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“A Room of Your Own”

“In the midst of a pandemic we came to realize how much we miss things that comfort us - the desire to touch another human being, to share our home with friends and to live in a happier world. In times of despair we have been saved by Humanity's most faithful allies: Goodness, Empathy and Love - once more we must call them to stand by our side. Once again, during the time of cascading uncertainties, we cling to what is precious and moves us so deeply - the infinite creativity, beauty and the wisdom of the human spirit.”

Francine Rogers

This red brick townhouse on West 30th street, a block from Penn Station and the wasted luxury mega project Hudson Yards, and several more from NYC's commercial gallery hub has been owned by the Lithuanian Cultural Alliance for over 100 years, explained Francine Rogers, the curator of the exhibition “A Room Your Own” on view until November 25 in the building's parlor exhibition space. One example of the sorts of ethnic cultural societies that have been so important to both assimilation and to retention of ethnic identity, this exhibition of seven New York based artists, all of whom are immigrants to the United States, speaks to the shifting realities of the immigrant experience in global cities. Ethnic associations, many of them formed during the waves of immigration from the late 19th to the early decades of the 20th century, acted as havens to combat isolation and provide networks and gathering places for European, working-class immigrants arriving on US shores. While, at least prior to the pandemic and to the Trump administrations increasingly nativist anti-immigration policies, such associations were less relevant to a younger generation of immigrants, many of whom were well-educated artists and intellectuals like Rogers herself. Rogers and many of the Lithuanians she met in New York City came to the US in the 1990's in search not of the conventional American dream, but rather of the kind of diverse and energetic art community found in a global center like New York.

These immigrants faced a different kind of isolation – one wrought first by the increasing hyper gentrification and art market bubble created by recent decades of unprecedented wealth accumulation of the global elite. This accumulation has driven these superrich to park their excess capital in property investment, aided by the generous policies of an urban political class, and in the arts both through an increasing turn to “creative city” growth strategies and a bubble

of art market speculation. This combination of astronomical levels of wealth accumulation and neoliberal urban governance coalitions has interrupted the delicate connections between artists by pricing out artists who in the past clustered close to the cities resources, forcing them to find places to live and work far and wide and smaller independent galleries and non-profits willing to show lesser-known artists.

More recently, the global pandemic and its economic impact, especially in New York, a city that relies so heavily on density and face to face networks for its economic and social advantages has further undermined NYC fragile artists' communities, composed in part of global nomads, artists from all over the world who have sacrificed the safety of family support and cultural familiarity to find their artistic voices and a different kind of community in a new and challenging environment. It is this alienation - imposed by market forces that have turned cities like New York which once fostered ragtag artists into luxury playgrounds for the global elite and exacerbated by the grinding isolation imposed by the pandemic, that Rogers seeks to puncture with her exhibition of a group of artists who are remarkably diverse in terms of their national origins, their career trajectories and the materials they employ. As Rogers, whose background in theatre and set design has served her well in her choice and juxtaposition of artworks in this parlor space, explains about the title "this is a play on a room of one's own, artists need that, but they also need to let others in."

On entering the gallery, the viewer is first drawn to the 6 square paintings by the Danish artist Peter Pacheco, (who, as a nurse, has spent much of the past nine months attending to NYC pandemic victims) placed in serial order. Pacheco's painterly, color saturated paintings, independently conceived but nonetheless cohesive as a graphic quasi-narrative montage read as an assortment of vignettes, which include a wall of luscious red rose buds pierced by one jaded looking eye, followed (left to right) by a series of disembodied feet (and one hand), sometimes standing on what appears to be a chewing gum patterned subway platform, then hanging in front of a brick wall suggestive of a prison cell, floating in a grey, airy space, standing in snow with a subway car and night sky in the background and, in one case, engaged in a sort of multi-racial foot orgy. Pacheco's influences, which include the Danish Cobra movement, the German Expressionist Max Beckman, Phillip Guston and the stylized figuration of 17th century mannerism lend a high pitched, dramatic note to the images which themselves reflect on the impossible binaries of isolation and entanglement, fecundity and expiration, and knowledge and blindness.

