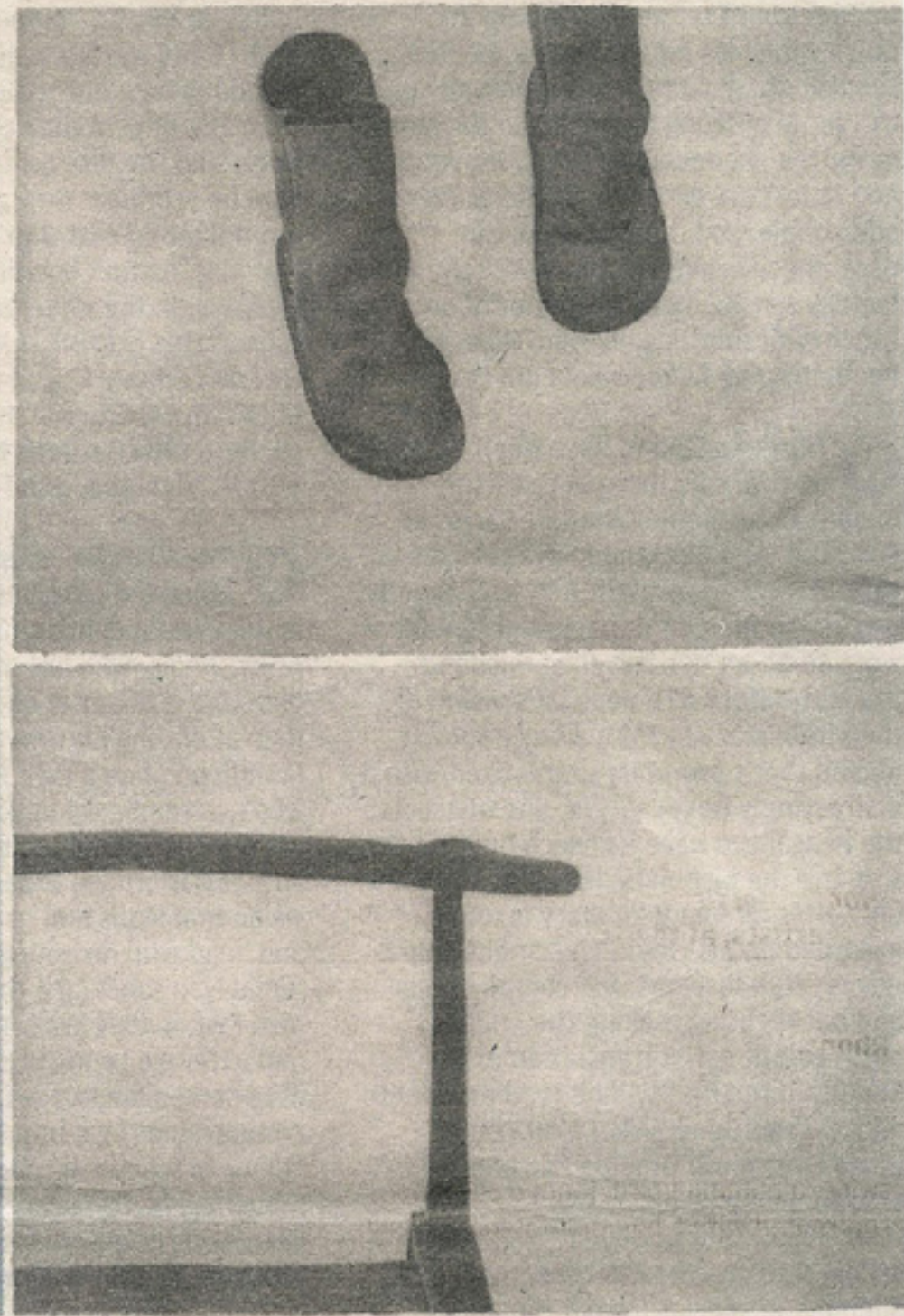


Now Showing

Meditations on Rice Paper



Jungjin Lee in front of *Thing 03-02*, her *Thing 04-27* (top) and *Thing 03-04*

The ordinary objects in Jungjin Lee's "Thing" photographs—a coat, a chair, a clam—hover mysteriously in space, stripped of their backgrounds. Their solitary forms, which seem fused with the handmade rice paper she prints on, radiate quietude.

Lee was born in South Korea, where she still lives, and attended a Seoul art school that didn't offer photography courses. The students organized a photography club and took weekend shooting trips to the suburbs and countryside. The youngest of five children in a "very traditional, very restrictive" family, Lee had never traveled on her own before but soon was making shooting trips alone. She was drawn to nature, country landscapes, houses that looked vacant. "I still like to photograph things that feel empty, like a wall or the corner of a building," she says. "I'm very private. I prefer to be alone. My soul is more to the shadow side."

After graduating in 1984, Lee began working as a photojournalist, doing photo essays on people and places. Once she traveled to a mountainous island and found an old man who'd been living with his wife in a primitive cabin for ten years while he searched for wild ginseng. He'd never found any. "He was very

good-looking," she says. "His face had a very strange spiritual feeling." For the first time she wanted to photograph a person. Over the next year she traveled to the island to document his life, and those photos became her first book.

In 1988 Lee visited the U.S. and wound up staying nine years. She enrolled in graduate school in photography at New York University, though she didn't like its emphasis on conceptual approaches. Her focus was still solitude—even her photos of Manhattan have a sense of it, deemphasizing specific people and places, often by showing reflections in glass.

Lee saw her style at the time as overly composed, and she says that meeting Robert Frank, whose photographs she admired, helped her change it. She'd begun printing on rice paper that she hand coated with emulsion. "The paper absorbs the emulsion very deeply," she says, "so it sometimes looks as if the image is coming from the bottom of the paper." This accounts for the almost dematerialized presence of some of her subjects.

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A few years ago Lee began learning to meditate. She says that after an hour or two "I cannot separate the parts of my body, cannot say, 'This is my hand. This is my feet.' After one session I opened my eyes, and my mind was very clear and very quiet. There was a little vase on my bookshelf. I've owned it for many years—I put pencils in it. I never thought that it could be my photographic subject." But suddenly "it looked like it was symbolic of the cosmos." She photographed it and later realized that she'd caught "what I feel when I close my eyes—I don't feel any weight."

This became the first photo in Lee's "Thing" series, 11 of which are on view at Andrew Bae. Other objects include a chair abstracted to look like calligraphic brushstrokes, a pair of boots made by a Native American for his daughter, a clam bought in a fish market, and a blackboard borrowed from a cafe in Korea, then erased. She says the prints in her earlier series, seven of which are also on exhibit, tend to express specific feelings. The "Thing" photos, she says, are less about her and more about the "essence of mind," about the "vacating of thoughts." She pauses. "When I say things like this I feel a little bit funny."
 —Fred Camper