

Hannah Lee
The Armory Show
September 6 – 8, 2024
Booth P7

Micki Meng





For Armory 2024, Micki Meng presents a solo exhibition of new works with Brooklyn-based artist Hannah Lee. Lee depicts intimate interior scenes where a surrealist quality subsumes the viewer's point of view. Capturing the affective quality of memory, each of Lee's works are both familiar and uncanny. Extreme perspectives, muted tones, and acute attention to the play of light form what John Yau has coined, "liminal realism," in a Hyperallergic article from early last year and "a haunted, cinematic uncertainty" as noted by Andrea Scott for The New Yorker. Lee's work is particularly loaded for our current moment, now four years out of the pandemic she works through the surreality of domestic life today, forgoing familiar tropes of family relationships to consider how we mediate moments of isolation with found communities.

Hannah Lee (b. 1989, Madison, Wisconsin) received a BFA at Parsons School of Design in 2012. Since graduating she has participated in numerous group shows in New York, Providence and San Francisco, as well as internationally in Manila and Tokyo.

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VIP Preview, September 5
Booth P7
The Javits Center



Lunch, 2024
oil on panel
14 1/8 x 18 7/8 in | 36 x 48 cm

\$7,500



detail, *Lunch*, 2024



Stage, 2024
oil on panel
16 x 20 in | 40.6 x 50.8 cm

\$8,000



detail, *Stage*, 2024



Wishing Well, 2024
oil on panel
18 x 24 in | 45.7 x 61 cm

\$10,000



detail, *Wishing Well*, 2024



detail, *Wishing Well*, 2024



TBC, 2024
oil on panel
16 x 16 in | 76.2 x 101.6 cm

\$7,500



Jake, 2024
oil on panel
30 x 40 in | 76.2 x 101.6 cm

\$12,000



detail, *Jake*, 2024



Nellie Olsen, 2024
oil on panel
4 x 4 in | 10.2 x 10.2 cm

\$1,500

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PRESS

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Art [Reviews](#)

Dreaming in the Afternoon Light

Through her attention to detail and light, Hannah Lee transforms a banal view into something uncanny.



John Yau June 2, 2023

In January 2022, I concluded my review of Hannah Lee's debut exhibition, *First Language at Entrance* (December 2, 2021–January 30, 2022), with this observation:

This is one of the strongest debuts I have had the pleasure of experiencing in years. The obvious effort that has gone into each painting, along with the artist's disinterest in developing a signature style, conveys an ambition and confidence that speaks well for Lee's future.

For these reasons, I went to see her second exhibition at Entrance, *Hannah Lee: Outside*, a few days after it opened. I was not disappointed. Of the six paintings and one hybrid painting-sculpture, which includes a shelf and mirror, the largest work, "Walkthrough" (2023), measures 48 by 36 inches. While the press release contextualizes this painting — "a new tenant viewing the empty apartment next door to her home studio" — I saw the scene of two workers standing by the windows of this empty apartment as being in dialogue with Gustave Caillebotte's "The Floor Planers" (1875), which is one of the first times a modern painter depicted urban workers.

Caillebotte's painting portrays three workers with bare, muscular torsos, two of whom are talking to each other. They are heroic types rather than individuals. In Lee's painting, the older, slightly hunched worker, framed by the window behind him, seems to be imploring the younger man, who is facing away. This impasse invites the viewer's

speculation. We are witnessing a moment of tension between individualized but anonymous men of different generations.

At the same time, Lee's painting speaks to the upgrading of tenement apartments, and the ensuing gentrification. As with Caillebotte's three workers, the two men standing in this modest apartment most likely could not afford to rent or buy it. Lee devotes her attention to the afternoon light diffusing in the room, the uneven coloring of the floorboards, the pale blue and brown walls, and the yellow janitorial mop bucket and dustpan. Her desire for verisimilitude in focusing on the tools and workers rejects moralizing or social messages without becoming didactic.

