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University Galleries • College of Arts & Letters  
6000 J Street • Library Gallery • MS 6131 • Sacramento, CA 95819  
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## A CONVERSATION WITH WON JU LIM

**KELLY LINDNER:** *You have previously described your experience of immigrating to the United States, landing in the Los Angeles area, and experiencing the city at night. Can you tell that story again and describe how that initial experience resonates with your work today.*

**WON JU LIM:** One of my earliest and happiest childhood memories was formed in the back seat of my father's first car, which was his first major purchase in the new country and a step toward becoming a bona fide "American." It was a burgundy Chevrolet Malibu he had bought secondhand from my aunt. At that time, a family outing consisted of stopping at McDonald's for dinner, followed by an evening drive on the vast, empty freeways. I remember looking out of the car window at the dancing lights and thinking that we were now living in a magical realm. One location remains ingrained in my memory: it was a city of flickering amber and green lights encountered along the stretch of the 405 freeway. I remember thinking that this was the future, that it existed within Los Angeles, and that my father's car had reached it by leaping through time. The eight-year-old me would sit in the backseat of her dad's Chevrolet Malibu, mesmerized by this vision glimpsed through the rear windshield, and would fantasize about living in that futuristic city of lights one day. The feeling of being transported to the future still resonates with me today, despite the problematic function of the site in question, an oil refinery. Unfulfilled desire toward this site, a longing for a place that I cannot occupy, remains a part of my work.

Growing up, I was part of a working-class immigrant community and had to negotiate the differences of belonging to two cultures, Korean and American—it was a learning experience. I was both and neither. During those formative years, I learned to understand my relationship to the world through two languages, from multiple perspectives, and from a peripheral position. This experience was influential in developing my position as an artist immersed in the complexities of this world while retaining a measure of criticality.

**KL:** *Your practice encompasses investigations of the built environment ranging from domestic spaces to urban landscapes. Describe your approach to architecture and how it influences your sculptural strategies.*

I studied architecture as an undergrad and wanted to pursue a career in design and architecture, but quickly found out that I was not into the practice at all. I now realize I had unrealistic ideas about what the practice entails, and my real interest has always been in the theoretical, experimental, speculative, and even fantastical aspects of architecture. For example, in my senior thesis project, I proposed a fictional character from Edgar

Allen Poe's *The Fall of House of Usher* as my client. I used the story to set the architectural program of the project, from the site study and space planning to the design. My favorite part of designing was always model making—mainly because an architectural model starts as a manifestation of the designer's mind and ends up as an autonomous object in the world. I accept the dual existence of a model, both as a 3D representation of an architect's vision and as a discrete object, in considering and developing my sculptures.

**KL:** *The French writer Marcel Proust has been a muse for you starting in graduate school. Why Proust? When did you first encounter Proust and what about his work felt relevant to you? Why does his life and writing continue to inspire you today?*

Why Proust? There is a great story about a chance encounter by the sculptor Alberto Giacometti while he was at a flea market with the founder of Surrealism, André Breton. Giacometti saw a slipper spoon at one of the stalls, and there was a moment of realization that this was the form he had been trying to produce in his studio but could not. It was as if the slipper spoon reached out to the artist instead of the other way around. He was not searching for it outside of his studio, especially not at the flea market, but his unconscious desire opened the pathway for the chance encounter. Similarly, I want to say that Proust reached out to me, not the other way around. By Proust, I'm obviously not referring to the man (nor his ghost), but a certain Proustian sensibility toward which I have an affinity. I believe a bit of surrealist tendency, an unconscious desire, is at work in every artist. They just need to be open to them.

