

Text from the catalogue <Beyond and Between>*

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Since the early 2000s, Lee Sekyung (b. 1973) has been constructing a unique art world whose main component is human hair. Hair has long been considered a sacred medium that combines one's soul and body, or a symbol of power and status. It has accrued various cultural meanings across the ages and in all countries of the world. Lee conducts fascinating and profound explorations of art, society, and culture in general today, using a ubiquitous yet uncommon material-hair-as her medium. She focuses specifically on the ambivalent and contradictory characteristics of human hair. When part of the body, human hair symbolizes an external standard of beauty, well-being, and youth; yet at the very moment it falls from the body, it becomes an unclean object that elicits disgust. In many of her works, Lee addresses these contrary properties with respect to the boundaries of beauty and ugliness, and the fleeting moment at which this extreme change in the perception of hair takes place.

To emphasize the ambivalent properties of her works, Lee Sekyung uses various strategies to effectively disguise the fact that hair is their main component. Using traditional handmade craft items, such as ceramics, tableware, tiles, and carpet, Lee reproduces incredibly intricate designs from strands of hair, instead of traditional painted or embroidered patterns. She borrows diverse historical motifs to create her patterns, such as Meissen porcelain from Germany, the geometric figures of Russian constructivism, traditional tile patterns from the Netherlands and Portugal, and traditional handicrafts and paintings from China and Korea. Lee displays her intricately decorated works as if they were rare and precious relics in museums, doubling the appearance of historicity and artistic value. Due to these illusory devices, viewers at first sight admire the beauty and extraordinary delicacy of her works. Upon closer observation, however, the viewers discover strands of hair falling from the edges of incomplete decorations. At that moment, their admiration turns into doubt, and they feel an inexpressible discomfort. The troubling

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sight of embroidered hair piled on top of a plate makes viewers aware of the equivocal and contradictory standards of judgment in which our cognition is grounded. Using this artistic strategy of antithesis, Lee provokes an extreme change in recognition, requiring viewers to reconsider the various cultural and conventional prejudices that surround beauty and ugliness.

Lee has addressed many of the historical, cultural, and social issues relating to hair in various other works as well. *Transfer_Portrait* (2012), is a series of photographs based on the fact that the hair sold as a product in the West originated as a symbolic icon (typifier) in the East. Having discovered that most of the human hair sold in Europe is the hair consecrated to Hindu temples by women in India while praying for their families, Lee focuses on differences and changes in the perception of hair according to different cultural backgrounds. To identify the point at which perception changes, Lee photographed a Hindu woman wearing a blonde wig and the process of color change in her hair back to its original color, black. In other words, Lee seeks to remind viewers of the differences in social and cultural perceptions in the East and West today by inversely tracing and visualizing the distribution channel for human hair.

Lee Sekyung's *Carpet* series, which incorporates massive amounts of hair-more than any of her other projects-invokes not only cultural tradition, but the formative nature of beauty and the religious meaning of hair. Lee was inspired to create this work by the patterns carved on the ground by Hindu women each morning while holding a prayer in mind. The artist regarded the time-consuming and laborious process of forming patterns on the massive carpet from one hair at a time as training in adjusting the mind and body, or as a ritualistic enactment of a passionate desire. The arduously constructed carpet overwhelms the viewers with its size and beauty, providing the fallen hair with an aesthetic quality that transcends the negative biases usually associated with it.

The work shown in this exhibition, entitled *Hair on Carpet* (2014), is a masterpiece with formal beauty that showcases the artist's skilled technique. Lee Sekyung covered the entire entry ramp to the Ground Gallery-19 meters long with an embroidered carpet of hair. It is important to note that she created the work as simultaneously an object of aesthetic observation and one of accessible functionality. To fulfill the latter imperative, it was necessary for the hair to be embedded to the surface of the carpet. Whereas the patterns on Lee's previous carpet works were created simply by scattering or carefully gluing hairs, the patterns of hair in this work were completely planted so that the hair would not be damaged by viewers' touching and/or stepping on the carpet. It took more than six months of labor, and required a constant high level of concentration, to

complete the work.

The reversal of meaning produced by this work begins as soon as the exhibition opens. As the viewers enter the ramp, they will admire the massive and beautiful carpet/ work that unfolds in front of their eyes. They will be awestruck first by the beautiful patterns, then by the realization of the immense labor involved in planting one hair at a time by hand, and finally by the unbelievably exquisite deception of a carpet made of human hair. To enter the exhibition space, the viewers must walk across the ramp on which the carpet is placed; they must therefore step on an artwork in front of their eyes to reach other artists' works. Forced to walk carefully on top of the carpet/ artwork, the viewers will experience the complex and contradictory feelings of awe (elicited by the work's delicacy), discomfort (at stepping on human hair), and fear (of ruining an artwork). In addition, the viewers' various physical encounters with the artwork will elicit subtle changes in awareness that add further layers of meaning to the artwork.