



Margaret Lee: Life Lines Jack Hanley Gallery



Installation view

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Jack Hanley Gallery

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By **EDWARD WAISNIS** June 12, 2024

Margaret Lee's work exudes confidence. Having turned away from her earlier iteration of an installation and sculpture-based practice, and applying herself to collaboration and curating, the focus is now firmly on painting, a move she started around 2018-2020, perfecting her craft ever since.

Lee's attention has turned from temporal secular work to concerns in the realm of the incorporeal, the ethereal and the psychological. Suffering what she has referred to as a 'block' during the pandemic, and with supply chain disruptions affecting her ability to work on sculpture projects, a delving into cognitive 'self-help' led her to the time-worn poetry of painting. Hence, one must conclude from the title of the show, painting provided something essential at an especially trying time for Lee.

Riffling through iterations of abstraction that echoed the efforts of Günther Förg, René Daniëls and Raoul De Keyser, Lee has settled on her unique amalgam, having seemingly brought in a strong visual reference to the paintings of Robert Motherwell of late, and distilling her experience to a rigorousness with devotion to lyricism and variation. The latter aspect plays out in the installation, somewhat akin to the panels of a comic strip, particularly when viewed serially en masse and in situ, as presented in the context of this exhibition. One can even envision this sequentiality being purposed into a flip-book allowing the compositions to dance and morph through a low-rent presentation of animation. What I am recognizing is the sense of movement in the work.

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All of this lends to a preface positing that environment and experience directly impact the artist's output. Nothing new here. What matters is the results. Lee after having experimented with materials (from plaster cast fruits and vegetables often coupled with stainless steel to nails and screws driven through lengths of black painted dowels) and form (from voluminous to flat and emblematic) she has forged a neuro romantic take on abstraction. An accomplishment made in light of the craft's floundering through several decades, the fervent rise of Neo-Expressionism, et. al., and a half-baked attempt to label from time to time—I am thinking of *zombie formalism* as a particularly caustic example—and emerging in the now firmly planted new century with strength.

The compartmentalization found especially in Lee's earlier paintings, as well as the sporadic arrangements in the new work, leads me to posit that echoes of experience the artist gained through her previous endeavors reside in her compositional choices; there is the whiff gallery space and the implements used to create and arrange it to be found here, I believe. Something of dealing with the rag-tag art spaces of perennially hip New York enclaves, as evidenced by Lee's involvement with the 179 and 47 Canal Street spaces, of which she was the founder and co-founder, respectively. Less than a decade ago Lee was profiled as one of "The Most Respected US Contemporary Art Dealers of 2015" on Artnet News. Now she has throw herself passionately in exploring this storied means of art making.

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Margaret Lee, LL 23, 2024, oil on canvas, 58 x 56 inches

Eleven canvases, all 2024, all 58 x 56 inches, and all bearing the title *LL*, denoting shorthand for the exhibition's title, followed by numerical denotation, provides the field on which, Rubik's Cube-like, Lee shifts a retinue of fleshy blocks and hastily dashed strikes of the brush, all against unifying backgrounds of diaphanous yellow. The aplomb and volume of the blocks, mostly mauve, recall early-to-mid-Philip Guston's formulations of the 1950s and 60s, remarkably consistent, that is a few short years would evolve into the more accessible, though deeply coded, cartoon realism.

Standouts, amongst Lee's paintings, include *LL 06*, that is weighed down by a rectangular element which uncannily resembles the state of Idaho being pelted by what could be streaks of black rain. What is it about trying to find representation in abstraction? Did Lee intend the reference I registered? Any way you look at it the work fulfills the desire of perception. *LL 23* carries the day through swagger, the dispersed forms bending, or leaning, against the elements, or an unheard rhythm. *LL 24* builds and balances a dozen cylindrical forms into a regimented huddle with strong ties to Nicolas de Staël's compositional innovations; in a way it can be seen as a distillation of Cubism after Minimalism. The reference I found plausible in *LL 08* is to British Modernists Patrick Herron and Howard Hodgkin. The outlier, still fine in it's way, is *LL 27*, where we find crudely rendered mid-toned cyphers lying at the bottom third of the canvas that mimic upside-down "T" and "U" forms, bringing to mind the tactics of Georg Baselitz as well as those 'U' forms in Wade Guyton's inkjet printed paintings from a few years back. While all this referential noise knocks around in my brain, my body feels the assault of the casually rendered passages, as satisfaction sets in.