



NEW SKIN FOR THE OLD CEREMONY

Resembling 20th-century surrealist objects, the thirty-three sculptures composing Yang's latest work to date are eccentric assemblages of prosaic materials—challenging viewers to plumb their psyche with the soulless matter of the contemporary world.

words by JOANNA FIDUCCIA

From left:
Square Splendor - Coalesced orbits, 2010
Collection of Kunsthau Bregenz

Medicine Man - Hairy mad joint, 2010
Courtesy: Greene Naftali Gallery, New York

Medicine Man - A good hunk of safety, 2010
Courtesy: Greene Naftali Gallery, New York

Stone Dance - Shaded, 2010
Courtesy: Greene Naftali Gallery, New York

All photos: Nick Ash



The accounts of that night are rapturous, inconsistent, improbable, legendary. On May 29, 1913, Serge Diaghilev's production of Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, choreographed and danced by Nijinsky for the Ballet Russes, premiered at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Nearly all the Parisian *beau monde* was in attendance.¹ According to some, the whistles and jeers erupted soon after the prelude began; detractors heckled and defenders applauded, and the musicians played on inaudibly while Nijinsky shouted counts to dancers deafened by the din. Insults flew, as did a few punches; Romola Nijinsky even claimed a duel was fought the next day at dawn.

That year, the ballet had a special purchase on the avant-garde: in Diaghilev's productions, cultural foment was lived out on a spectacular scale, and no sensibility was spared. In fact, it was in the liner notes for another ballet—Jean Cocteau's *Parade* (conceived, according to Cocteau, on a midnight carriage ride with Stravinsky, Diaghilev, and Nijinsky the very evening of *Le Sacre's* premiere)—that Guillaume Apollinaire first coined the term that would designate Paris's next avant-garde: "surrealism." Slightly less than a century later, an oblique homage to *Le Sacre* has taken the stage—or the floor—at the Kunsthau Bregenz. Drawing from sources as multiform as medicine men and mineral formations, dollar stores and séances, land art and the aforementioned ballet, Haegue Yang's most recent work, *Warrior Believer Lover*, is a glimpse into the contemporary surreal.

Warrior Believer Lover consists of thirty-three sculptures made of metal clothing racks festooned with a medley of domestic articles, handicrafts, and store-bought items. Yang assembles them gradually and intuitively, crocheting yarn around the stands, draping plastic plants, dangling wigs or stones, delicately inserting plastic hair rollers, and snaking strands of frosted light bulbs through the ensembles. The racks are positioned throughout the space, subtly congregating in subgroups organized around shared materials and rack-varieties, and titled by Yang accordingly: There are six *Female Natives*, six *Medicine Men*, and the trio of *Totem Robots*, the *Circular Flats* and *Square Splendors* and *Stone Dances*, as well as a cast of stand-alones, with names like *Dilemma Circus*, *Thrifty Ghostie*, and *Stiff Sponge Belly*



From left:
*Female Native – Saturation
 out of season, 2010*
 Courtesy: Kukje Gallery, Seoul

Medicine Man – Hairy noble, 2010
 Courtesy: Greene Naftali Gallery, New York

Female Native – Possessed hillbilly, 2010
 Courtesy: Kukje Gallery, Seoul

Dilemma Circus, 2010
 Courtesy: Kukje Gallery, Seoul

All photos: Nick Ash

Dance. Together, the sculptures form what Yang calls a “charged field,” invoking Walter de Maria’s *Lightning Field* (1977), but also recalling André Breton and Philippe Soupault’s first experiment in automatic writing, *Les Champs magnétiques* (*The Magnetic Fields*).

Written in 1919 by passing the manuscript back and forth in order to record an uninterrupted stream of consciousness, *Les Champs magnétiques* modeled the technique that sought to liberate the forces of the unconscious through pure psychic play. The Surrealists would practice séances and other rites to achieve the same goal, however it was with automatism’s migration into the visual field that the movement hit upon its principle aesthetic tactics: automatic drawing and the surrealist object—an object that, through a spontaneous encounter (with us, no less than with other objects), makes legible our latent desires and drives. “So it is,” writes Frederic Jameson, “that some chance contact with an external object may ‘remind’ us of ourselves more profoundly than anything that takes place in the impoverished life of our conscious will [...] [T]he objects around us [...] stand as the words or hieroglyphs of the immense rebus of desire.”² For the Surrealists, the flea-market find or everyday bauble produced an object-language for the unconscious; it became an enunciation of what cannot be said, a portrait of what cannot be seen.