Although I was aware of Proust's work as a young adult, it wasn't until I was in graduate school that I started reading *In Search of Lost Time*. After I completed my first artwork, I started reading Proust on a recommendation from one of my graduate advisors. Immediately, the world of Proust opened up, and I jumped right into it. I was susceptible to it and primed for it. It's not so much the writer nor the content of his work that, in a direct manner, I find inspiring. After all, a big portion of *In Search of Lost Time* is dedicated to the lifestyles of Parisians during the Belle Époque and all the gossips and frivolous dramas of the bourgeoisie—how someone's dress is out of mode, who is having an affair with whom, the details of the food served at a dinner party, and so on. But there are beautiful moments when the narrator dives deep into his melancholia, which turns into philosophical observations about his relationship to the world. He also departs from reality and plunges into a fantastical world where things and people from different places he has lived or visited come to life. Longing—not a desire toward a particular thing but a longing in its purest sense—is the driving force in his work. For instance, the young Marcel's desire for a goodnight kiss from his mama is never fulfilled, so the search for it continues throughout his life in his obsession toward people (Gilbert, Albertine, and Oriane, the Duchesse de Guermantes), in objects (a doorknob, church spires, the little patch of yellow in Vermeer's painting), and also in places he visited (Combray, Balbec, Doncières).

**KL:** *Memory also plays an important role in your work. Your large installations incorporating light, shadow, projection, and sculptural objects often generate a dream-like environment, where place often feels dislocated, and details become obscured. Again, let's bring Proust into the conversation.*

Samuel Beckett said that Proust had a poor memory, and I agree. Forgetting and remembering are not opposites; one does not erase or replace the other but exists within one another; they relate to each other

dialectically. Remembering is never about having an accurate account. Memory is a production of disturbances, confluences, and imaginations. A memory of my first home, for example, is a memory of a memory of a memory... The narrator in Proust's story speaks about involuntary memory, a rush of spontaneous bursts of events that happened in the past initiated by a particular sensation. The story of madeleine is a famous example: upon tasting a piece of madeleine dipped in tea, the memory of the days with the narrator's aunt Léonie at Combray rushes through his body, causing it to shudder, giving him pleasure to the point where he could not distinguish if the sensation is in him or is him.

**KL:** *As you just mentioned, remembering, and recreating the various homes you have lived in has been an ongoing point of departure in your work, from Proustian Bedroom to Raycraft is Dead and in a new series, where you are creating models of places you have lived, taking a mold, then a mold of a mold resulting in a latex form – a soft architectural model. Each series takes a new approach in how the viewer experiences the work but also acts as a device to upend expectations of our own memories. How and why does this subject continue to spark your creative investigations?*

The notion of home (positive or negative) is one that is present in everyone. A home, according to Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetic of Space*, is where we first learn to daydream in the comforts of our interior world, and as we move on in the outside world, the recollections of our home expand our container of dreams. This is a poetic gesture, not a scientific one. For me, and perhaps for those whose homes were not so grounded, this topic is loaded and complex.

In *Proustian Bedroom*, through recollections of many homes I lived in the past, I superimposed multiple drawings of past bedrooms directly onto the walls and floor of the exhibition space. Layering caused erasures, leaving unrecognizable shapes and residues of semi-recognizable shapes. I like to think of these different areas as moments. This is an ongoing project and will be concluded when I am no longer alive to remember. *Raycraft is Dead* is a series that was initiated by a decade-long feud between my neighbor and myself. This excruciating experience led me to a body of work that addresses the locus of ownership and the psychological relationship one has with one's domestic space. The works in this series—collages, photographs, sculptures, and a single-channel video—expose and examine those disturbing spaces in the house that are hidden from view, thus becoming an endless source of fantasy about ourselves, our bodies, and our place in society. The new work, the soft latex sculpture, is a bit difficult to talk about because I am currently working on this series; that is, I don't have the distance as with the previous works I just discussed. I do know that by producing many generations (a mold of a mold on a mold...) from the one original form, which is a model of a home from my past, I am interested in finding the perfect moment when the form is not quite recognizable yet still retains its ancestry. I am extremely curious about what this latex sculpture will look like at the end of this exhibition.

**KL:** *In your new film, Casting II, you explore multiple subjectivities and perspectives in both the audio and visual components. The layering is an overt expression of simultaneity, narratives and experiences unfolding at the same time, and is often associated with film. How did this project unfold for you?*

Right around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were three pivotal developments in different disciplines that changed the course of western culture: the birth of cinema, Eisenstein's theory of relativity, and Freud's

*The Interpretation of Dreams*. Marcel Proust's first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, *Swann's Way*, was published in 1913. Proust was the product or a symptom of changes that happened back then, and his work reflects this critical moment in western history. The Proustian world is oneiric, where time and space slip, expand, contract, and superimpose. A subject can be both fragmented and multiple. They slip from a subject to an object that slips and stands for a place from the past. Desire in the Proustian world is never fulfilled; it is only temporarily revealed in another person, place, or thing.

