



Suhn Lee: *MEMENTO MORI*

Educator's Guide

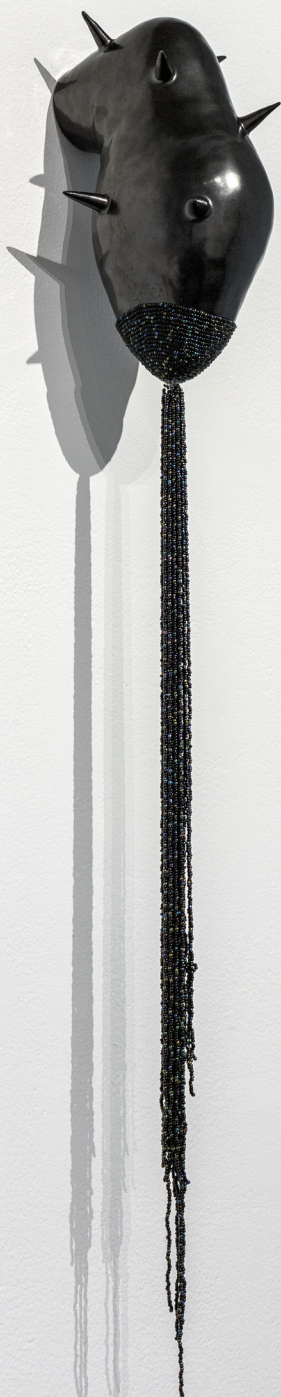
Los Angeles
Municipal Art Gallery



The Show.

In celebration of the gallery's 70th year anniversary, the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery (LAMAG) revisited its popular *Open Call* exhibition on December 9, 2023 - March 16, 2024 that featured over 350 artists living and/or working in Southern California. Founded as the *All City Outdoor Festival* in 1950 and held throughout nine Los Angeles City parks, *Open Call* evolved into a recurring exhibition opportunity for youth, students, professional and non-professional artists to exhibit their artwork side by side at LAMAG.

The *Open Call* has a rich history at LAMAG; this egalitarian approach has become a cornerstone of LAMAG's identity, celebrating the diversity and creativity of Los Angeles' artistic community. In lieu of a cash prize and Honorable Mentions in this iteration, LAMAG invited two artists, **Suhn Lee** and Danila Cervantes to develop exhibitions in the gallery's project space. LAMAG Curators Hugo Cervantes and Nancy Meyer selected the two artists. Their choices reinforced the gallery's focus on fostering artistic dialogue and creating new opportunities for emerging voices in the local art scene, ensuring that the spirit of the Open Call continues to evolve, while honoring its past.



Memento Mori marks the first institutional exhibition by the Los Angeles based artist Suhun Lee (b. 1983, Los Angeles) whose interdisciplinary practice combines ceramics and textiles with experimental techniques. This exhibit presents a series of abstracted, geometric forms of “creatures” covered and armored with beadwork, sequins, and textiles.

Lee’s repetition-driven practice of stitching and adhering, or shaping and firing clay becomes a process similar to a physical mantra of changing or transforming emotional pain into something else through her art making practice. The effects of this create a reverence or respect for the mundane, and help her learn to transform pain into beauty, grow emotionally, and to appreciate everyday things.

The title of the exhibition references the idea that life has cycles and ultimately, an end. Lee’s work and artistic practice include life’s challenges, which she refers to as “relics or tokens akin to evidence of a life well lived.” This reminds the viewer to consider the idea of impermanence and mindfulness as they acknowledge and move through difficult times, situations, and loss.

The exhibitions run simultaneously with Step and Repeat which is featured in the main gallery. All three exhibitions take place from March 8 - May 18, 2025.

Land Acknowledgement.

It is important that the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery prioritize respect for both the historic culture and the contemporary presence of indigenous peoples throughout California, and especially in the Los Angeles area. To that end, and particularly as a public and civic institution, we acknowledge that our gallery resides on what was historically the homeland of Kizh, Tongva, and Chumash peoples who were dispossessed of their land.

