

Uncommon/Incommon Lily Wei

Catherine Lee and Kay Whitney are primarily sculptors whose work might seem worlds apart at first glance, even an odd coupling, but ultimately, there are fewer differences between them than there are similarities. Part of the pleasure of the pairing is how they bounce ideas off each other's work and let us do the same; another pleasure is the gradual discovery of the commonalities between them, although there is also much gratification in regarding these accomplished works as singular entities. Their conversation, not so incidentally, began over twenty years ago and is an ongoing exploration of the fallout from the ideological battles waged in the 1970s and 80s in which women were often at the forefront, pioneers in laying down the ground work for the less fortified, much more open and diversified domain that is today's art world.

Both Lee and Whitney are ambitious artists, their feminist-inflected, post-minimalist production carefully considered and articulated, visually and verbally. In terms of material, Lee tends to work with hard, fixed substances such as metal and ceramic. But she also makes paintings on canvas, as well as ceramic works that might be taken for paintings, a contrast to Whitney's three-dimensional work. Whitney tends toward more pliable, softer—that's a relative term—materials such as felt, which has become a signature medium over the past several years. She also uses plywood and metal rings and grommets, the plywood analogous to felt in its layered, compressed construction, both industrially made, artificial. Lee has likened her canvas to Whitney's felt. And Whitney's use of metal accouterments is a link to Lee's metal sculptures, interchanging ideas of "hard" and "soft," and what constitutes painting and sculpture and how.

Color is another point of departure and convergence. They deliberately limit their palette. Lee restricts herself to mostly primaries, her work more or less monochromatic. Whitney allows the variable, indeterminate colors of felt to

remain as is, a kind of neutral grey-scale or earth-toned range overcast with perhaps blue or violet at times, speckled with stray shards of colored plastic and other industrial debris. The plywood also is neutral in coloration so that form is given precedence. Lee's use of color, however, also emphasizes and clarifies shape; the effect is more intellectual, its sensuality lambent, complicated, slower to come to the fore. Curiously, while Whitney's color schema is more reticent, her felt-wrapped, draped work assumes an unexpected voluptuousness and corporeality.

Lee's magnificent, magisterial *Quanta* paintings, a definitive, continuing series—she needs to work in series, she says, that's how she thinks—is based on a quantum, the smallest amount of energy that can be emitted by an atom, conveyed as electromagnetic radiance, as light. The paintings are formulated in a grid, her preferred composition, in which each color mark is the equivalent of a quantum. Layering her color to form another color that is the result of the color that came before, in a multi-part harmony, she "locates a transitional color" that is another hue altogether. Both Lee and Whitney use a systematic approach, one that is hitched to experimentation, materiality, process and its pragmatics rather than theory. This is the generative force behind their works.

Disclosing her process is essential to Lee. Everything is meant to be legible, from the pure primary colors to the number of brushstrokes and

the order of their application to the repetitions that circle the “heart of the thing” and in repetition, come closer and closer to it. The small interior tesserae-like squares reiterate in shape the square that is the whole painting, and each small square is a complete painting in itself, a reflection of the whole. Somewhere between the mathematical and the musical, her grids become a shifting, subtle, push/pull score set in play by the eye of the attentive viewer.

Lee’s “hard geometry” is tempered by the application of the paint, by touching and retouching, an act of sheer simplicity but it keeps her engaged, mindful so that the painting does not slip away from her. She is clocking each moment, each gesture, registering and measuring time and its inexorability. What remains of its passage, as testament and evidence, is the work.

Whitney’s projects are three-dimensional but often depend upon the wall. Here, the exception is the remarkable “*4 devices for a somnambulist* (2019). Suspended from the ceiling by nearly invisible wires, it is her first serial piece, her contribution to a dialogue on series and the serial. The felt is interwoven and knotted around metal ovoid rings with strips that drop to the floor, the two larger rings around 5 feet at their greatest expanse, nearly human-size, while the two others are somewhat smaller, her hard geometries softened, like Lee’s, becoming more expressive, more embodied. It’s a kind of talismanic swaddling or magical weaving, a reference, it seems, to indigenous crafting and the sophistication of minimalism, blending them together.

Whitney’s work refers to built environments, to architecture as shelter, to mid-twentieth century

design in which Isamu Noguchi and Charles and Ray Eames figure, and to feminist heroines such as Lee Bontecou and Eva Hesse. Her process also includes an intense concentration and like Lee, she does a lot of counting and “is a maker of patterns,” she says. Whitney is careful to note that the pattern she develops is not visual, but for purposes of fabrication. It has to do with process and is functional.

But she is not about utility. As a writer, she also takes imagistic leaps that might make you smile. *Skyhook* (2016), the title of another one of her works, consists of felt strips held by a small circular ring suspended high up, the strips descending, lashed around the plywood shapes that form its base, anchoring them in place. It is the notion of a skyhook, however, that gives it an appealing extra twist as an object that is non-existent in this world but might exist in a parallel world, part of it utterly logical (the hook), and so useful that it should exist although it is physically impossible (so far), an example of the quirky, questioning combo of sense and nonsense that characterizes her thinking.

Perhaps what they have most in common is their utopian belief in art. Both Lee and Whitney think that art matters, that *this* kind of art matters. Through systems of counting, measuring, and marking, through an imposition of order on the flux that is nature and reality, chaos can be held in check, averted. It is the will to make that they believe in, an unquenchable impulse and imperative that has brought the world to where it is today, for better and worse.