

ISSUE 03

INTERVIEW WITH  
JAYE RHEE

This interview with Jaye Rhee was conducted via emails in July and August 2021.

It's been some time, yet I guess I'd like to start with a question about the work *Mediterranean* (2009), which was presented at the screening *Tourist's Dream* I curated in 2010 and the opportunity I got to know your work. In *Mediterranean*, you create your own Mediterranean setting in your studio with objects that can be found in daily life, embodying images of the location. I found it very interesting the way in which you play with the tension and discrepancy between 'real' desire and 'fake' objects of desire by using a signified image. What do you think about how you, as a performer or as the subject, are mediating this discrepancy?

*Mediterranean* (still),  
2009, single-channel  
video installation,  
7:50, courtesy of the  
artist.



In the work, *Mediterranean*, I bring in/take out fragmented and borrowed objects in the space which the frame of the camera captures. I turn on and off the neon that reads *mediterranean*, wrap/unwrap the blue stripes on my t-shirt to make a blue striped marine look.

But none of these acts and objects in the film can show or describe the Mediterranean. The objects, such as ambiguous foreign signboards, symbols, and emblems prove to be failed cultural signifiers that represent a misleading collective fantasy. These fantasies are not even mere touristic souvenirs that we can buy from elsewhere. It only questions what and how these acts and objects relate to the Mediterranean.

I am, as a performer in the work, the one generating miscommunication and misleading viewers. The act of performance is not to make up for the gap between what is and what it is supposed to be, but to construct the gap more clearly to evaporate the empty fantasy.

It seems the performative feature became prominent in your recent works such as *The Perfect Moment* (2015) and *The Flesh and the Book* (2013). What's different for you when not yourself but other performers are staged in a work?

Trust. Whether I perform or I have other performers/actors perform, the most important thing is trust.

But if there's a slight difference between when I perform and direct performers, that is the time that I need to build trust. When I have performers/actors to

perform in the piece, I need to spend enough time building trust in them and in me simultaneously.

It's the relationship that makes the work in a way. Like when you take care of a concept in making art, the concept takes care of the form of art or vice versa.

When you take care of a relationship and the trust between yourself and performers, it takes care of the work in some ways.

I give it enough time and wait. Sometimes I have to put down whatever I thought and had in my mind, thought, and plan in the first place, it's the most difficult part when I have performers/actors perform. But all the waiting and the time that you spend doesn't betray you. When the moment comes, everything finds and figures itself out.

*The Perfect Moment* (still), 2015, two-channel video installation with sound, 12:00, courtesy of the artist.



I'm interested in how you depict the status, which can be called utopia, truth, or the 'real', through represented images, objects, and for example, using a fictive story in *Once Called Future* (2019). What does it mean for you that something is unreachable, which it is to every human? What do you try to find in between, let's say the discrepancy?

I remember once when I was little, five or six, my grandfather passed away and the moment I heard of his passing I remembered the ocean he took me to for the first time in my life.

That day, I was alone in a quiet room, and I imagined the sound of the ocean and started to color the wall with blue crayons.

Coloring the wall with crayons was an impossible task. Though I used all the blue colors I had, the wall didn't even look good, with a few spots of blue. But even so, I jumped on a bed pretending to swim.

Likewise, every single event in life is almost always mismatched, off-kiltered all together although it has its own meaning and a degree of completion of its own. Any search for truth is like an endless, unrealizable thing which is like a faded, flickering old film.

That's a sad yet beautiful memory. Your works produced in the 2000s like *Mediterranean* seem to lead the viewer to face the gap between a sort of fantasy and reality intensely; however, your recent works, which collaborate with performers/actors or use a fictive story, seem to open up a room for many possibilities and interpretations. For example, you let performers/actors find their ways based on trust built with enough time while directing them, and you seem to accept the discrepancy between real and fiction as it is and see the incompleteness with a warm-hearted view. Do you think how you see has changed? Or did you have any moment or turning point?

The work grows or changes as time goes by.

For me, the turning point was when I finished *The Flesh and the Book* and prepared to make the work *The Perfect Moment*. My plan for making *The Perfect Moment* was to film multiple dancers explaining their own experience of a perfect moment and I had already cast about 10 dancers for the narration and a couple more for the movement part. While I was coordinating and setting the details of shooting for *The Perfect Moment*, one of the dancers whom I also worked with in *The Flesh and the Book* had an accident. She sprained her toe when she was doing her daily dance routine and a doctor told her that she needed surgery and might not be able to dance anymore. She told me she could not perform for this piece I was preparing due to her condition, though it was just a tight medium shot of her speaking. I didn't know what to do but I could feel exactly what and how she was feeling. What if, for some reason, suddenly you cannot make art (or whatever that is, something that you identify yourself with and purely devote yourself to) anymore. And this great dancer, Pat Catterson, wouldn't have thought of a day without dancing for more than fifty years of her dance career.