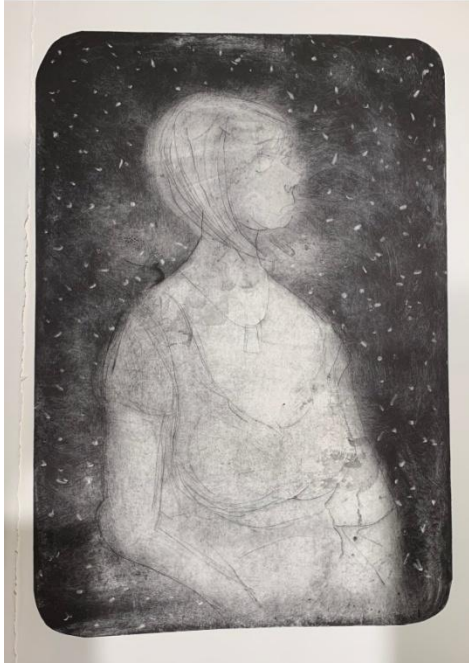


Two of the artists in the show are from Lithuania including Aura Naujokaitis who is the only artist whose work draws directly from an ethnic craft tradition and her grandmother, who was an avid embroiderer and an influence in her artistic development.

Naujokaitis has contributed a series of delicate needlepoint representing plant, snakes, patterned abstraction and an homage to embroidery art, traditionally associated with women artists.



The other Lithuanian artist in the show Sigita Rucinskaite-Praneviciene, had an early education in visual arts at Children's school of Arts in Vilnius, but was later pressured by her family to become a pharmacist to insure a more conventional livelihood, a profession that she practiced along with her work illustrating children's books. After relocating to New York City with her family, she reclaimed her artistic potential with her study of design at FIT and printmaking at the School of Visual Arts with Elaine Breiger and Alphonse van Woerkom. Her sensitive dry-point portrait etchings reveal a rhythmic flow and subtle breadth of graphic dexterity and range of tone, line and texture.



Next to Pacheco's painting we find another patch of color from the delicate tabletop sculptures by the Jamaican born artist and writer Shantel Rose Miller. Miller's welded architectural abstractions highlight the simple beauty of the steel and a keen designer's eye (Miller has a background in merchandize design). While Miller is still in the early stages of her career as an artist, her professional experience in the design world has helped her to develop a strong personal and professional artistic direction and narrative that will serve her well as she perfects her technical skills and aesthetic vision which is at present firmly rooted in the minimalist abstraction of sculptors like Anthony Caro and Tony Smith.



The Brooklyn based Italian artist Bruna D'Alessandro displays her sensual and dreamlike inner dialogue and her mastery of a variety of very different mediums through a series of ink and wet-on-wet watercolor drawings on paper as well as a welded sculpture in shape of a daisy sprouting from a pile of earth.



The dirt on the floor nods to Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room*, 1977, and the contrast between the harsh gleaming steel out of which the daisy is formed and the flower shape itself creates a striking and somewhat ominous presence in the gallery while the dreamlike figures in the watercolors, depicted in the most vulnerable positions of human experience, bring to mind the work of the Haitian surrealist Hector Hyppolite.



The back of the gallery is devoted to the work of two accomplished multi-media artists, both of whom, among other things, are highly skilled welders. Korea born artist Haksul Lee has been teaching metal sculpture at the Art Students League in New York, since 2010. Unlike most of the other artists represented in this exhibit who came to New York as part of a break with family and tradition, Lee has been a precocious artist since early childhood and has pursued his calling with the blessing of his family. Lee's influences are eclectic and include Lee Bontecue, Clifford Still, Georgia O'Keeffe, Louise Bourgeois, Buckminster Fuller and Francis Bacon. At once facile and deeply contemplative, Lee's sensibility is both playful and highly formal. His work delights in ambiguity and juxtaposition of forms and materials and the dialectic between abstraction and representation, inside and outside, painting and sculpture.

During the early days of lockdown, Lee was unable to access his New Jersey studio, where in addition to creating his own work he earned a living fabricating sculpture for other artists (including Louise Bourgeois). This left him dire financial straits, and even when he was able to return to work, his lengthy commute on public transportation from his home in Queens to New Jersey was fraught with risk and animated by the uncanny experiences of near empty train

