

“Mirror Cells” at Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

by [mousse](#)

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At the core of the group exhibition “Mirror Cells”, curated by Christopher Y. Lew and Jane Panetta at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, are two primary concepts. One is what gives the show its title, the mirror neurons, a new set of brain cells discovered in 1992 by a group of Italian scientists observing macaque monkeys. The discovery shed light on how we understand others and confirmed the essential role of repetition in the interpretation of other people’s actions and intentions, as in the case of empathy.

In the context of the works by Maggie Lee, the carpet evokes a domestic setting. The New York–based artist extracted four chapters from her video *Mommy* (2015), one for each member of the family, and presents each with a personalized display: the magician father who left them when she was very young, the punk older sister, the tragedy of her mother, who immigrated from Taiwan in the early 1970s and died unexpectedly, and the artist herself. Lee combines personal content with found images and mounting techniques, blurring the boundary between the intimate and the public dimensions.

The same floor surface becomes a stage where the Los Angeles sculptor Liz Craft displays her unsteady papier-mâché mannequins. The characters are women with fashionable clothes and hairstyles, and their standing balance is maintained by spiderwebs of tied strings departing from their heads or body joints and connecting them to the floor and the wall. The mannequins are not moving, but their uncanny expressions combined with ceramic mouths and dialogue bubbles scattered around the walls suggest a surreal communication among them.

Rather than empathizing (one of the most direct implications of the mirror neurons discovery), the works in “Mirror Cells” do not relate to each other directly through repetition or imitation. But some common elements are discernible. What characterizes all of them is a process-based approach whereby the artist is directly involved with the work, either physically or emotionally, in contrast with digitally based works that are predicated on advanced technologies and anonymity. The medium of ceramics is shared by Craft, Goldberg, and Jaeger, and although each artist develops it in a different direction, the experience of determining the shape, color, and texture of this material stimulates an attention to tactility on the part of the viewer. The density of the installation is perhaps the most consistent element of the show; the display of works all over the floor, walls (including a hidden white eagle on the high beams by Goldberg), main corridor, window, café, and terrace make it an experience that engages the museum in its entirety.

Elena Tavecchia

at Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
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Courtesy: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo: Genevieve Hanson, New York