Korean-born artist Haegue Yang is known for her multi-faceted sensorial installations and sculptures occupying the in-between spaces where public and private meet. *A Mag* discovers her weird and wonderful world
When Igor Stravinsky’s 20th century masterpiece, The Rite of Spring was first performed in Paris in 1913, it was a disaster. Erratic and jarring, the music rising and falling in layers of drama and dissonance with abrupt twists, the audience jeered and booed it, even throwing vegetables at the stage.

This disjunction is precisely why Berlin and Seoul-based artist Haegue Yang - who gained international attention after her installation in the Korean pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale, a structure of coloured, hanging Venetian blinds flapping to wind-propellers – chose it to accompany the latest display of her artworks entitled Quasi-pagan Quasimodern Shift, currently on show until mid-February at Aïshti by the Sea in Beirut.

"The history of Russian avant-garde art has helped me gain an understanding of what I am doing, developing my consciousness as an artist. And The Rite of Spring was part of the Ballets Russes, and wasn’t received well at all at first – it’s eclectic and not harmonious. Those days, we may all know it as legendary, but it took over a hundred years for the work to become celebrated," Yang says, as we listen to its staccato rhythms while walking through the ten anthropomorphic sculptures made of artificial straw that make up the installation.

First shown at Galeries Lafayette in Paris in 2016, albeit in slightly different guises and under the title Quasi-Pagan Modern, the works came to Aïshti by the Sea after a joint effort between Yang’s galleryist Chantal Crousel and Aïshti CEO Tony Salameh, who both felt the sculptures could be staged in the David Adjaye-designed building.

"Haegue is very interested in crafts from all parts of the world," Crousel said, as we listen to his continued dialogue with contemporary dresses of mannequins, in a nod to traditional, decorative aesthetics but are largely artificial; they have a tribal, surrealist feel to them. The music related to shamanic ritual dances that accompanies them to Beirut, in a sequence of diverging motifs: "It’s a cultural detour of sorts, in atonal music about the juxtaposition of diverging motifs: ‘It’s a clash of two forms, in anomalous music about a Native American pagan sacrifice spring ritual. I wanted to integrate it in my work.’

It isn’t hard to see why since the sculptures have horn-like heads, others are more cylindrical and bulbous in form and many of them have fake plants emerging from them. With playful titles such as: Long Neck Woman Upside Down or Inverting, Solid Cloud, Yang’s works look organic, yet are largely artificial; they have a traditional, decorative aesthetic but are also anti-classicist and modernist in their geometries. The choice to use The Rite of Spring she says, points to her continued obsession with this kind of hybridity, in the juxtaposition of diverging motifs: ‘It’s a clash of two forms, in anomalous music about a Native American pagan sacrifice spring ritual. I wanted to integrate it in my work.’

"As I moved from IV stands – which were too frail to carry more objects – to clothing racks, it started to become an autonomous sculptural language: the bodies of mannequins draping with cables, bulbs, metal strainers, baskets, fly swatters, whistles, knitting yarn, plastic tunnels and other miscellaneous items. These sculptures in turn grew out of a Series of Viable Arrangements (2007-9). "I imagined a group dance of pagan figures, such as Native women and medicine men in duets and trios and I was envisioning a choreography with The Rite of Spring as my reference. At the time, I thought it was exploitative to use another author’s music but it became a necessity to lend movement to the piece.

Yang began using frames like IV stands on wheels, or drying racks wrapped in fabric and elements like bulbs and cables, in what seemed like ad hoc sculptures, after she visited her late grandmother’s house. “I went there and there the drying rack IV, drying fans, strobes and origami – they were all there – and it all just came together in my work.” So she created an installation on-site, Seoul 30. “As I moved from IV stands – which were too frail to carry more objects – to clothing racks, it started to become an autonomous sculptural language: the bodies of mannequins draped with cables, bulbs, metal strainers, baskets, Venetian blinds, netting, artificial plants, dried herb bundles, mushrooms, charcoal, metal strainers, baskets, bulbs, fly swatters, whistles, knitting yarn, plastic tunnels and other miscellaneous items. These sculptures in turn grew out of a Series of Viable Arrangements (2007-9). "I imagined a group dance of pagan figures, such as Native women and medicine men in duets and trios and I was envisioning a choreography with The Rite of Spring as my reference. At the time, I thought it was exploitative to use another author’s music but it became a necessity to lend movement to the piece.”

