

Yona Lee

Objects in Practice

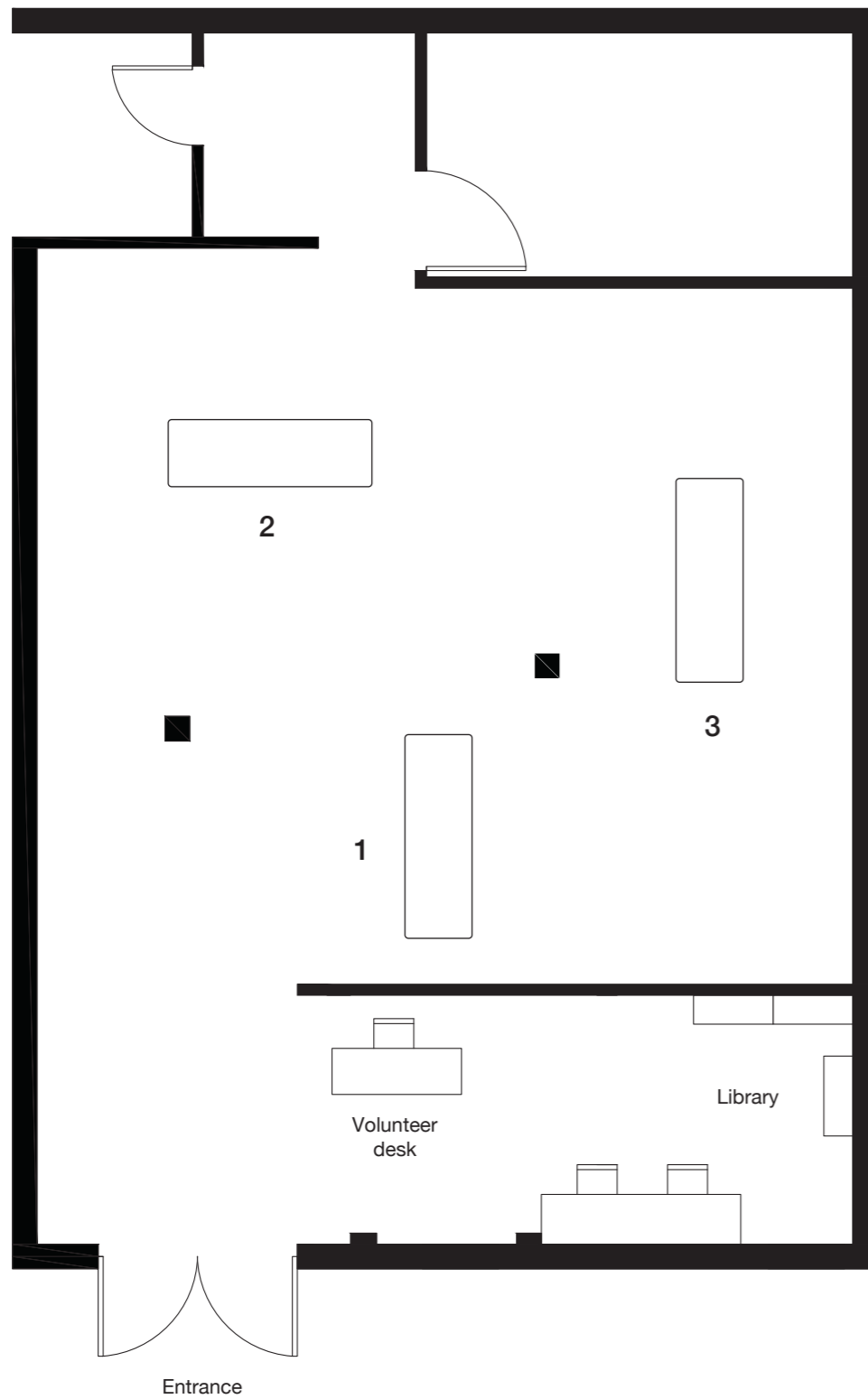
Exhibition runs: 28 April – 11 June 2023

Objects in Practice presents three new sculptures by Auckland-based artist Yona Lee. Over the past seven years, Lee has refined a vocabulary of stainless steel tubing supporting everyday items. These items, deployed in carefully orchestrated installations, evoke the itinerant and fugitive experiences of contemporary life. *Objects in Practice* is a series of material gestures that prompt us to consider the role of iteration or rehearsal within artistic practice. Further, Lee's repertoire of actions, built up over time, expresses the habitual, intricate, and sometimes acute drama of our everyday lives.

