

Art in America

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by Nick Irvin

Maggie Lee

at Real Fine Arts



In “Fufu’s Dreamhouse,” her first New York solo exhibition, Maggie Lee (b. 1987) continued to elaborate her diaristic exploration of adolescent girlhood, Millennial subcultures, and style. Rooted in blogging, honed in zines, and realized in *Mommy*, her acclaimed 2015 film about the death of her mother and their life together, Lee’s approach here turned to sculpture, the artist presenting a series of dioramas set on wooden tables. Staged mostly within glass terraria and performed through Jenny dolls—a Japanese Barbie corollary established in the 1980s—the scenes depicted are from an adolescence based roughly on Lee’s own. With custom outfits and hair styled by Lee, the

Jennys appear alone in their chambers, sedately preoccupied: one plays with a synthesizer on her bed; another models a thrift-store outfit; another waits out a bad acid

trip. One is dancing, but most simply sit, rigid, among the posters, stickers, and other items that Lee has concatenated around them. They seem spaced-out, bored and waiting. More than the dolls themselves, it is the scrap heaps of Lee's interiors that animate these scenes and grant them their peculiar tenor. They play and replay the crucial role that consumption holds in American teenage identity, where the stakes of affiliation with brands, bands, and movies feel dire. Lee disperses signs of everyday girlhood in the '90s—an *Ever After* VHS tape figured as a mattress, a glittery Jellies makeup organizer as a pool, and hearts and stars throughout—among materials representing “alternative” artifacts like Dario Argento movies and “Liquid Television” cartoons. On top of narrating the pursuit of subculture from a suburban remove, Lee's references prod and make a mess of the shifting and often contradictory roles that young women are expected to play—daughter and bride, creative and muse, thoughtful subject and scopic object. While the dolls serve as armature for their accessories, they don't seem hollow. All the care behind Lee's materials adds up to the idea of wearing a thing deeply. Her papers and plastics recall just how much something like a poster can matter to a young person; they also point to the dense negotiations of race, class, and gender that can undergird a person's visibility and expression. Lee's taste for the edgy compounds this knot, reveling in the joys and pains of deviance from standard scripts. For her generation, the internet turned such teenage experiments of affiliation and disidentification into a public ritual: the bedroom became not just a stage but a broadcasting booth for identity formation. In their glass cages, the Jennys seem to wonder: how best to unleash the freak?

Those familiar with *Mommy*, or the conversations around it, are likely to associate Lee's name with sincerity and gut-punching confessionalism. The film's narration and editing teem with media tropes turned achingly personal; Lee demonstrates how, within our digital remix culture, an image or phrase need not be unique to ring true as one's own. While intimate citation was also the force behind “Fufu's Dreamhouse,” such emotive heights are more difficult to reach in the white cube, with its habits of distanced observation, than in the more immersive space of cinema. In the gallery, sincerity has a higher hurdle; there, Lee seemed comparatively remote, even wry. But whether her insights came across clearly for viewers might be beside the point. As any diarist knows, secrecy is liberating—and as an Adidas ad blanketing one Jenny's wall reads: “SUPERSTAR DOES NOT CARE WHAT THE OUTSIDE WORLD THINKS / SUPERSTAR DOES NOT LIVE LIFE INSIDE THE BOX.”