

# The Monster and The Cyborg

## Unfurling Interiorities in Lee Bul's Early Work

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Korean contemporary artist Lee Bul harnesses disgust and absurdity to examine the place of the gendered body amidst patriarchal political and social culture. In our cultural canon, monsters and cyborgs incite fear and fascination and are categorized as distinctly 'other.' By examining the othering of such 'unnatural' entities, Lee draws our attention to the othering, objectification, mechanization, and monsterization of the body.

Lee's mounds of cotton-stuffed flesh and dismembered slick cyborgian forms reveal the precarity of the dichotomies between beauty and disgust, human and creature, inside and outside, self and other, natural and artificial. In materializing these contradictions embedded within our cultural truths, Lee challenges the power structures that dictate boundaries and distinctions onto the body.

Notably, the emergence of Lee's artistic career coincides with South Korea's tumultuous transition from authoritarian regime to democracy, and within this political landscape, her deconstruction of traditional distinctions such as gender might function as a disguised mode of dissidence.



Lee Bul, *Untitled*, 2010. EVA panels. Leeum Museum of Art.



Lee Bul, *Untitled (Cravings Red)*, 1998/2011. Courtesy Studio Bul.

Lee Bul, *Monster: Black*, 1998/2011. Fabric, fiber filling, sequins, dried flower, glass beads, aluminum, crystal, metal chain, acrylic paint on stainless steel frame. Leeum Museum of Art.

This project constitutes my honors thesis in the History of Art. My initial intent was to examine Lee Bul's 1990s sculpture series of *Cyborgs* through the lens of critical cyberfeminist and queer theory as well as posthumanist thought. I hoped to explore how the cyborg might serve as a metaphor for the undoing social categorizations as a whole and how to reframe the relationship between technology and the body as a force of liberation, rather than a source of oppression.

However, after engaging with Lee's work in person and her lesser known earlier performance and sculpture works, my focus has shifted to understand how cultural and political realities have turned the female body monstrous. Lee grapples with notion of the body turned inside out to uncover the complex interiorities of both the physical body and the space it occupies in society. I now turn to the beginning of her career, roughly from 1989-2000, to study how against the complex political backdrop of Korea at the contemporary moment, Lee's manifestations of monstrosity and disgust interrupt normativity and conformity in a nuanced, parodic, absurd cultural critique.



Lee Bul, *Cyborg W1-W4*, 1998. Cast silicone, polyurethane filling, paint filling. Art Sonje Center.