Warrior Believer Lover is the result of a kindred aleatory harvest (as the artist explains in her conversation with Yasmil Raymond in this issue, see page XXX). As is the case with the surrealist object, the articles in Yang’s sculptures are ordinary, banal as dreams, and their combinations are no less quizzical than Lautréamont’s “chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table,” the image puffed by Breton to characterize surrealist beauty. Roughly human-sized, the sculptures suggest a corps de ballet assembled for the pagan ritual described in Stravinsky’s ballet, composed like wild distillations of the costuming for Nijinsky’s primitive grotesque: the *Female Natives*, who dance around the maiden chosen for sacrifice; the *Medicine Men*, who enact the “Ritual Action of the Ancestors” in Act II or represent the “Procession of the Sages” in Act I... Periodically, the museum lights dim and the sculptures, illuminated by their own bulbs, seem to flush with life as the opening bars of *The Rite* begin to play. In the dark Kunsthaus, the sculptures lose their narrative potential, as the artist says—only to thicken with



magical possibility. One half believes that they might begin to dance their roles.

The experience is uncanny, but also comic, and not merely because of the boldness of blaring Stravinsky from museum speakers. A real material difference distinguishes Yang's work from surrealist objects, "vibrant with mana or taboo,"³ and makes such fantastic projections improbable. The majority of the elements cladding Yang's clothing racks are not the patinated, charmed tokens found in 1920s Paris. Rather, they are cheap commodities, their low price-point a reflection of their easy reproducibility. The glowing bulbs make a mockery of their lost aura, and convey a grim, twenty-first-century perspective on the kind of psyche that must find its language in the only objects left to it: plastic, soulless things, without history or legacy. For what desire is telegraphed in *Female Native - Fruitful Glow*, whose artificial grape vines and plastic gourds entwine with a garland of cosmetic sponges and a cluster of aluminum reflectors? How noble is the *Medicine Man - Hairy Noble*, when that most sensual/repulsive bodily matter, hair, is presented as bunch of white and silver party wigs?

Of course, not all of Yang's materials seem purchased from the dollar store. Like the work of Rachel Harrison, Jessica Stockholder, and even Paul Thek,⁴ the materials appropriated for the sculptures bear the evidence of Yang's hand. Crocheted, knitted, and papier-mâché elements, as well as other "domestic touches" like decorative fringe, mingle with store-bought products. But whereas Harrison and Stockholder's sculpture despoils its commodity-components with references to art practice (paint and plaster), Yang's sculptures are modified by craft, by everyday, non-exalted acts. As a result, they seem to offer themselves more readily as a contemporary rendition of the surrealist object: There is simply something *that much more* prosaic about *Warrior Believer Lover* that makes the sculptures *that much closer* to the conditions of the Surrealist everyday-marvelous—and therefore their contrast that much more disquieting. For if Surrealism sought to arrive at an authentic expression of the unconscious through materials chanced upon in the world, how is an equivalent expression to be achieved today with such impoverished materials? A crocheted doily hardly seems like enough to hang one's hat on, and the psyche finds a dispiriting reflection in *Stone Dance - Flat Black's* rainbow-colored papier-mâché talismans or *Thrifty Ghostie's* empty lightbulb boxes.

