

How to Sculpt the Fog: A Conversation with Haegue Yang

Haegue Yang discusses artistic conviction, creative friendships, and the beauty of intangible materials with Stephanie Yeap.

It's sometime past 9:30 a.m. on a Saturday morning when celebrated South Korean artist Haegue Yang gets on a video call with me. "I appreciate that you made yourself available," she quips, "since it is such a taboo to work over the weekend nowadays." Some artists I've interviewed (understandably) aren't always fans of early morning meetings, though I quickly discovered that Yang's comment reflects her dedication to immersing herself in her work as part of her creative process.

Most know Yang for her materially diverse practice, as marked by her incorporation of quotidian objects such as Venetian blinds and drying racks, as well as intangible materials that engage the senses, such as light and sound. Since the 1990s, Yang has made a name for herself with her multi-faceted explorations into cultural heritage, history, and movement.



Our chat comes off the back of Yang's solo exhibition *Leap Year* at London's Hayward Gallery, as well as her recent exhibitions, *Arcane Abstractions* at kurimanzutto in Mexico City and *Lost Lands and Sunken Fields* at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas. The former foregrounds Yang's deep explorations into abstraction on her own terms while the latter features her sculptural practice in terms of contrasting elements — think light and dark, manmade and organic, stiffness and airiness.

It's evident from our conversation that her visually diverse oeuvre reflects her concerns around both tangible and intangible materials, her keen interest in connecting with local audiences, and her longstanding conviction to challenge traditional modernist ideals of sculpture as something erect and monolithic.

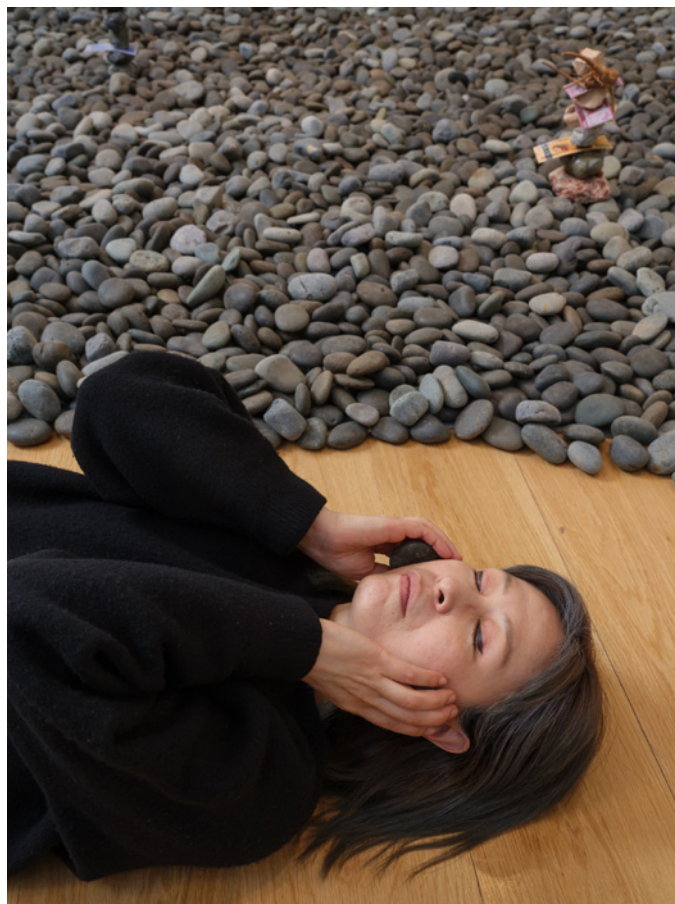


Haegue Yang, *Edibles – Market Place, Live Well, Garden Glory*, 100g, 2019. Vegetable pressed on paper, framed, 78 x 68 x 4 cm. Yang created this work during her residency at STPI. Courtesy of STPI.

Returning to Mexico

While *Arcane Abstractions* opened at kurimanzutto earlier this year, Yang's first show with the gallery, *Ornament and Abstraction*, took place in 2017. However, even before that first solo, she worked with the gallery on staging Marguerite Duras' *The Malady of Death* in Spanish. "That was my genuine desire to show my respect and be introduced to Mexico in the local language that I don't understand," Yang commented. The staging project was first conceptualised in close dialogue with gallery staff and soon Yang learnt that the Spanish version was continental Spanish, which might sound odd in Mexico.