If you would like to learn more about the land you are on please visit [this link](#).

The Artist.



Suhnn Lee is a Los Angeles based artist with a focus in ceramics and textiles. Her ceramic and mixed media artworks in *Memento Mori* address themes of time, self worth, life and the passing of life, as well as the process of creating artworks. Her work is heavily influenced by her Korean American upbringing and explores her culture's obsession with image and overachievement. "Growing up in Los Angeles, there was an enormous amount of emphasis placed on image and results. Self-worth was not obtained from within, but rather hinged on performance and external validation."

The primary focus of Lee's practice is a psychological examination of time, anxiety, and self-worth in conjunction with a reverence for the present moment. Calm and focus are entry points to her creative process by being in the "here and now." Lee considers herself "a time traveler" in her mind. Her preoccupation with the past and future prevents her from aligning herself with the present moment.

The meditative and process-driven nature of certain materials is what attracts Lee. Her sculptures “externalize the psychological experiences of anxiety, perfectionism, and grief.” Informed by her Korean American heritage, the artist presents a series of sculptures that she describes as “creatures”, small to medium-sized ceramics “armored” with beadwork, sequins, and fabric. The abstracted, geometric forms of turtles, clouds, mushrooms, other animals and elements from nature are inspired by the *Ten Symbols of Longevity*, and prosperity derived from various Asian cultures.

Lee is drawn to the concepts of lifecycles, death, life and grief and aims to represent these in each artwork. Since losing her Dad, she wanted to explore these themes through her artworks. Lee’s Dad passed away right before she changed her path to pursue art. Her Dad “was the one that always pulled me out of my head. He was my soulmate. That loss, that grief...it still haunts me and it makes me so sad that he didn’t get to see me find my true calling and will never see anything that I create.” “Death to me is really about life... it’s familiar but unknowable, it’s the universal unifier. No matter who you are, where you’re from, how much money you have, you are going to die. It’s one of the only things money can’t save you from. We all accept it as a fact of life, but do we? There’s an uncertainty that’s part of the package when it comes to death...it can literally happen at any moment. So in a sense, our entire life is ruled by this uncertainty because death is always just right there.”

Lee did not have formal training in art or design. Her instinct guides each step of her art making process. She is “overly obsessed with detail and really particular about proportions and lines”. Lee feels she is “getting better at letting go, even when a finished work does not sit exactly right”. “Sitting with that discomfort, that’s the real work...with my art and with life.” Lee has had various and diverse career paths; as an attorney, fashion merchandiser, and currently a ceramic artist and educator. When she decided to dedicate herself to art making, she enrolled in ceramics classes at Barnsdall Park, which was her first experience with clay. She first felt like an artist and felt more confident calling herself an artist when she found her distinctive style and visual language. It is very meaningful that her first solo exhibition, ***Memento Mori***, is at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Park. This is a “full circle moment” that she hopes is the start of “greater things to come.”

Suhn Lee received a B.A. in Communications from UC San Diego and graduated Cum Laude from Southwestern Law School. She has a legal background in Intellectual Property licensing and experience in Fashion Buying and Merchandising. She currently teaches ceramics at Otis College of Art and Design.

The Artwork.

Lee was first inspired to use animal motifs and figures when she researched the *Ten Symbols of Longevity* in Korean culture. Three animals she uses in her artworks are turtles, cranes, and deer. Lee combines abstract forms with figurative representations of animals. While her animal sculptures, forms, and representations are primarily abstract, she found the familiarity of these interesting and powerful. Lee likes the idea of “something being simultaneously familiar and unknowable.”

Through the repetitive act of stitching and attaching elements one by one to her artworks, each bead or other item is filled with what Lee calls a sense of “ritual and reverence”. The artworks offer viewers her “reflection on healing and resilience against society’s obsession with productivity, efficiency, and status.”