Before she began experimenting with straw, Yang was making light sculptures out of IV stands and clothing racks. Her Warrior, Believer, Lover series in 2011 featured 33 such works draped with cables, bulbs, Venetian blinds, netting, artificial plants, dried herb bundles, mushrooms, charcoal, metal strainers, baskets, bulbs, fly swatters, whistles, knitting yarn, plastic tunnels and other miscellaneous items. These sculptures in turn grew out of a Series of Viable Arrangements (2007-9). “I imagined a group dance of pagan figures, such as Native women and medicine men in duets and trios and I was envisioning a choreography with The Rite of Spring as my reference. At the time, I thought it was exploitative to use another author’s music but it became a necessity to lend movement to the piece.”

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But building art pieces out of unusual materials such as bicycle bells and Venetian blinds, which she calls “harmal discoveries,” can be traced to the very beginnings of her art practice. Leaving Seoul, where she trained as an artist, for Germany in 1994, she found herself in a place that was completely foreign.

"I don’t know if you can imagine the confusion I went through... I couldn’t interpret the social
codes. I had never been to Europe before, I decided to leave home because I didn’t know what to do next – after I failed to get into grad school in Korea,” she recounts unabashedly. “I had studied sculpture in university and I had lost the sense of what art means.”

So the art student, disillusioned with the academic system in her country, which she describes as a “Japanese import mixed with American influences,” found refuge in the most unlikely of places: the Bauhaus, or your typical German hardware store. “I was fascinated, we don’t have these kinds of stores back home… The thick store catalogue became my Bible, and where I learned German words.”

Yang made her first paper collages out of these catalogues, in her Hornbachbild or Hardware Store Collages series, featuring various tools such as faucets, door handles and tubes – which may not be the coolest thing for artistry today but at the time with little money, Yang used the materials she had at hand. “This is Warenwelt, German for the ‘world of things/commodities.’ I didn’t see it then but I had begun to develop my vocabulary out of lacquer and varnish, casts and plaster.

“The decision to include this early work as the beginning of my career in this monograph,” she says, as she shows me the latest published catalogue of her artworks by Kunsthaus Bregenz, “was a crucial yet difficult one. For a long time, I didn’t understand these formative works on my own. I considered them mere studies, and was embarrassed by them. I even often threw everything away, since I had no means to store them. So there are only some 35 mm slides remaining of the actual works.”

She moved further in her fascination with the everyday with Social Conditions of the Sitting Table in 2001, a pseudo-social study of the ubiquitous low-lying tables in Korea: “The ownership of this nameless table, with the height of a chair and the surface area of a table, isn’t questioned; it’s used in spaces that blur the private with the public. I’m interested in these urban objects that are on the verge of disappearing,” Yang says, referencing Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades, or mundane objects that are found and repositioned to become art (such as his notorious 1917 porcelain urinal, Fountain).

In the same year, Yang created What I’d Love to Have at Home, by placing a vintage sofa near empty metal shelves in a minimalist expression of modular living, a desire for private space, and also a paradoxical yet desperate statement on both art and lifestyle by a young artist.

“It’s not that I didn’t have the desire to make things during that period.” Yang says, “I just didn’t see how working with the discovery of objects, such as in a shopping mall, on the one hand, and making labour-intensive works on the other, were contradictory. They exist as parallel desires in me, in a hybrid approach of found and made. In a similar way, many other seemingly opposing parts, such as anthropomorphic and geometric, organic and artificial, indeed build a contrast, yet aren’t conflicting.”

Perhaps the best examples of this inclination are her recent mobile sonic sculptures (2012-2013), metallic, spherical forms made out of bells. “I began these around the same time as my so-called light sculptures began to fade away. And the series of The Intermediates, the straw sculptures, which began in 2014-2015, followed… their materiality is so different.” The former may look cold but they vibrate with sound as they move.

While her straw sculptures communicate by evoking some kind of esoteric dance ritual, her sonic pieces communicate through movement and resonance. Both are bizarre and move through sound; both are profoundly uncanny and perhaps a little tatty and uncool. Both work with oppositions that re-imagine the ordinary as extraordinary, the primitive as contemporary, and the organic as artificial.