Eventually, an entirely new translation was commissioned to stage *The Malady of Death – Monodrama with Irene Azuela* (2016) in the Yucatán region — "in the middle of the night, pitch-dark in a jungle, in a cenote, a sink hole with an opening to the sky, where countless stars are reflected onto the crystal clear groundwater. Yet all of this beauty is completely obscured, and one can only hear the sound of bats flying and accidental drops of water," Yang recalled. "I really wanted to create something with kurimanzutto so intimate, which nearly only exists as an anecdote before having my first solo show in Mexico and set the tone of the relationship between me and the gallery."



Haegue Yang. Photo by Kevin Todora. Courtesy of Nasher SC.

Some time after the staging of *The Malady of Death*, Yang's first exhibition with kurimanzutto finally took place in Mexico City. It was based on a re-reading of the Austrian architect Adolf Loos' 1913 essay, 'Ornament and Crime', which, in part, argued that labour should be emancipated from producing ornaments in the modern period. "When I re-read this short but poignant essay, I was frustrated but also compelled to engage," Yang explained. "I approached the author's perspective, as he was desperate to call out a Modernist notion of labour that craftspeople — including architects — should be emancipated from a given power structure, which is in need of ornamentation to express one's status."

Particularly concerned with how Loos portrayed ornamental tattoo in tribal community as primitive, Yang believed that "tribal, ethnic, and Native art, charged with symbolic value, aren't things to condemn." She was keen to "pursue an approach to emancipation, yet one that breaks away from this dichotomous idea" and advocated a hybrid approach that affirms the coexistence of seemingly disparate things. This became the premise for *Ornament and Abstraction*, whereas the later *Arcane Abstractions* delved into a contemporary view of folk art and indigenous traditions.

Renovated by Mexican architect, Alberto Kalach, the large hall of kurimanzutto's gallery has a ceiling with a strong wooden structure. Artworks and archival materials in *Arcane Abstractions* are either on the wall or on wooden displays, hanging down from the ceiling, embodying what Yang calls "metaphorical groundlessness." Further exemplifying this was the presence of a fog machine, which covered the ground, eventually evaporating and clearing. "Of course, this was an element, rather than a body of work, to render the whole space legless. A mystical power, I would say," Yang recalled.



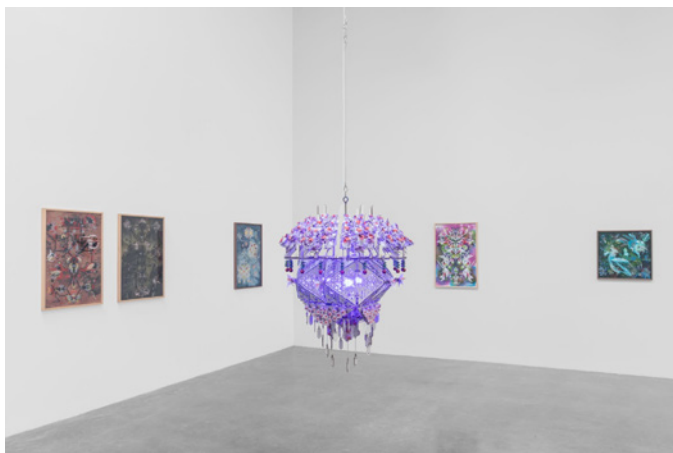
Installation view of Haegue Yang: *Ornamento y abstracción*, Kurimanzutto, 2017.

A publication, *Mesmerizing Mesh – Power Paper*, charts Yang’s research trajectory into the traditions of paper in various places. Developing the publication involved commissioning renowned anthropologist and curator Marta Turok to introduce the Mexican paper traditions of *papel picado* (perforated paper) and *amate* (a bark paper manufactured in Mexico). While *amate* — often cut into the form of deities used for indigenous rituals — is well known among folk scholars, the tradition of *papel picado* has received less attention so far. “Even many Mexicans would only know *papel picado* as a celebratory decoration, hanging above you as a flag at various festivities, without much recognition as a form of art or serious scholarship on it. So, this publication was meant as an update of those traditions, as a way of returning to the people,” Yang commented.

This sentiment manifested in the eventual exhibition, with Yang actively deciding to embed research materials and documents on the backs of works. “I’m aware it’s a bit of a taboo to put all the documents and my field trip reports in the context of a contemporary art show, but I felt I had to do it, to return my powerful findings here in a respectful way,” Yang added.



Installation view of Haegue Yang: *Arcane Abstraction*, Kurimanzutto, 2025. Photo by Gerardo Landa.



