

LEE BUL

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
mca.org.au
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SOPHIE O'BRIEN

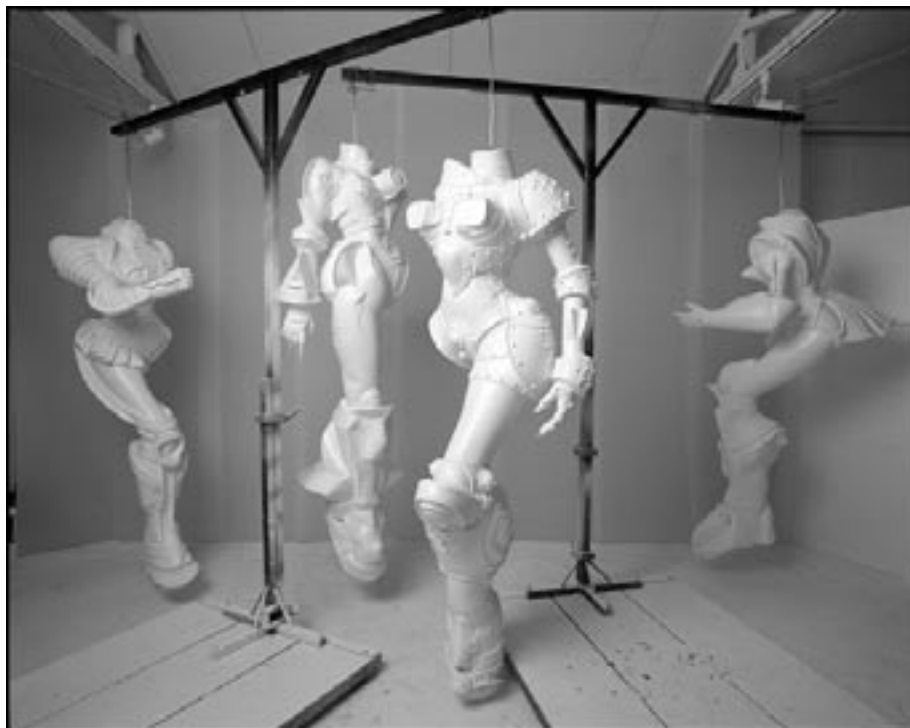
I'm trying to explore ways to bring out those assumptions that operate beneath the shiny surfaces. Lee Bul

Much of Lee Bul's imagery is directly related to animation – in particular the Japanese anime and manga popular in Korea today. What allows the work to move beyond mere representation of animation and sci-fi genres is the critical eye that Lee brings to the imagery, looking at the processes and ideologies involved in the formation of social, cultural and aesthetic imagery.

The daughter of a long time political dissident, the artist herself emphasises the link her practice has to critical thinking about cultural and specifically gender issues. Lee describes the cyborg works as incarnations of male fantasies and they are extensions of ideas first expressed in her early performances [some of which are included in this exhibition in video format]. Her cyborgs question the myth of technological perfection, as they are often missing organs or limbs, and intentionally invoke archetypal images of femininity from art history and popular culture – for example, the famous winged figure of Nike or Futurist sculptures, as well as numerous images from sci-fi movies and gaming.

In the initial space inside the foyer of the Museum of Contemporary Art, a spotless white cyborg sculpture is in the process of exploding, sending its parts throughout the room and into the upstairs galleries. The lack of colour in these works abstracts the forms, lending them a kind of poetry in motion through the double-height space. In other rooms, the intricate and monstrously beautiful sculptural works deal with some of the more difficult spaces of the MCA: the first and second floor galleries, where pillars confront us in every room. The spatiality of these gently swaying sculptures is delicately considered, necessarily responding to the architecture surrounding them.

In a separate room florid paintings and mother-of-pearl inlaid screens reflect the artist's interest in both natural phenomena and more artificial creations, and the meeting and exchange possible between the two. Both these and the hybrid sculptural works infer a perfection and seamlessness, yet they also acknowledge their own handmade origins, appearing as if prototypes for an alien experiment.



Although Lee's initial works explored the boundaries between the body, objects and culture in very immediate ways, later works abstract or imply the body – dealing with its 'extensions and substitutions, or its representations through technological means'. This shift can be tracked from the early performances to the later karaoke sculpture and video works. Lee has said that, "part of the early attraction to performance was that it was an indeterminate form; the results were never known ahead of time."¹ Karaoke then, can be utilised by the artist as a metaphor for the individual's interaction and/or struggle with pre-programmed technology of all kinds.

Upstairs, a sleek karaoke pod is a pop music machine made for human vocal interaction in the museum context, continuing Lee's investigation into human participation with each other and with machines. [The functional pod is opened up for the public to use at certain times of day. Along with other similar works, it was shown in the 1999 *Venice Biennale*, gaining popularity with many international visitors who were encountering karaoke for the first time.]

Behind the pod, in one of a series of videos, a rotating and inverting series of images of a woman singing in a wooden pavilion is intentionally repetitious. It could be said that the computer effects used are comparable to the simple technology karaoke itself uses, reinventing loops over and over again for different participants. Breaking the video's monotony during my visit, two teenage girls, hidden in the dark, unselfconsciously sang the songs loudly and out of tune as the lyrics came on screen.

The exhibition offers an overview of Lee Bul's practice, including sculpture, video and painting and is accompanied by an appropriately shiny publication with reproductions of many of the works included in the show. Although the catalogue touches on the artist's critical stance towards discourses of femininity, it also aims to broaden the focus out from this to reference a more general, shared corporeality. However, the exhibition itself underlines Lee's strong and unbroken connection to her initial point of departure: an investigation into what constitutes femininity and its contingent images and forms. Linked to these themes, much of Lee's work reflects upon ideas of the authenticity of experience – offering here the opportunity to engage with the works firsthand, allowing us to assess our own experiences with both popular, and by extension museum, culture.

Note

¹ HU Obrist, *Lee Bul Interviews Volume I*, Charta, Milan 2003: 426

Top: Lee Bul, *Cyborg W1-W4*, 1998
Bottom: Lee Bul, *Live Forever III*, 2001
Photos courtesy the artist