In *Casting II*, I wanted to capture the slipperiness of Proust's writing. The audio, the voiceover, and the soundtrack, as well as the video, echo the Proustian world. The narrative is told from two perspectives by a peripheral, fragmented subject. The script was excerpted from the writings of Proust and from the memoir of his housekeeper, companion, and editor, Céleste Albaret. It is narrated by Ysa Le, a Vietnamese American who lived in Paris. In the speech of the narrator, there is a residue not only of her personal past but also of the colonial histories of France and Vietnam. The soundtrack is comprised of excerpts from César Frank's *String Quartet in D major*, which was performed live in the privacy of Proust and Albaret's home. Excerpts from Frank's composition were compressed and stretched to sculpt the uncanny sounds produced while keeping the slightest residue of the original music.

In the video, a hybrid model based on the landscapes, buildings, rooms, and objects described by both Proust and Albaret is being lighted, casting shadows, while the entire production process is captured by two cameras: one that captures the hand lighting of the model, while the second captures the effect of the lights. As a result, *Casting II* is a "Cinéma Vérité", a document of its own making taking place within the interior that the video itself constructs. The visual superimposition is caused not by cross-dissolves in editing but by multiple light sources.

**KL:** *In some of your sculptural work, the visual language you use is primarily volumes and voids, which reads as a nod to 1960s Minimalism. How would you describe your relationship to Minimalism? At the same time, Baroque architecture also feeds into your work, where exaggeration and visual layering comes into play. How do you reconcile or balance these two seemingly opposite explorations.*

I think it was my second year in grad school when I went to Marfa, TX, for the first time (as part of a course on Minimalism and Earthwork co-taught by Liz Lerner and Sam Durant). Upon experiencing Donald Judd's 100 untitled works in mill aluminum at the Chinati Foundation, the course of my practice—perhaps my relationship to the world—shifted. The aluminum boxes, of the same outside dimensions yet each containing a unique interior, are installed in two rows throughout two former military artillery sheds side by side. Long glass walls were installed by Judd specifically for this installation. Because of the changing conditions of the site and the unique design of the box interiors, the navigating viewer is caught in a play of light and shadow, reflections and refractions, mass and void... I've visited this work many times, and each time I had a different experience. As with other works by Judd and those of artists associated with Minimalism—Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Tony Smith, et al.—phenomenology is at work, and the viewer is caught in an irreconcilable difference between what their mind is telling them and what their body is experiencing. It is a beautiful experience that implicates the moving, thinking, and feeling viewer.

The experience of being inside a cathedral of the Baroque period also implicates the viewers, perhaps in a different way. The moving subject is fragmented, multiple, almost a conduit through which the active conditions of Baroque architecture—scale shift, multiple perspectivalism, interiors within interiors, trompe

l'oeil spaces, continuity through discontinuous materials, to list a few—resonate. There is a constant negotiation, an exchange, or a reciprocity operating between the navigating subject and the Baroque interior.

Yes, stylistically, they are opposites, and these moments in western history are reflections of different ideologies. However, they both allow for similar experiences vis-à-vis the agency of the navigating subject. They both extend the frame—the frame that includes the body and the mind of the viewer/audience. In doing so, a dialogue and an exchange between the viewing subject and an art object open—my practice is most invested in creating interesting subject-object relationships.

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Kelly Lindner is the Art Galleries and Collections Curator for the University Galleries at Sacramento State. Her curatorial practice is centered around site-responsive and cross-disciplinary explorations.

Born in Gwangju, South Korea, Won Ju Lim is currently based in Los Angeles, California. Her work has been exhibited worldwide, including the Elzig Museum, Istanbul, Turkey; Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, South Korea; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California; St. Louis Art Museum, Missouri, and Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia, Canada; among others. *Won Ju Lim: Casting* at the University Library Gallery, Sacramento State is the artist's first survey exhibition presented in the United States.