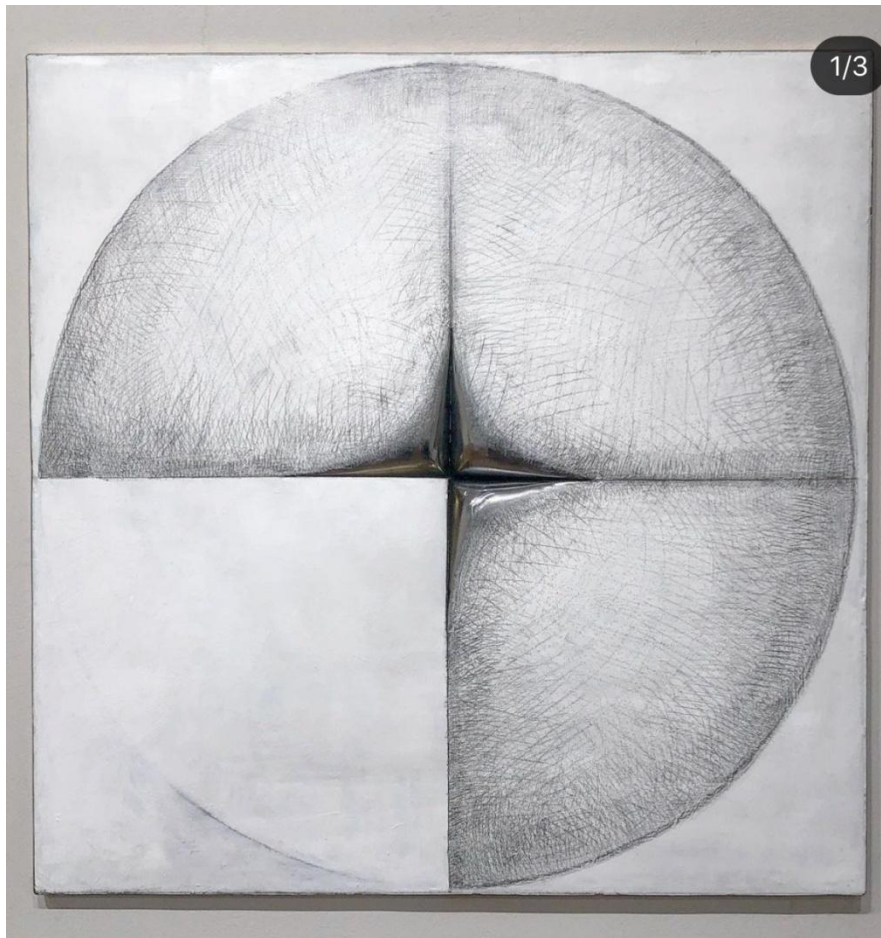
platforms and occasional scenes of violence and desperation playing out in the eerily abandoned underground spaces. When I asked Lee if the strange visual and psychological landscape of a locked down New York impacted his work he replied that it hadn't much, because "my core doesn't change because of this...my work mostly reflects my core...I've gone through a lot of difficulty already".

As we contemplated one of Lee's pieces from 2011, a H 60" W 60" D 26 canvass painted in various shades and textures of black paint and soot, with a cut-out navel or key-like hole in the middle out of which peeped an aluminum sphere, Lee explained that despite the fact that the piece was untitled: "...I'm giving it some kind of persona. [My pieces are] objects, but they have some kind of persona and then they have some kind of story. Sometimes the stories are a literal story and sometimes they are abstract. I cannot even put it into words, but some kind of persona I have in my mind or some kind of sensation. For this particular one I made the inside piece first.... and then I was thinking this needs home".



In a more recent mixed media piece, *Conceptus Et* , H 36" W 36" D 5," Lee employs delicate crosshatched pencil drawing and acrylic painting on formed steel and bronze to create a dialogue between flat and curved, hard and soft, circle and square and inside and outside. Despite the geometric, mathematical sensibility of this piece, Lee explained to me that it was inspired by the

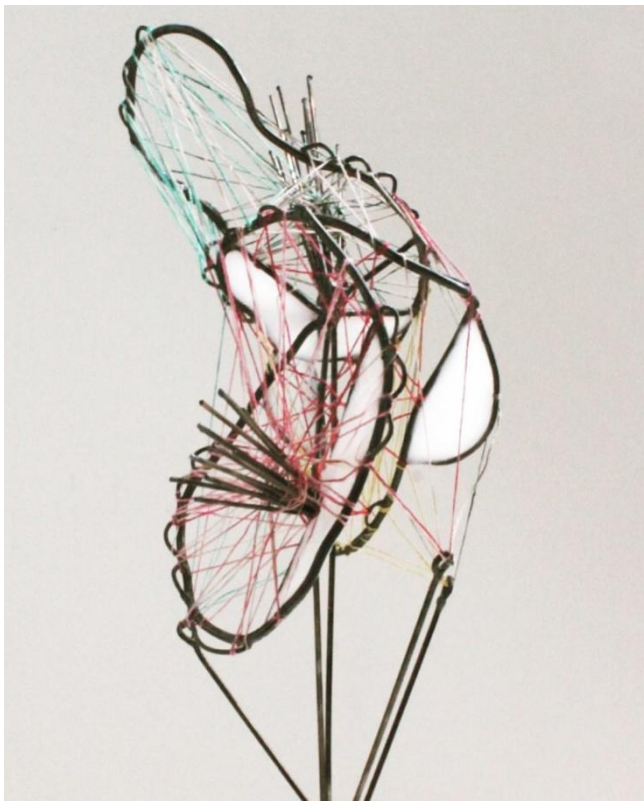
human embryo with its splitting cells and stages of development, when quantity folds into quality.