There was this pivotal moment, the moment of understanding, of acceptance.

A few days later, I went to see her at her place to check in on her and see if she was alright or needed anything. It was not for making art; it was a human thing, a human gesture. I kept checking in on her for a while as we were living in the same neighborhood anyway. We talked and talked, looked at her old documentation videos and talked again... then I reflected on the conversation and wrote things at the end of the day habitually at my studio.

It made me question myself deeply in every detail of the planned piece. My thoughts on the piece, *The Perfect Moment*, have changed bit by bit; it's as if things change by weathering, while keeping the core of the piece.

Even if it takes a long time to prepare, you have to commit to making a piece while your drive is still fresh and strong, otherwise, it's difficult to maintain the tension. Thus, usually, one of the most difficult parts for art-making in the long-term is to keep the same drive, focus, and tension which makes artists somewhat stubborn and strict.

Time passed, and one day I realized that most of the material for the piece was almost ready, very naturally.

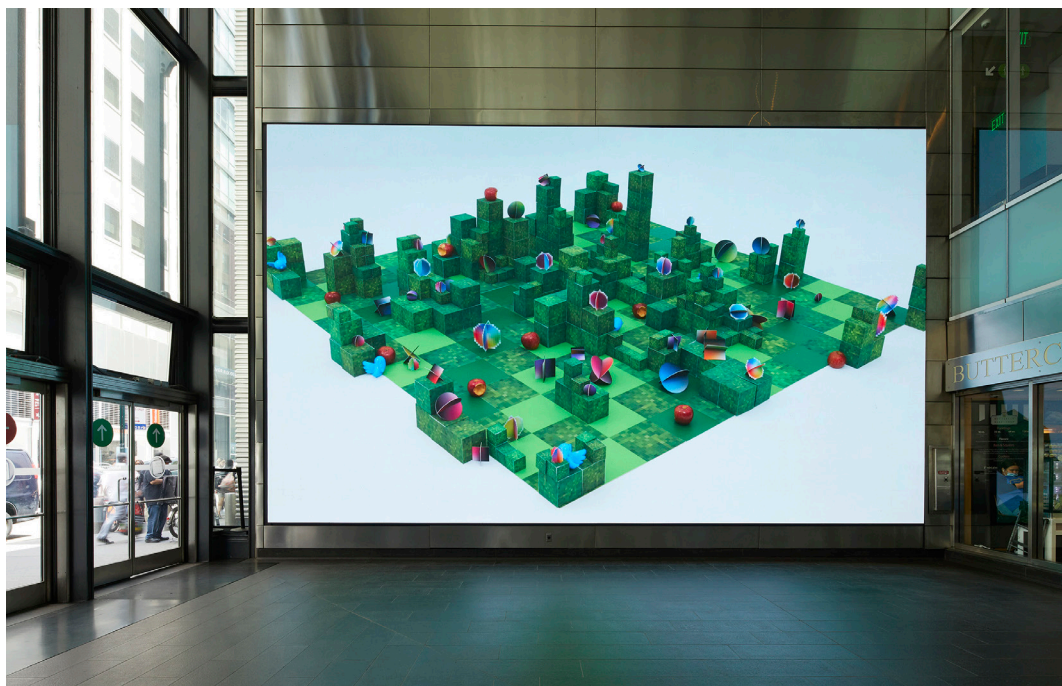
It was already there as if waiting to be made, the perfect moment.

Your recent work *Handcrafted Reality* (2021), a new site-specific work installed at the Fulton Center, New York, seems to be digitally produced at a glance.

Nevertheless, one can soon recognize that each module consists of 'real' materials and is manually assembled. What do you think about virtuality? What is different from your 'fake' images?



Installation views of  
*Handcrafted Reality*,  
2021, Fulton Center,  
New York, courtesy of  
the artist.



Ah, as soon as the MTA decided to give me this commission, making a new work based on one of my older works, *Bambi* (2009), Covid 19 hit harsh in NYC. It was early Spring of last year. So suddenly, we had a pause in the city meaning no direct contact with people and all the meetings and gatherings became virtual via, for example, Google Meet or Zoom.

