Commonly Newcomer
Jewyo Rhii
Oct 11 2014
Feb 8 2015
Since the early 1990s, Jewyo Rhii has worked in sculptural installation, video, drawing, and publication. The artist did so while constantly displacing herself from her native Seoul, Korea to study and work in Western Europe and the US, and sometimes back in Seoul. Never longer than three years in any one location, Rhii has come to embrace this nomadic way of living as an integral part of her working processes. As part of this, her studios have turned into exhibition spaces, and her exhibition spaces into studios. In November 2013, having moved into a studio at the Queens Museum, just about 100 feet away from the exhibition space, Rhii began to put together this sprawling sculptural work.

Stepping into Rhii’s installation, one may feel disoriented. The 2,600-square-foot gallery feels like a single gigantic three-dimensional collage consisting of salvaged and improvised everyday materials that are familiar and strange at the same time, life-size yet somewhat awkwardly scaled. The works collectively aspire to replicate the artist’s experience in all dimensions, both physically and psychologically (much like the absurd realism pursued in Jorge Luis Borges’ 1946 short story *On Exactitude in Science* about the life-sized map of an empire).

In order to let her work tell her stories, to give a palpable presence to her own experiences, Rhii explores coincidental qualities in everyday objects and scenarios and their found or makeshift uses. She pays attention to trivialities of the city, not by photographic or pictorial means but by representing them as carefully fabricated sculptures, simply yet unexpectedly transposed into the museum space. How often does one contemplate walking on the shiny silver paint-covered rooftops of low-rise buildings visible from the elevated No. 7 subway line (*Waterproof-ed Lot*)? Are people intrigued by the differing styles of fences that adorn rows of almost identical houses (*Look Out*), or by the blunt volume of a concrete barrier in a parking lot (*Wall to Park*)?

Rhii’s installation brings the physicality of her experiences and the intuitive aspects of being a newcomer to the foreground. These can only be experienced by the visitor when actively moving and seeking out the details and totalities of the objects in the gallery space. The installation pieces together fragments of Queens as the artist has lived it, in Jackson Heights and Corona, through visual and physical manifestations of the region’s local characteristics as perceived by Rhii, the newcomer, with a sense of hesitation, discomfort, and pure awe. In Queens, Jewyo found herself among a largely immigrant population that did not always identify her as a total stranger—unlike the way she was typically identified as being different in the European cities where she had previously lived. In this site-specific installation, such daily sensations of being the unfamiliar element in her immediate environment are carried in the works that recur from previous works: draped black acetate foam sheets acting like a walk-in shelter for a group of faint pencil drawings of words and phrases—“now swim,” “current too strong,” and “two more weeks” (*Black Hideout*); assorted materials in the corner of the gallery heaped under a semi-translucent plastic sheet with an LED light mysteriously emitting its cold glow from within (*Undocumented Enlightening Objects*). These compiled objects discreetly assert their presence in the beholder’s eye.
Elsewhere in the gallery, sets of projected images move up and down the wall as a large metal structure suspended from the ceiling gently pendulates back and forth, powered by a gallery attendant stepping on a wooden lever. Affixed to both ends of the hanging structure are two sets of drawings: simple line drawings depicting two people in various poses and stretches are selections from Rhii’s 2002 picture book Two, now transferred onto translucent sheets; gridded geometric patterns come from the layered metal wires attached onto the wired structure itself. Lit by two small bulbs, they cast themselves and their multiples onto the adjacent walls and objects nearby, and become moving images only when the structure swings, setting the images, and subsequently, the viewer in motion. Eyes follow the traveling images on various surfaces inviting the viewer deeper into the apparatus until the images—both the drawings themselves and their projections—gradually settle back onto their stillness. Entitled Swing Theater (“Movey”), the work does not let the viewer sit as if in a movie theater but asks for a physically engaged observation.

*Commonly Newcomer* is also an extension of one of Rhii’s previous works, a collaborative publication titled *Outside the Comfort Zone*, written by Irene Veenstra, a Dutch art historian who visited Rhii’s 2013 exhibition *Wall to Talk to* for nine consecutive days at the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, Netherlands. During this time, Veenstra wrote a wide-ranging, impressionistic text that touched on her own life, art history, and contemporary issues, using the works in Rhii’s exhibition as a jumping-off point. This slim volume has been placed in the exhibition, available to read. Rhii experiments with materializing the textual incarnation of her previous work, to bring back the often abstract nature of the physical and psychological human experience of repeated relocation that might have slipped away between the written lines.

**Works in the exhibition**


2. *Wall to Park*, 2014, wood, metal-wire, concrete, and paint. Approximately 63 x 123 x 10 inches (wall) and 27 x 37 x 25 inches (fence).


4. *Swing Theater* (“Movey”), 2014, metal mesh, metal pipe, drawing on clear acrylic sheet, LED light, and paint. Approximately 164 x 213 x 49 inches (swing) and 62 x 70 x 50 inches (standing frame).

5. *First Work Table*, 2014, wood, house paint, metal pipe, stanchion base, wire mesh, and silver tape. Approximately 40 x 176 x 128 inches.

6. *Common Place*, 2014, wood, house paint, insulation foam, white foam, cinder block, fan, and metal. Approximately 11 x 46 x 23 inches, 13 x 60 x 49 inches, and 94 x 67 inches (billboard).


Commonly Newcomer is organized by Hitomi Iwasaki, Director of Exhibitions and Curator at the Queens Museum. Special thanks to Ikjung Cho, Eunsun Choi, Ji Youn Hong, Boram Jang, Bo Kim, Su Jung Kim, Susan Lee for their assistance to the installation of the exhibition.

Commonly Newcomer is supported by Nexon and Ford Foundation. Additional support provided by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.