In "Breakfast" (2023), which measures 33 by 33 inches, Lee depicts 10 people seated around a circular restaurant counter, with other diners visible on the left side. Lee's beautifully observed gathering of White diners defines a world that is not racially diverse. It shares something with Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks" (1942), an iconic view of four alienated people in an urban diner late at night. However, the differences are more telling than the similarities. In Lee's painting it is morning and breakfast is being served; the circular counter evokes a vision of camaraderie. The viewpoint is from inside the restaurant, of someone seated at a table, rather than from the street. All of the details culminate in questions, starting with who is part of the circle and who is not.

There is a gentleness to the painting and the artist's devotion to details that invites viewers to consider this and other questions, and to observe what is and is not present. Will there always be outsiders? What would an integrated society look like? Has such a state ever been achieved?

What connects "Walkthrough" and "Breakfast" to the unpopulated paintings "Outside" (2023) and "Studio Light" (both 2023) is the artist's preternatural recognition of the relationship between open and closed spaces, as well as the way both artificial and natural light inflect surfaces and ambience. In "Outside," Lee depicts a street-level view of two large frosted windows in a modern building that extends in diagonally in from the left edge. Meticulously painted, as is everything in her work, the uniformity of the building's brick surface is generic and cold. Parts of two second-floor windows are visible. We glimpse someone standing in a salmon-pink room through one; a green-

Micki Meng

ish curtain partially covers the other. It is supposed to be the perfect color for cozy basements.

It is the two large, identical street-level windows that demonstrate what Lee can do with paint. Faint reflections of light from passing cars are visible on their surfaces, as well as a diffuse light that seems to come from inside. The reflections are so convincingly painted that I found myself staring at something I might not have noticed in real life. Through her attention to detail, lighting, and the color of the second-floor rooms, Lee transforms a banal view into something uncanny. Nothing in the painting seems forced; it is as if she saw this scene in a dream.

“Studio Light” (2023), which measures eight by eight inches, takes Lee’s interest in light to another level. Working in a tonal palette of bluish-white to pale blue, tempered with whitish orange, Lee depicts a disorienting perspective, cropping the view so that nothing is quite clear. We are not even sure where we are standing in the room. I was completely mesmerized by this painting.

In terms of both composition and subject matter, Lee does not repeat herself. I sense that her investigations are motivated by a range of pre-occupations, and that she has no interest in packaging them. I believe her biggest goal is artistic freedom, and I applaud her for that.



Micki Meng

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Art [Reviews](#)

Hannah Lee's Dreamlike Realism

Being bowled over by an unknown artist's first one-person show does not happen often but when it does, it renews your faith that the art world is not just about buzz and hype.



John Yau January 27, 2022

Being bowled over by an unknown artist's first one-person show does not happen often but when it does, it renews your faith that the art world is not just about buzz and hype. That is how I felt when I saw the work in Hannah Lee: First Language at Entrance (December 2, 2021–January 30, 2022). The gallery's press release, less than half a page long and jargon-free, with the artist's three-sentence biography at the bottom, was refreshing to read. After receiving a BFA at Parsons School of Design in 2012, Lee did not go on to earn an MFA at Yale or Columbia or any other graduate program. This was a press release in which no claims were being made for Lee's pedigree, which meant that the work would have to speak for itself. I can count the number of times this has happened in the past few years on one hand, especially for an artist's debut show.

Lee exhibited six modestly scaled paintings and group of small sculptural objects composed of q-tips propped up in melting ice cubes made of resin, sitting on two narrow glass shelves. The paintings (all dated 2020 or 2021) were done in oil or oil and wax on panel. The largest measures 30 by 40 inches, and the smallest 8 by 8 inches.

No matter how straightforward some of Lee's realist scenes seem to be, their clarity tilts toward the dreamlike rather than the observed or remembered. Pressed to characterize her work, I would call it "liminal realism." She depicts an uncanny situation so that it may initially strike the viewer as believable, which might be considered the opposite of surrealism. Lee's work quickly and smoothly draws the viewer into its

clearly defined space, yet resists immediate comprehension. I liked being in that ambiguous state, where seeing and knowing dance around each other without letting go.