I spent time in front of the computer communicating. I even spent more time looking at FB or Instagram because it was like an act of checking to see we are alright. It was the least and the most effort that I could make to maintain a close relationship with people as if it were pre-Covid. This process made me realize how much I prefer in-person meetings over virtual meetings.

When I visited my sister's, I saw my niece and nephew living half of their day virtually because they have their school activities and even playing with friends

virtually. It was a drastic change.

All these virtual communications are reality in 2020 on but it is a reality without 'real' as in flesh.

I thought I should make something that reflects this reality of the 2020 pandemic everyday life but I also wanted to make something physical, tangible and thus *Handcrafted Reality* came out.

Objects and backgrounds that I produced to film *Handcrafted Reality*, are faked objects. All are tangible, physical objects, but at the same time, none of them are real. It is true artifice.

If I compare virtuality with 'fake' images. I have to depend on my future memories. Are we going to say our 'reality' in 'virtual communication' is a 'virtual reality'? Or is it 'reality'? Are my niece and nephew going to remember this time as the beginning of all things becoming virtual? Or, are they going to remember this time just as an event of confinement and 'virtual reality' in their certain childhood time?

It's interesting that you say it can be decided depending on your future memory. Personally, I think the virtual world is also real as long as we are conscious of it, and hope virtuality would not be considered fake in the end. I'd like to hear more about this work *Handcrafted Reality*. I like the idea that all the objects are tangible and physical, yet they are artifice. I've read that each module is made of paper and you painted on the apples, which appeared in the work. Can you tell me more about its production process? The colors on the papers are printed or painted? How big are each module and this virtual world? Was it filmed continuously? How is it moving?

Yes, most objects are printed on paper, cut and folded into shapes. The colorful sphere and square object dimensions are various between 5×5×5 cm to 15×15×15 cm. It was not spheres actually, it was criss-cross cut some parts and put into the cut parts together to stand like a kind of dovetail joint. The green spectrum pixelated cubes were cube planar drawings printed on paper folded and glued.

I shot *Handcrafted Reality*, in a white cyclorama studio that is about eighty square meters. I had to think of the size of all the objects in the piece including the two dogs that appeared in some parts and the size of the shooting studio that was available at that time simultaneously. The shooting itself took two full days, but making and constructing the paper objects was the most time and labour consuming part and the post-production of the video was also time-consuming.

It was commissioned public work, and I had a limited budget and time with so many restrictions from the very beginning. It was a mixture of many things including stop motion, theatre, and playground sets for the two dogs.

Fulton Center has twelve lines of train platforms and a huge shopping mall. I had to make works for fifty-two big screens of various sizes and I wanted to show different images for all fifty-two screens within the same theme and I did, even if it seems somewhat unnecessary labour to put into the project.

Most of the people will only use the same train platform, the same shops in their everyday life, thus realistically people will hardly see all fifty-two displays, and moreover, none can see them all at once. But I thought it was like a metaphor for our city. Collectively, we experience the city but every neighborhood is different and the experience is somewhat different within the same city experience.

It sounds like *Handcrafted Reality* is quite comprehensive in a way it encompasses your interest in the relationship between real and fake, reality and fantasy, and is displayed to represent the impossibility to capture the whole and a room/gap for various views and interpretations. I wish I could experience the work in New York even if I would be able to view only part of it. As for the last question, I'd like to ask about your floor plan. We named this platform the Floorplan to manifest the basis of creation, assuming every art practitioner has their own floor plans in mind. Whether it be an installation, a painting, an image or blueprint on a monitor, text in a book, or a note on manuscript paper, I suppose they conceive of an idea while postulating that their creations will be placed in a certain setting. What is your floor plan in mind?

There was a time when I did not know, and worried about how to live my life as an artist and a person in society.

I would wake up in the morning, go out and walk to a library that it took an hour to get to, even though there are libraries in my neighborhood within a fifteen-minute walk. Reading novels with many characters, I even had to draw a character chart while reading, and I walked back in the evening as if leaving the workplace. I needed to spend a day and consume time doing something within a minimal economic budget, and the days like that seemed endless in front of me, sightless days like night.

And after some time passed with this routine, one day I realized that I could confront anything that is like fear, and even embrace not knowing what to do. I don't know what to call it, whether it is self-esteem or courage.

I just take a step without knowing what's in my next step though I plan things for what I would like to do in detail. I can only envision sensorially, and guess but never fully know what's there.

If there's a verbally explicable basis of creation for me, it is the solitude of being born as a living human being and the endless resistance within it.