

# Maia Ruth Lee

## *Migrant Reader*

July 9 - August 20, 2022



François Ghebaly is proud to present *Migrant Reader* by **Maia Ruth Lee**, the artist's first solo exhibition at the gallery.

Maia Ruth Lee's multidisciplinary practice spans photography, video, painting, and sculpture. Busan-born, Kathmandu-raised, and now Colorado-based, her work often addresses the complexities of self and cultural preservation in times of dissonance and globalization. Serving as atlases, maps, indexes and readers, each work helps navigate a viewer into further understanding her recurring subject, the migrant.

For this exhibition, Lee considers rope-wrapped baggage often seen accompanying migrant workers and diasporic peoples from regions such as East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Having relocated several times in her own life, Lee reflects on the movement of one's body between borders, the distinctive form of accompanied baggage and what it signifies. Tenderly displaying her new works as four discrete parts—pigment prints, India ink paintings, rope pods, and a banner—Lee dissects the subject to provide an illegible but compelling language to a diasporic identity. One that is seen, but not spoken, understood, but not audible and ultimately whispered through a corporeal physicality and object-hood.

Using the physical form of the baggage as a formal and conceptual point of departure for the exhibition, Lee's works are marked by dispersal, then reconstruction. Their restless viscera are a compilation of hidden items a person collects over time. In certain examples, skin is represented by canvas; it is traced, exposed and weathered. Exoskeletons exist as lengths of rope and as intersecting armor meant to demarcate and protect. Each work is an homage to transience, reminding viewers of one another's personal histories, both visible and concealed.

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A further translation of Lee's previous work, *Migrant Reader* features new directions that also consider the mechanics and failures of language. In two framed postcard-sized photographs, Lee's surreal bondage baggage sculpture titled *Self Portrait* is seen posed silently in a restricted roadside setting. Nearby, a series of large-format India ink paintings, each titled *Bondage Baggage Reader*, appear not only as topographic mountainous or urban maps, but as a kind of ophidian dermis. Their scale suggest both a majesty and a toughness. On another wall, ink stained ropes that previously bound together objects and luggage are deconstructed and reconciled into pods, physically and symbolically networked to represent a sprawling community. Simultaneously utilitarian to some, as they secure and fasten, their fragility is also ever-present underscoring how easily the material can be cut apart or frayed. Stiffening the rope in India ink, a medium more commonly associated with calligraphy, Lee employs the pigment to preserve the rope and remind viewers of the legible outlines of a distant mother tongue.

The only color visible in the exhibition is *Obangsaek Skin*. Lee's version of a banner or flag, it —signals the presence of a powerfully present entity: the Migrant. Obangsaek (오방색) meaning five-orientation-color in Korean, is a traditional color spectrum that represents the five cardinal directions and the five elements - Blue: East: Wood, Red: South: Fire, Yellow: Center: Earth, White: West: Metal, Black: North: Water. Continuing the black and white motif of the *Bondage Baggage Reader* series on one side, the snakeskin-like fabric echoes the surrounding walls of the gallery space. Hanging tall from a gallery ceiling beam, *Obangsaek Skin* hints at transformation, preservation and vertical transcendence.

Borne from a simple sighting, Lee's exhibition embodies journeying itself, giving importance to past, current, and future migrations of peoples, tongues, and ideas.

**Maia Ruth Lee** (b.1983, Busan, South Korea) lives and works in Salida, Colorado. Recent solo exhibitions include the MCA Denver, CO; Jack Hanley Gallery, New York, NY and Eli Ping Frances Perkins Gallery, New York, NY. Lee's work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including the Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO; Canada Gallery, New York, NY; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY. *Migrant Reader* is her first exhibition at François Ghebaly.