The artworks and embellishments are crafted with painstaking care and serve as a “passionate mediation on heartbreak and death”. Lee says the materials in her artworks “are imbued with her grief”; this grief is ultimately transformed into “objects of beauty.

Lee's artworks are a "manifestation" of her heartbreak. In 2024 while at her first residency at Haystack School, her dog Zero passed. She said this loss "felt like a command", encouraging her to pursue this theme more deeply. Ultimately, this became the central basis for this solo exhibit. These losses "kept cracking me open again and again." Working on artworks for the exhibition was her refuge.



An Empty Shell of Me, 2024

Ceramic, beads, polished stones

7.5 x 8.5 x 4 inches

Courtesy of the artist



Discussion Prompts.

Lee examines and explores the different ways that we protect ourselves emotionally from life events that are difficult. In the mixed-media abstract ceramic sculpture, *An Empty Shell of Me*, her goal was to express the idea of shields and armor as metaphors or symbols of protection.

- What do you see in this mixed-media ceramic (clay) sculpture? What geometric shape covers the sides and bottom?
- What animal could this be? Why do you think the artist chose this animal symbol? What does this artwork represent to you? If you were to create a ceramic artwork of an animal that symbolized protection what would it be? How might this artwork relate to symbols and stories from different cultures?
- How could this animal sculpture tell a story about cycles in life such as loss, endings, changes, protection, nature and beauty?
- Think of shapes, color, texture and materials. Compare and contrast the differences and similarities. How is the inside different from the bottom and sides? What do you notice that is the same on all sides? Use your imagination to describe what you think the inside and outside feel like. Is it bumpy, rough, smooth, hard, or something else?
- Why do you think the artist created a sculpture that can be viewed from the top, sides, and bottom? How would you describe the process of creating the shape, adding the beaded embellishments, and the geometric shapes? Why do you think that clay, beads, and polished stones were used, and what might they symbolize?

The Artwork.

This artwork is inspired by the a bird called a crane which is another symbol of longevity and immortality. Immortality means living forever. Since cranes were believed to stay with one mate or partner for their lifetime, it is also seen as a symbol of fidelity and good luck in marriage. The two cranes combine the symbols of immortality, and fidelity to mean eternal love. “In Korean culture, marriage and bloodlines are of significant importance and who one marries, particularly for women, is often seen as more important than one’s career.”

Lee’s process to create each artwork is slow, meditative, repetitive, and exacting in detail. Repetition is the “connective tissue” that runs through her artworks. Practice of a technique is a method she uses to incorporate and experiment with different materials, media, and processes. The act of repetition is her “physical mantra” in the way she forms each ceramic petal and attaches each shape and feather. She calls it the “act of doing - one by one”; this is her mindfulness practice, almost as a meditation and the artmaking process is her therapy. The slow nature of her work is, in part, “an act of silent rebellion against society’s preoccupation with productivity, efficiency, and status.”

Sometimes it is clear to Lee when a work is completed. Most of the time she does not have a definite end result in mind, only a vague idea. She will create a form knowing that she wants to cover the surface using a specific material. When the piece is fully adorned and covered, it is done. During her creative process she thinks she might be close to completing the artwork, but then she says she hates it and has to start over.

In Sickness and in Wealth, 2024
Ceramic, goose feathers
5.5 x 5.5 x 16 inches
Courtesy of the artist





Discussion Prompts.

In Lee's practice and during the art making process, she explores themes of lifecycles, rebirth, renewal, loss, and grief (sadness over the loss of a person or pet companion). Repetition of a shape, motif, or design element in her ceramic (clay) sculptures is an important part of her art making.

- What is the first thing you notice about the form and shapes in this ceramic sculpture?
- What type of animal do you see in this artwork? Why do you think there are two, and why might the artist have placed them close together? What do you think the artist wants the viewer to think about when looking at this sculpture?
- How would you describe the textures of this artwork? Do you think it could be fuzzy, smooth, soft, rough, bumpy, another texture, or a combination of these?
- Think about the amount of time the artist took to create this sculpture. Why do you think it was important to her to be thoughtful and take her time when creating each section of this artwork?
- Repetition is when something is done or created over and over again. In Lee's artworks, repetition is something positive. What sections have the same shape repeated many times? Why do you think creating and applying the same repeating shape was important in this sculpture? How could you use repetition in your artwork, to help you learn something new, or when studying in school?

