

Lee Bul

HAYWARD GALLERY

In Lee Bul's glittering London retrospective, "Crashing," everything seemed to be reaching and pushing insistently outward. The exhibition—covering thirty years of Lee's practice, 1988–2018, with more than one hundred artworks on display—extended beyond the gallery's physical limits to include a specially made artwork, *Weep into Stones*, 2017–18, comprising some fifty thousand crystals hanging off the Hayward Gallery's Brutalist concrete exterior. At the entrance, the South Korean artist's sprawling installation of cracked and curving acrylic mirrors, *Civitas Solis II*, 2014, stretched over two walls and spilled over much of the floor. This silvery expanse sparkled beneath *Cyborg W1–W4*, 1998, a constellation of prosthetic robot limbs and torsos hanging overhead, their distended contours encased in sculpted white "armor." Nearby were suspended a pair of works from Lee's "Monster" series, both dated 2011: fat, taller-than-human-size clusters of tendrils upholstered with what looked like skin, each swollen tentacle curling and probing outward as if driven by desire. *Mon grand récit (Weep into Stones)*, 2005, seemed a tiny utopian city, all spiky scaffolding and gleaming Oz-like tower, with minuscule ribbon highways and illuminated signage spinning out like urban sprawl. In *Via Negativa II*, 2014, a maze of mirrors endlessly repeated rows of bright electric bulbs and our own reflected images. Both our bodies and Lee's tunnels of claustrophobic space stretched before us to infinity. The work was less like Yayoi Kusama's psychedelic *Infinity Room*, 1965, than like a Kafkaesque labyrinth of never-ending corridors, pointing ceaselessly in every direction.

Gleaming and expansive, Lee's exuberant art has never looked better than it did at the Hayward Gallery. Her sculpture's supremely tactile finishes—sometimes fleshy, sometimes beaded and jewellike—were set off to great effect by the building's harsh *béton brut* high modernism. The cavernous, multilevel spaces permitted gratifying vistas, allowing viewers to take in at a glance the artist's multifarious output: immense or thumbnail-size sculptures—suspended from above or lying directly on the floor, emerging from the wall or arranged on pedestals and shelves—not to mention installations, drawings, paintings, and video-documented performances. A pair of exquisite *Untitled Silk Paintings (Yellow and Multicolor)*,

both ca. 2002–2004, depicted Lee’s usual tangled and flowing compositions of organic shapes and lines—like overgrown postnuclear vines or dark unruly hair—here filled with her irresistible shades of pale pink and aqua blue. Highly sophisticated and yet presented as mere footnotes to an ambitious overall project, they attest to Lee’s refusal to fall for easy solutions. A lesser artist might have dined out for years on the production of these intensely desirable, cloisonné-like paintings, which moreover showcase Lee’s virtuoso drawing skills. But a larger, unified sense of purpose across her many media describes an artist of exceptional vision—in equal parts science-fiction film director, insane haberdasher, and futurist urban designer—brimming with urgent political intent.

Punctuating Lee’s gallery-wide presentation were two overtly didactic murals, encyclopedia-style time lines detailing the chronic oppression of Korea—and particularly its women—across centuries. Her persistent extension of everything beyond its expected reach—even her own body, in performances such as *Sorry for suffering—You think I’m a puppy on a picnic?*, 1990, in which she wears one of her tendril-cluster sculptures and ponderously moves through public space—suggests the artist’s will to overcome confinement and her homeland’s and gender’s chronic subjection to compression. In this light, Lee’s ecstatic vision—perpetually shape-shifting and pushing past limitations—shines on every surface with courage and the promise of change.

— Gilda Williams