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Nicholas Stephens *Haegue Yang: Traces of Birdsong* in: COBO, May 8, 2019, www.cobosocial.com

Haegue Yang: Traces of Birdsong



For her monumental exhibition at South London Gallery, Haegue Yang presents a collection of older and newly conceived work through which she literally and figurative traces movement, exploring its metaphorical implications. Here is our review of the globally renowned artist's show *Tracing Movement*.

Text: Nicholas Stephens

Images: Courtesy of South London Gallery and the Artist.

Peckham is a part of south London best known for the warm-hearted 1980s TV comedy “Only Fools and Horses,” in which an entrepreneurial London family in government housing tries to get rich through a variety of (often technically illegal) means. In the days when British TV consisted of only four channels, more than 20 million people would regularly tune in. TV has changed a lot since, and so has Peckham, which is now hot residential property, and home to several commercial galleries, including Seen Fifteen, Hannah Barry and Bo.Lee. Founded in the 19th century with a worthy aim to “bring art to the people of south London,” the South London Gallery long predated the comedy and the gentrification. This sets the scene for globally renowned Korean artist Haegue Yang’s new London show: *Tracing Movement*.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2-SLG-HY-036-copy.jpg>)

Installation View of Haegue Yang’s *Tracing Movement* at South London Gallery.

Hidden under the floorboards of the main exhibition room are the timeless words: “the source of art is in the life of a people.” Any visitor who reaches the centre of the exhibition room (where an X is duct-taped to the floor) will be greeted by this sentence emanating from loudspeakers above their heads: not read by humans but by “Text to Speech” bots from around the world, devoid of vivacity or intonation. It is not obvious who is talking to whom, and for what reason. In this former ballroom where iron vents blast hot air through the floor like a Roman hypocaust, Haegue Yang seems to collapse time periods, but always makes sure there is enough night and fog to hide her traces.

Her diverse and thrilling *Tracing Movement* is an eclectic meander through time and place, a sand-box of geometric collage, tinkling towers of Venetian blinds on wheels, and razor blades preserved in amber.

In a large room, one which is certainly not cluttered or over populated with artworks, visitors will pause at the doorway and revel in wonder at the wide array of materials and textures on display. Despite the diversity on offer, the exhibition stays true to the artist's consistent flair for engaging all the senses, her jovial juxtaposition of ornate geometry with flippant ephemera, and her preserving of traces of today for some undefined benefit in the future. Thus her *Lacquer Paintings* series (since 1994) presents the blades she uses in the adjacent *Trustworthies* collages (since 2010), and her *Carsick Drawings* series (since 2006) traces the jerky movements of real journeys on real-life terrain (as a side note, any readers who are fans of Sherlock Holmes should re-read *The Norwood Builder*, where Holmes makes an important deduction from a will made as a *Trainsick Drawing*). The doorway viewer's gaze will likely linger on the substantial *Dress Vehicles* in the middle of the room before the subtle new textures of the remaining works reveal themselves gradually.



(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/11-SLG-HY-012-2-e1557116523196.jpg>)

Installation View of Haegue Yang's *Tracing Movement* at South London Gallery.

Some textures are invisible and can only be heard. This show is an aural feast as much as a visual one: the South London Gallery has a programme of musical accompaniments to the exhibition (performances of the work of Korean avant-garde composer Isang Yun – another major influence on Haegue Yang), and the two *Dress Vehicles* are periodically jangled rhythmically and melodiously over the gallery's uneven floor. Visitors at any time will notice the bird song in the exhibition room. The artist is playing a recording of the air around the private meeting of the leaders of the two Koreas in the DMZ in 2018. Whilst the human conversation was secret, the birdsong was not. Its trace lives on.

Many of the seminal influences on Haegue Yang's career are alluded to by the curation of this show: her residency at the Singapore print-making institution STPI is commemorated by *The Cutting Board Prints* (2012), while her arrival in Germany is memorialized by the *Hardware Store Collages* (since 1994). The visitor begins to think of the defining experiences of their own lives. Or rather, that all experiences, significant or otherwise, leave a legacy of some kind. No memory or experience perishes. Some trace remains.

About the Artist

Haegue Yang (born 1971, Seoul, South Korea) currently lives and works in Berlin and Seoul. Yang's work has been exhibited internationally since the mid-1990s. Recent solo exhibitions include *La Panacée* – MoCo, Montpellier (2018); La Triennale di Milano (2018); a survey exhibition at Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2018); Kunsthaus Graz (2017); Serralves Museum, Porto (2016) and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2016). She represented South Korea at the Venice Biennale in 2009, and took part in dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel (2012). Her works are in the collections of major institutions, including MoMA, New York; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and Tate Modern, London. Yang is Professor of Fine Arts at the Städelschule, Frankfurt, Germany, and recipient of the 2018 Wolfgang Hahn Prize.

Nicholas Stephens lived in Hong Kong for ten years, latterly working for a leading Hong Kong gallery, specializing in contemporary ink. His articles on diverse aspects of the Hong Kong art scene have been featured in several publications. A graduate in Modern Languages, Nicholas has authored translations of novels and plays by writers including Stefan Zweig and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Nicholas returned to Europe in 2018 and writes about the growing profile of Asian artists in the region.

#Haegue Yang (<https://www.cobosocial.com/tag/haegue-yang/>)

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