Art Activity: Create a Collaged Creature!

We invite you to create a one-of-a-kind paper collage of a real or imaginary animal or creature that symbolizes or represents something about yourself or how you are feeling right now. Suhn Lee's art practice includes the act of repetition while creating shapes and elements in her sculptures. A repetitive motion is doing something over and over, which helps to teach patience and to be in the moment. As you are making your artwork, take your time and enjoy each step and what it feels like to be creative.

What you will need:

Two to three pieces of any type, size and color of paper, including recycled paper, pencil, scissors, glue stick or glue

Optional: Various colors of paper, cardstock, markers, colored pencils, other drawing utensils, beads, fabric.

*Please check with a parent/guardian/caregiver or teacher before using any items and make sure items are safe for all ages.

Art Activity: Create a Collaged Creature!

Step 1: Gather all items you will use and arrange them for easy access. Think of the possibilities you can create using paper as the primary material.

Step 2: Imagine what type of animal or creature you want to create. It can be a very simple basic shape. Before beginning, reflect on what you are feeling at this moment. You can listen to music that helps you reflect and feel calm and imagine what you want to create for this collage creature. Allow the process to happen, without any expectations of the final artwork.

Step 3: Using any size or color of paper, use a pencil to draw an outline of an animal or creature that means something special to you.

Step 4: Using scissors or your hands, cut or tear as many paper pieces as you like using the same size and shape. *Optional:* As you are cutting or tearing the paper, think of a repetitive personal Mantra or Meditation to repeat to yourself. (See below.)

Step 5: Use a gluestick or glue to attach your paper shapes to the animal shape on the other piece of paper.

Art Activity: Create a Collaged Creature!

Step 6: *Optional* - Collage additional papers, shapes and materials to your animal or imaginary creature. Use drawing utensils to add details.

Step 7: *Optional writing and discussion prompts* - Reflect on what you discovered by this slow art making process. Write about what it felt like to repeat the same shape over and over again. What did you learn about yourself or the process of art making?

Optional activity - Creating a Personal Mantra: A Mantra is a word, sentence, or sound repeated to help focus or concentrate. A mantra may help when meditating. Meditation is when you focus on something to calm or relax yourself or to accomplish something. This is Lee's favorite Mantra from the "Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomenon" by Longchen Rabjam. As you read it, think about what this might mean to you, and to the artist and why this is helpful for her.

*"Let whatever happens happen and whatever I manifest manifests.
Let whatever occurs occur and whatever is be.
Let whatever is anything at all be nothing at all."*

What words or sentences can you write and repeat them to yourself to help when you create an artwork, relax or focus on something?

Credit + Resources.

Suhn Lee Instagram | @suhnlee

Exhibition Website | <https://lamag.org/suhn-lee/>

Gallery Guide | [“A Conversation with Artist Suhn Lee on Eliminating Psychological Time”](#)

Images

Installation view of *Suhn Lee: Memento Mori*. Courtesy of the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs / Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. Photo credit: Monica Nouwens (@monicanouwens)

Don't Let Yearning Turn Into Regret, Ceramic, glass beads. 6" x 6" x 34." Courtesy of the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs / Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. Photo credit: Monica Nouwens (@monicanouwens)

Photo of artist, 2024. Courtesy of Suhn Lee.

An Empty Shell of Me, 2024. Ceramic, beads, polished stones. 7.5 x 8.5 x 4 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Installation view of *Suhn Lee: Memento Mori*. Courtesy of the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs / Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. Photo credit: Monica Nouwens (@monicanouwens)

In Sickness and in Wealth, 2024. Ceramic, feathers. 5.5 x 5.5 x 16 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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