, and Lee found that artists could provide necessary skills and assets: making posters, photographing protests and events, producing videos, and applying graphic design to the organizations' outreach projects.

While AAD is still a new organization, Lee is excited about its prospects. "The relationships that have formed have been the best part of what AAD has been able to achieve," she says. "Hanging out with people you wouldn't normally hang out with, gaining new perspectives. There's so much to learn. It's real community engagement as opposed to art community engagement."

In a city like New York, it's especially easy to feel disenfranchised and disassociated from the issues affecting others, but New Yorkers are also quick to learn that inaction is the worst reaction. While the reformation of a community is a slow process, the impact is infectious, creating a catalyst for awareness and positive change, with Lee standing at the forefront.





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12



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1
Waiting is for Lovers
2017
Polished stainless steel
45 ¼ x 20 ½ x 5 ⅞ inches
(114.9 x 51.1 x 14.9 cm)

12
"MHMMML"
Installation view
Apr 12 - May 25, 2013
China Art Object
Galleries, Los Angeles

2
"...Banana in My Tailpipe"
Installation view
Nov 5 - Dec 3, 2017
Misako & Rosen, Tokyo

13
Dots on Top
2013
Archival pigment print
Image size: 13 x 13 inches
(33 x 33 cm)
Paper size: 19 x 19 inches
(48.3 x 48.3 cm)

3
I Mean it When I Say
XXX
2017
Polished stainless steel,
wood
61 ⅞ x 13 ¼ x 19 ⅞ inches
(155.9 x 33.6 x 49.8 cm)

4
W.D.U.T.U.R. #2
2016
Dye sublimation
photograph and acrylic
paint
28 x 42 inches
(71.1 x 106.7 cm)

5
W.D.U.T.U.R. #3
2016
Dye sublimation
photograph and acrylic
paint
28 x 42 inches
(71.1 x 106.7 cm)

6
Fountain (This is How It
Goes)
2016
Paint cans, brushes,
ladder, hose, power
cord, running water,
concrete
Concrete base: 8 x 50 x
50 inches
(20.3 x 127 x 127 cm)
Overall: 40 1/2 x 50 x 50
inches
(102.8 x 127 x 127 cm)

7, 8
12 Bananas (Strung
Up) #1
2016
MDF, pine, casters,
plaster, acrylic paint,
rope
Wall: 56 x 4 x 84 inches
(142.2 x 10.2 x 213.4 cm)
MDF: ½ inch
(1.3 cm)
Bananas: 29 inches
(73.7 cm) each, 12 total

9, 10
10 Gallon Hat (and the
Hole) #1
2016
Beaver felt and polished
stainless steel
Hat: 12 ½ x 16 x 14 inches
(31.8 x 40.6 x 35.6 cm)
Stainless steel pipe:
2 x 11 x 2 inches
(5.1 x 27.9 x 5.1 cm)
Sprayed white pedestal:
12 x 12 x 40 inches
(30.5 x 30.5 x 101.6 cm)
Edition of three

11
Tangerines and Bench
2013
Mixed media
18 x 20 x 42 inches
(45.7 x 50.8 x 106.7 cm)

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