Installation view of Haegue Yang: *Arcane Abstraction*, Kurimanzutto, 2025. Photo by Gerardo Landa.

In conversation with the organic

Exhibiting almost concurrently with *Arcane Abstractions* was *Lost Lands and Sunken Fields* at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas — and both shows' presentations simply could not be any more different. While *Arcane Abstractions* hosted diverse works in a horizontally successive manner with the rising and disappearing fog mystically covering the floor, *Lost Lands and Sunken Fields* spanned vertically both the Nasher's indoor galleries across two levels and the iconic sculpture garden.

The unique characteristics of the Nasher's architecture allowed Yang to explore her interest in working with light and responding to new ways of sculpture-making. Light came not only through the ceiling, but also through large glass panels at both ends across the ground-level galleries, with openings that exposed the green gardens as well as the side street — creating a multi-faceted setting with both built and natural environments.



Installation view of Haegue Yang: *Lost Lands and Sunken Fields*, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas. February 1–April 27, 2025. Photo by Kevin Todora, courtesy of the artist and Nasher Sculpture Center.

Yang decided to cover each side of the gallery with pebbles and moss. Her *Mignon Votives* series (2025–), each under 40 centimetres, revealed her interest in sculpture that was unpretentious. In the ground gallery, one could hear the sound of ocean waves hitting a pebble beach despite there being no visual evidence of it. “Water is actually a continuous motif of this entire show,” Yang shared. The recording is of Yesong-ri Mongdol Beach, a pebble beach on Bogil Island, located at the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula. In ancient times, the king would send people to be exiled in this remote place, far from the capital.

Upon encountering the pavilion architecture there — where those exiled would sing songs about loneliness and nature — Yang was struck by “how much we have to endure so the art form can continue to exist.” Her experience at Yesong-ri Beach prompted her to refer to the island in the series and highlight the air as a rendering material for the sound recording.

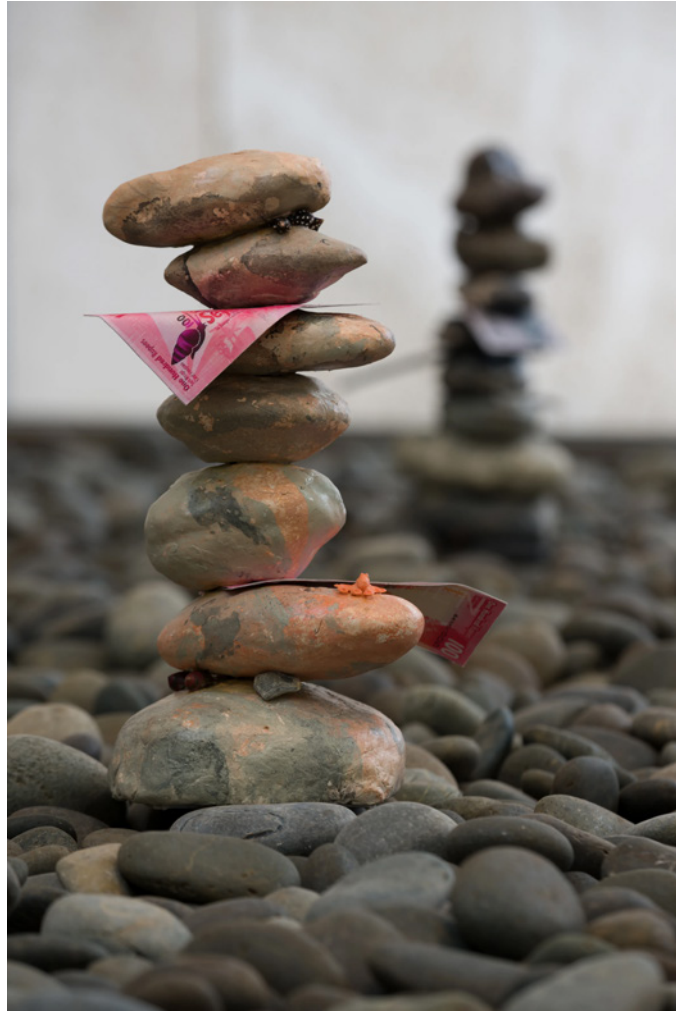


Installation view of Haegue Yang: *Lost Lands and Sunken Fields*, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas. February 1–April 27, 2025. Photo by Kevin Todora, courtesy of the artist and Nasher Sculpture Center.