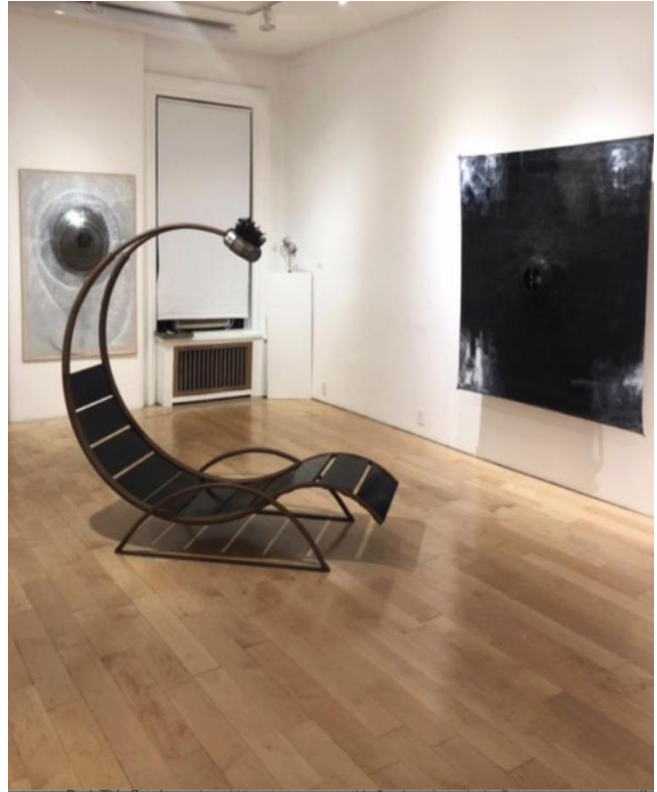


Installed next to Lee's work are selections of pieces by the Japanese-born multimedia artist Natsuki Takauji. Like Lee, Takauji, who came from a family of writers and studied creative writing at Waseda University in Tokyo before diving full-force into sculpture, has mastered a wide range of materials ranging from metal, fiber, wood, kinetic materials, water, paper, fabric and even motor oil. She also has developed an equally wide ranging visual vocabulary, which finds its deepest expression in site specific, interactive sculpture. In addition to a range of smaller, formal almost cubist-like wall pieces from an earlier period, she has contributed a lyrical tabletop sculpture made of colored string, wax delicately formed steel to the exhibit.

One of Takauji's interactive pieces is also on view. This piece, called "Confession," crafted from stainless steel and wood (H62" W29" L72" 2020) is in the form of an oversized, undulating chaise longue made from wood slats fixed to a steel frame. As the viewer takes a seat in this structure she looks into a small mirror placed on the inside of what becomes a curving stalk finishing the top of the chair's frame in the shape of a periscope or perhaps a speculum. The title makes a reference to the Catholicism which Takauji was unwillingly exposed to through her

early schooling in Japan, which, together with Japan's highly patriarchal culture, led her at an early age to question conventional social patterns and belief systems. As she explains: "I had to ride an overly crowded subway with the omnipresent threat of sexual assault or neglected by others, which was a given in the Tokyo system. Even if I made it through the day without attracting trouble from these men, I still had to deal with the gender inequality that being a woman in Japan forced on me in every public interaction. All of this led me to doubt and question the professed spirituality, ethics, perception and belief system in all societies." With "Confession" Takauji insists that we are ultimately beholden only to our own moral authority and sense of self, and that is a lonely place to be.





While this piece is the only interactive piece in this exhibition, Takauji explained to me that she is most excited by creating public, interactive sculptures, which she has had the opportunity to explore through several commissioned projects in public space, including “*Window*” - Riverside Park South, Manhattan / May 2014 - May 2015 and *Window II* - Rye Town Park, Rye, New York / June 2019 - September 2020.

Roger’s ambitious use of the parlor space of the SLA building to give voice and community to artists who are still seeking the alternative American Dream in what is perhaps the world’s most diverse city is off to a promising start. Shows like this remind us that while investors and developers, deploying their influence with city and state government have done their best to remake New York City as a luxury paradise and speculator’s wet dream, it is not too late to nurture and support the creative vitality and vision that have made this city a destination for artists.