The tension—the charged field—between *Warrior Believer Lover* and the surrealist

FOOTNOTES

1. See Modris Ekstein's *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1989)

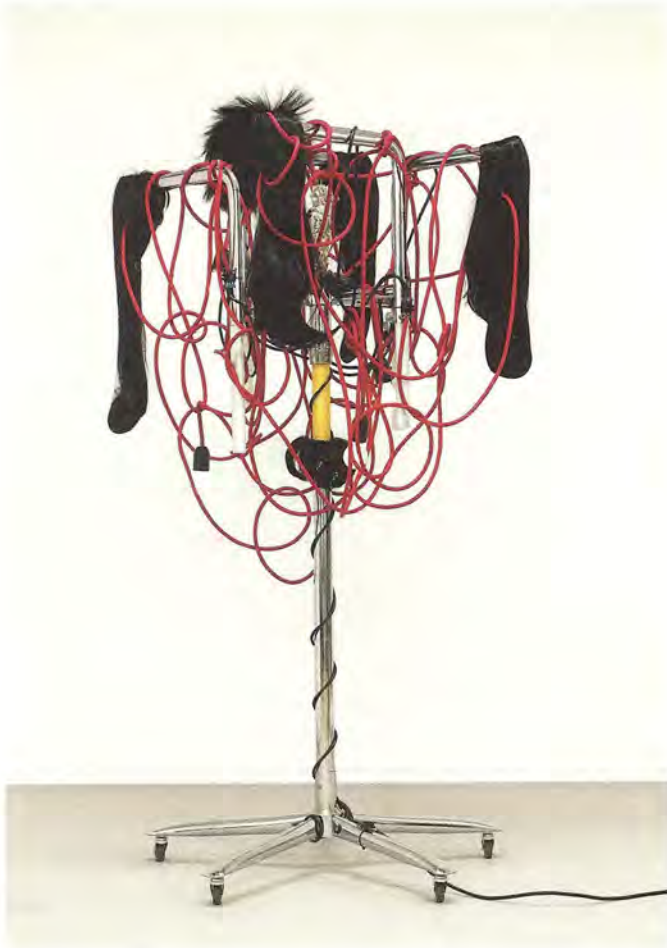
2. Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 99.

3. *Ibid.*

4. To name but a few in the continuing lineage of an alternative extraction for twentieth-century art, pursued by Gene Swenson in his exceptional

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object thus seems to reside in the nature of their components. The surrealist object was composed of commodities, too, whose force moreover echoed the commodity-form's fetish nature: to disguise human labor as the commodity's own objective characteristics. Surrealism transformed capitalism's obfuscating false animism into a revelatory operation. As "*hieroglyphs* of the immense rebus of desire," surrealist objects assumed a real filiation to the desires they represented—as though they had rubbed up against illicit feelings, as though they had been altered by contact with deep drives, before being chanced upon by the artist.

Yang's objects, on the other hand, seem to be living for the first time in her sculptures, and this gives them their winsome openness, as well as their capacity to resist, or demean, the viewer's projections. As twenty-first-century surreal objects, *Warrior Believer Lover* directly solicits identification, but deflects deep psychic recognition. Each sculpture is a richly textured get-up of objects isolated from their contexts, seemingly ripe for associative fancy. Yet the objects themselves are penurious, neutral, and almost neuter; they suggest puns or light free-association, for example in the caution-tape-yellow lightbulb cord draped around an abundance of macho black wigs in *Medicine Man - A Good Hunk of Safety*. The clothing racks evoke surrogates or stand-ins—their "rotational potential," as the artist puts it, recalling our own mobility as viewers, their lack of a pedestal bringing them to stand on the same floor we do—but when the music begins, their paralysis proves oddly embarrassing for the viewer tempted to see the earnestly her own psyche in a clothing rack.

By putting them to music (like surrounding them with scent diffusers, or staging them under theatrical lights, as she has done in other installations), Yang exposes the desire to project onto her sculptures the richly imaginative character suggested by their titles, and to read into them the object-language of our unconscious. Like the audience at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, who by rioting inserted themselves into the modern moment, we too can gain entry into Yang's contemporary surreal—but only at the risk of seeing ourselves reflected in a dollar-store item or some piece of colorful artifice. *Warrior Believer Lover* names three roles of absolute conviction, three parts most of us would like to play ourselves. The marvel of Yang's work that we are incited to play along, even when faced with a world of things that seem to offer no more soul for our aesthetic rites. ◇

From left:
Medicine Man - Hairy bloody, 2010
Courtesy: Greene Naftali
Gallery, New York

Pine Spell - Ashed winter, 2010
Courtesy: Kukje Gallery, Seoul

All photos: Nick Ash