While sculpture has long been understood as a work's physical form and how it consists of volume in space, Yang marches to the beat of her own drum, as she incorporates the immaterial — everything from fog, light, water, and sound — into her oeuvre. Reflecting this in particular is Yang's choice to place one of her iconic *imoogi* sculptures *The Intermediate – Six-Legged Carbonous Epiphyte Imoogi* (2025) near and around the fountain in the garden of the Nasher Sculpture Center. Drawing from Korean myth, the *imoogi* is a mystical creature that doesn't have a fixed form. The end result was an *imoogi* that appeared "as if it's fallen into the water or rising from it," especially as the water froze and ice cracked around it.

On how the curatorial decision foregrounded Yang's aversion to traditional understandings of sculpture, she commented, "I wanted the outdoor sculptures to be near all the public sculptures, which are Western canon-styled, erected, and monolithic. I have a different heritage, so I wanted to do something parallel to this; I wanted the *imoogi* — which is all creature-like, rather than a sculpture — to be in dialogue with the environment."





Installation view of *Haegue Yang: Lost Lands and Sunken Fields*, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas. February 1–April 27, 2025. Photo by Kevin Todora, courtesy of the artist and Nasher Sculpture Center.

2025 marks the tenth year of Yang incorporating straw weaving techniques into her practice since the beginning of *The Intermediates* series in 2015. Driven first by sculptural desire and her interest in folk art and mythology, *The Intermediates* which appear in different forms as suspended, wall-mounted or free-standing sculptures, bring to life Yang's knowledge of different weaving techniques, her respect for the practice, and fascination with creating varied textures and ornamentation.



Installation view of *The Intermediate—Six-Legged Carbonous Epiphyte Imoogi* (2025) in *Haegue Yang: Lost Lands and Sunken Fields*, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas. February 1–April 27, 2025. Photo courtesy of the Nasher Sculpture Center.

The beauty of working together

Reflecting on how Yang collaborated with both kurimanzutto and the Nasher Sculpture Center — institutions that both have distinct identities and ways of working, she firmly believes in the power of collaborating and creating impactful experiences for her visitors. “I work closely with the hosting institution to make the most out of the exhibition. We have to return certain experiences that the audience deserves. Of course, I have my intentions, visions, and desires, but it’s always a collective effort, and I never want to lose that.”

The integration of creative engagement into her life is also key to Yang’s prolific practice. While some artists might have schedules for research, experimentation, and creation, her practice is exemplified simply by sheer production. “I’m such a practitioner that I have to make things in the studio. If I stop that, nothing will eventually evolve,” she states. Yang isn’t concerned about hitting a set quota, and admits that she can’t separate work from leisure. “The most intimate and private things happen while I work; my noble, public self-giving mission carries on in work. Everything is inside the work for me. I don’t know the border and I refuse to make that distinction,” she says.



Installation view of *Haegue Yang: Lost Lands and Sunken Fields*, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas. February 1–April 27, 2025. Photo by Kevin Todora, courtesy of the artist and Nasher Sculpture Center.

When I comment on how difficult art-making is, due to it taking a different form for everyone, she says something that has stuck in my head for weeks on end: “Each artist pursues something unknown even to ourselves, we jump into the unknown, so there’s a lot to fight. So, when people ask us to explain our work, it feels overwhelming. There are so many things we don’t know.” It’s an eye-opening perspective, considering how prolific Yang is, and how art-making can remain a challenge for someone who is considered established, having created work for several decades now.



Installation view of *Haegue Yang: Leap Year*, Hayward Gallery, 2024. Photo by Mark Blower, courtesy of the artist and Hayward Gallery.



Installation view of *Haegue Yang: Lost Lands and Sunken Fields*, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas. February 1–April 27, 2025. Photo by Kevin Todora, courtesy of the artist and Nasher Sculpture Center.

Producing works that subvert traditional ideas of sculpture as we know it, it's an understatement to say that Yang has played a big role in changing contemporary perceptions of the medium. Recalling how she's been working in sculpture for decades, she shares that she initially wanted to be a painter as a child, since "that was all [she] knew about art," and only encountered sculpture as a notion in high school. When asked how her idea of sculpture has changed over time, Yang states sagely, "I've reached the point where it's not about getting to know the genre. Instead, I focus and reinvent the notion. Expanding on it — that's my artistic role within the realm of sculpture."



Installation view of Haegue Yang: *Lost Lands and Sunken Fields*, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas. February 1–April 27, 2025. Photo by Kevin Todora, courtesy of the artist and Nasher Sculpture Center.

Written by Stephanie Yeap