In "Milk" (2020), two fit, young Asian women, seated cross-legged on blue satin mats placed on a wooden floor, face each other from the opposite ends of a long, low, narrow blue table. A blue and white cloth, decoratively embroidered with pairs of horses and swans, is laid out on the table. The woman at the far end, who is bare breasted and wears black sweat pants, is pressing a pump to each breast. The pumps' tubes carry milk into a glass near the other end of the table. Although her back is to us, the woman sitting in front of the glass appears younger and slightly smaller in stature than her companion.

The age difference suggests they are sisters rather than mother and daughter. I suppose they could be friends, but that relationship seems unlikely to me. There are many ways to read this sibling relationship, the coolness of the older woman's face and the unseen face of the younger woman, and yet none strikes me as fully satisfying, which is why I feel so strongly about this painting. It does not fit into any tropes regarding familial relationships, particularly those in an Asian American family, which have become commonplace in middlebrow magazines and articles about "tiger moms."

The other thing that struck me about the paintings is that their locales and figures are all different from each other. Lee does not step into the same subject twice. In "In Between" (2021), she focuses on the far wall of a gray, nearly empty room. A door is at each end of the wall, both slightly ajar, their door-knobs mirroring each other. Between the doors, an illuminated fish tank sits on an equally sized table. On the left is an electrical cord that reaches from the fish tank to a socket on the wall. On the right side, two clear plastic tubes extend from inside the fish tank to the door on the right. There are no fish in the tank, just some rocks and water.

The problem with works like this is that they often feel contrived or arbitrary, but this is not the case with Lee's paintings, and that is why I am drawn to them. She seems to put thought into everything: the electrical socket, the lighting in the room, the color of the walls and ceiling, and the placement of the doorknobs. And yet, for all of Lee's deliberation, there is something direct and offhand about the painting, something understated.

Micki Meng

In “Demonstration (2020), the exhibition’s largest painting, I would call attention to the way Lee stages the scene, the care she has paid to the spacing, to architectural details, and to both of the two figures facing us, who stand by a column, and those facing away from us, who compose an audience. Three of the four people with their backs to us form a diagonal, even as the two on the far left are parallel to the picture plane. Lee’s placement of a plant and planter and an electrical wall socket covering on the painting’s right-hand side convey her compositional acuity. That, and the way she directs our gaze to the subjects of the demonstration: a woman, and a man who seems to be applying eyeliner to her.

What is the purpose of this demonstration? Why is it taking place in this location, which looks like some unused corner of a hotel lobby? Who are the people in the audience? Lee seems to be able to strike a perfect balance between transparency and opacity. Rather than impose an external logic on the paintings, which would make them feel contrived, she seems to find it in the process. That’s the power of these works.

In “Shower” (2021), which I found to be the most compelling and perplexing painting in the exhibition, Lee depicts a stage-like room within a larger space. The room is cropped on the right side, leaving a view of the front door, with light shining in from the gap between the door and the floor, a single bed in the left corner, gray walls, books and bottles on a board sitting on a radiator, and an open door on the room’s far left. Through the door we see a figure standing in a bathtub behind a transparent shower curtain.

This is where painting seamlessly shifts into another dimension. The wall on this side of the room is just a gray wallboard. Wooden supports on the outside indicate that the main room is inside a larger room. And yet, if the wall on the left is all that separates the room from the larger space it is in, that space with the shower cannot exist. Lee’s attention to unlikely details further enhances the mystery of the painting. What is the light glowing in the center of the bed? Is someone reading under the covers? Why is the bed so close to the front door? How big or small

is this apartment?

The paucity of creature comforts, such as chairs and other things meant to make one’s life comfortable, is a noticeable feature of these works, and yet Lee does not make that the focus of the paintings. Rather, it is something discovered in the looking, just as the pairs of animals on the embroidered cloth in “Milk” are not immediately obvious. This is one of the strongest debuts I have had the pleasure of experiencing in years. The obvious effort that has gone into each painting, along with the artist’s disinterest in developing a signature style, conveys an ambition and confidence that speaks well for Lee’s future.



Hannah Lee, “In between” (2021), oil and wax on panel, 18 x 24 inches