The free-standing sculptures in *Objects in Practice* sit low to the ground on coloured yoga mats. Upon encounter, they draw the eye and the body towards the floor, changing a typical viewing experience by asking us to crouch down or to sit alongside the works. The bright colours of the objects and mats draw the viewer in, leading the eye and the body into the space. There is a sense of play as Lee's floor-based sculptures bend themselves into sleek knots, their bodily scale eliciting the tacit knowledge of hand-

to-steel and knee-to-mat. They are also like bodies themselves. A clock face might stand in for a head; a pair of inverted lamp shades for a torso. A clamp might become an articulated wrist, its hand clutching a red umbrella which shields a mop head at its base, a visual pun that breaks the minimalist order in these works. In this way, Lee's works take on a surreal quality, becoming reminiscent of an attenuated figure at rest, or schematic yoga diagrams, and making strange our encounters with everyday objects.

In earlier installations, Lee used steel handrails alluding to public thoroughfares and transit infrastructure, inviting viewers to navigate spaces of controlled movement and impasse. In doing so, Lee recognised the ways in which these systems both enable and constrain our desire for unlimited movement. What might these new works show us about bodies in motion? And how do we relate to these sculptures—as figures or models for another form of movement? Like her earlier works, these sculptures are sensitive to the collective experiences of urban living. During a recent visit to Korea,



Lee observed how yoga and other health-conscious practices were being adopted en masse whereby individual wellbeing supports social cohesion. However, in *Objects in Practice*, we feel as if we are stepping into an exercise class populated by small creatures, overturning the logic of the works and suggesting dream-like possibilities.

Perhaps the comedic or subversive qualities of *Objects in Practice* have always been present in Lee's work. In an earlier installation by the artist, one might have experienced the shock and joy that ringing a bus stop buzzer in a hushed gallery induced. Or looking at her installation, *In Transit (Highway)*, at the 15th Lyon Contemporary Art Biennale from a distance, feeling the exhilaration and paralysing vertigo of being 12 metres in the air and only a few centimetres from imminent disaster. These visceral, emotive punctuations might allow us to consider Lee's work from an alternative perspective that places the body first.

Lee has often compared her artistic process with musical performance and the interpretation of the composer's emotional and narrative intent. Similarly, we can view Lee's careful study of space as an attempt to understand a given site and to respond intuitively using a personal vernacular of lines and colours. This negotiation between composition/space and performance/sculptural intervention might bear a relationship to improvisational performance, which depends upon shared knowledge, and a repertoire of actions, built up over an extended period of practice. In turn, perhaps we can think about Lee's exhibition as a kind of improvisational performance, embodying a personal archive of gestures and memories, and capable of conveying vast emotional reserves.

An accompaniment to this exhibition might be found in South Korean writer Bae Suah's *A Greater Music*. In this novel, the protagonist recounts her experience of moving from Seoul to Berlin as a series of fragmented recollections. The novel unfolds in three parts, like a musical composition, taking the reader through the extreme highs and lows of love, desire, betrayal, and death. In one

sequence, the protagonist plummets into an icy river, and she observes herself through a series of flashbacks as her body fights against immobilising terror. The author herself bears a resemblance to the protagonist—both are students of German language—and we feel her grappling with the slipperiness and inadequacy of a foreign tongue, yet in its structure finding the means to express the contingency of memory and her own peripatetic experience.

If we read Lee's work in a related way, objects and steel become 'flashbacks', forming a repertoire of spatial gestures built up through iteration and sensory recall. This is also the way in which we might experience her chosen materials in the world outside of the gallery: fleetingly yet in profusion. One result of Lee's iterative method is that there are infinite opportunities to rehearse the ordinary, strange, and improvisational performance of our everyday lives.

- Amy Weng

LIST OF WORKS

1. *Mop in Practice*, 2023
mop, umbrella, stainless steel
97 x 98 x 111cm
2. *Clock in Practice*, 2023
clock, stainless steel
68 x 29 x 40cm
3. *Lamp in Practice*, 2023
lamp, stainless steel
69.5 x 38 x 47cm

Yona Lee was born in 1986 in Busan, South Korea and she is based in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa. Lee's work has recently been the subject of solo exhibitions including *An Arrangement for 5 Rooms*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (2022); *In transit (choose a network)*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (2018-2019); *In Transit*, City Gallery Wellington (2018-2019); and *Succession*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery (2020). She has featured in large-scale thematic exhibitions including the Busan Biennale, South Korea (2020); 15th Lyon Biennale of Contemporary Art, France (2019); and Changwon Sculpture Biennale, South Korea (2016).