

**Catalogue essay for the exhibition *Sandra Eula Lee: A Map is Not the Territory*  
Martin Art Gallery, Muhlenberg College, Allentown, PA**

***Registering Change*** by Kristen Hileman

Art is a means to contemplate change, but often in an implied and celebratory manner rather than through a direct and critical probing. We marvel at an artist's skill in transforming materials: oily squishes of paint and seemingly unyielding blocks of stone metamorphize into beautiful images. While the content of these paintings or sculptures—the stories they tell, the ideas they represent—might not be explicitly about change, the dramatic physical transformation of materials contributes to what makes art special. After all, change in everyday circumstances is often gradual and unremarkable. It is easier for a distant relative to see how much a child has grown when she pays yearly visits, than it is for parents to take measure of their child's development on a daily basis. We can fail to see the changes in our own faces until we compare a photo taken twenty years ago with our reflection in the mirror today. Change creeps up on us. And since such changes are entwined with mortality, when they are finally and perhaps suddenly recognized, they can be chilling to confront. As paints on a palette become a completed picture and in other artistic transformations, we can instead focus on change as a marker of exceptional talent that leads to increased beauty and order. Artistic change is powerful, but it often remains idealized and distanced from us...it rarely holds us accountable.

However, for artist Sandra Eula Lee, transformation characterizes both the process behind her art and its content. She draws out its subtleties and significance through the textures and tones of her wide-ranging materials in a way that is neither startling nor pacifying. Rather, her works call for an active and visceral consideration of the force and magnitude of the constant of transformation—how change defines what it is to be human and how it manifests in the conditions of our planet. Over the last decade, inspired by residencies and teaching positions that took her to Seoul and Beijing and her own Korean heritage, Lee created garden-like sculptures and installations from construction materials. These formations of bricks, asphalt, electrical wire, and miscellaneous debris in hues that evoke plants, water, stone, and sunlight point to two types of growth—the cultivation of the natural world and the expansion of urban development in Asian cities—as well as the fragile, shifting balance between these interdependent kinds of flux.

More recently, Lee has positioned her work along the vastly different yet interconnected registers of human experience and geological time. Stacked bamboo steamers in the sculpture *Backbone*, 2021, and a container of fermenting peppers in *The Walking Mountain (Ferment/Foment)*, 2020, conjure up the everyday alchemy of food preparation. By applying heat, pressure, and acids, we turn raw ingredients into sustaining delicacies. Lee composed the vertebrae of *Backbone's* column from the emphatically charred surfaces of the steamers' relatively thin husks to engage our senses of sight, touch, and smell as she reveals the kitchen (not coincidentally, a domestic space in which many of us have spent more time over the months of the pandemic) to be a metaphor for the violent forces that are often essential to transformative processes. Bright red sawblades hovering above planks of wood in the sculpture *Habitat*, 2021, similarly speak to the aggressive human intervention into nature that results in the inconspicuous materials that comprise the structures in which we live, learn, work, and take comfort.

Three garlic sleeves hold varying forms of copper in Lee's *Inhabit (copper)*, 2021. This modest but highly tactile presentation asks us to quietly fathom resources buried in the Earth over its 4.5-billion-year history and the place that humans, who have developed building and electrical technology by mining the malleable and conductive material, occupy on the scale of existence. The irregular, mottled surfaces of the intensely useful, elemental metal is oddly and even melancholically constrained by the machine-regimented weaving of the plastic netting—the flashy red material flaunting its own artifice, extraneousness, and non-biodegradability.

*Electronic Garden/Slow Burn*, 2021, is a related sculpture. Here, Lee stacks materials at different moments in their cycles of existence and use. Petrified wood and driftwood are juxtaposed with steel rebar and cast concrete as if to contrast nature's processes for producing hard and smooth surfaces with those of civilization. Likewise, an assortment of minerals mined for use in electronics are bound to discarded electronic parts with electrical wire, rejoining product and waste to their sources. The result is a talismanic form, at once memorializing what has been taken from the Earth and perhaps humbly wishing for its regeneration.

Terra cotta tiles and glass beads made by the artist and bricks reclaimed from the ruins of a factory in Lancaster, PA near the university where Lee teaches can also be found in her sculptures. Each of these modules exemplifies the reliance of human industry on the transformation of Earth's raw materials—a precarious hand-off from the dynamics of the Earth's interior to the furnaces, molds, and hammers of humankind. They also hint at the inevitable obsolescence of successive regimes of craft and production as humans labor to keep up with the ever-changing needs of the societies that they generate.

In *Rising*, 2021, Lee renders decorative, disposable package bows in heavy terra cotta, glazed in the colors of dying autumn leaves. The pile of bows weighs down a white-collared shirt, itself a ubiquitous symbol of impersonal, routinized office work undertaken to access greater wealth and consumption. There is a forlorn and decidedly non-buoyant quality to *Rising*, as if the act of acquisition and its strong association with the rituals of holidays and celebrations has depleted other qualities of life in a vexing capitalist cycle of change. Despite the pathos of *Rising*, Lee's works are not entirely pessimistic about human ecology at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Her potent materials and poetic gestures of transformation yield a purposely ambiguous space, one that allows us to meditate on the past and present rather than to predict the future and in so doing opens up possibilities for new action and change that heals.

-Kristen Hileman

Kristen Hileman is an independent curator and educator based in Baltimore. She has served as a curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, Head of the Contemporary Department at The Baltimore Museum of Art, and the inaugural Curator-in-Residence at The Delaware Contemporary and taught at George Washington University, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.