



**Project
Space**



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Sangmin Lee

How to Fix a Broken Home

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“Home” is an entity that is arduous to define. It is an intricate web made up of tangible and intangible elements; a slow accretion of memories, scents, sights, and sounds. Most importantly, it is a series of patterns, movements and tasks that offer a sense of stability and security.

In his latest work, *How to Fix a Broken Home (2019)*, Sangmin Lee builds on previous explorations relating to the idea of the household to deliver an installation that carefully delves into the physical elements that help create an embodiment of home. What seems to be a collection of unrelated objects is revealed to be an intricate collage, where quotidian shapes and their attributes are displayed, repeated, and deconstructed, helping us ponder on the ever-so-important pieces of infrastructure that offer us comfort in our daily lives.

A multitude of objects - found, modified, recreated, or wholly fabricated by the artist - are set up within a large, scaffolding-like structure. Complete with a pitched roof, the overall shape appears like a diorama, inviting us to peer from the outside in. The plan of the installation is further divided into different sections,

with spaces geometrically bound by modular elements such as parquet flooring (common in large apartment buildings).

Showcasing a narrative with the help of modular or repeated elements is a characteristic of Lee's larger body of work. This latest installation builds on ongoing fabrication techniques and notions developed in previous projects; however, *How to fix a Broken Home* is not chronologically linked to previous pieces, rather an anthological slice into the artist's study of this subject. For example, in Lee's 2018 artwork *Untitled (How to Unfold a Home)*, a simple set of wooden frames becomes a three-dimensional cubicle like structure as it is unfolded, reconfigured, and unfolded. The work plays an important role in framing elements of the current installation. Scrutinizing mass produced items by distilling them is central to the artist's practice, and offers a sly commentary on the way in which spatially bound commodities become imperative in confining mundanity.

Lee carefully picks out fragments out of everyday items and highlights a sense of romance and beauty. A flower motif found on a large bag of rice is recreated, with the indispensable grain used as the medium to trace and fill new, even more delicate ephemeral flowers. It's a move that isn't done arbitrarily or simply as an aesthetic gesture; the artist recognizes the role of packaging as one of the most powerful tools of visual communication. The design of labels that make the journey along well established trade routes has been instrumental in conceiving, and, most importantly, creating romantic narratives of foreign cultures (an enduring effect of colonialism). As empires grew, so did the demand for *chinoiseries*¹ and other "curiosities" from their distant dominions. Packaging remains a ubiquitous apparatus in creating exoticized images of "far-away"

¹ European interpretation of East Asian and Chinese artistic traditions (mostly centered around decorative arts), mostly popular in eighteenth century France and Britain.

places. Lee recognizes the role of the rose as a marker of orientalist symbolism and adeptly acknowledges the grey areas left by the enduring impact of the West's gaze on the East.

The theme of orientalism plays into one of the most visible components of the current installation, in the form of effigies of both Bart and Marge of the Simpson family. The two members of one of white Middle-class American television's most iconic nuclear families stand tall within the installation, their idiosyncratic bright yellow skin drawing our attention; a yellow that has become emblematic of American pop culture through its association with the television series. This same yellow is inarguably racist and oppressive in nature and is used as a derogatory slur assigned to East Asian populations. As entire communities became scientifically *othered* by Europeans in the late nineteenth century, this hierarchy was created and these residual effects are felt to this day. Lee decides to juxtapose these two cultural notions of "yellow" together, a tongue-and-cheek acknowledgment of popular culture as a beacon of familiarity. Lee's intervention disrupts our understanding of these associations.

Yellow is also present in the work manifested in painted stripes and construction tape, playing a role in alluding to the purposefully unfinished quality of the temporary short-lived "home" created by the artist. Along with this are the heavy use of unfinished concrete and the materiality of the volume that bounds the installation; the artist deliberately alludes to the visual language of construction. There is a will to showcase a structure that is unfolding, morphing as the artist sees fit.

One of the more meticulously constructed elements of the installation is a series of scaled tetrapods, a piece of infrastructure that is now critical in protecting coastal communities around the world (including Korea, where the artist first noticed them) When interlocked, they become a concrete barrier, an effective

tool in preventing erosion. Stoic, inanimate, three-legged; they stand defiantly out of context, as a reminder of the precarious conditions that cradle the home. Dwellings have to be carved out, maintained and, in some cases, have their surrounding conditions controlled, so that they stay hospitable. Lee aims to reveal parts of the home and that are peripheral, but play a key role in upholding these lifestyles and cultural practices.

Lee understands modularity and rhythm as important in the creation of spaces that are amniotic or familiar; conversely, he is cognizant of the fact that these prosaic pulses can also be alienating and, at times, uncomfortable. Along with some of his most recent pieces, *How to Fix a Broken Home* chooses to burrow itself quietly into the mind of the viewer, reminding us of the all-encompassing power of the home in defining and unwinding both our personal and collective narratives.

- Francis May