

**Lee Bul, *After Bruno Taut (Beware the sweetness of things)*, 2007.**
Installation view at *Lee Bul. On Every New Shadow*, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, 2007–2008. Collection of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac. © Lee Bul. Photo: Patrick Gries. Courtesy of the artist and Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain.

# LEE BUL

**: From 1998 to Now** 이불: 1998 는 이후 **13.11.2026–07.03.2027**

M HKA MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART ANTWERP

Exhibition co-organised by **Leeum Museum of Art** in Seoul and **M+** in Hong Kong, in collaboration with M HKA.

LEEUM | M+

## LEE BUL: From 1998 to Now

***Lee Bul: From 1998 to Now*** **is a major survey devoted to one of Asia's most influential contemporary artists. Spanning more than three decades, the exhibition offers deep insight into Lee Bul's radical and visionary practice, presented across both floors of the museum.**

**Emerging in the late 1980s, Lee Bul developed her work in close dialogue with South Korea's shifting social and political realities. Working across different media including sculpture, installation and performance, she has consistently explored the relationship between the body and society, humanity and technology, nature and civilisation. Her work probes the promises and failures of modernity, as well as the political forces that shape our collective imagination.**

**Featuring more than 150 key works, *Lee Bul: From 1998 to Now* traces the artist's sustained engagement with utopian thought, modernist architecture and the historical avant-garde. From early iconoclastic performances to immersive, multi-sensory installations, the exhibition reveals an artist who combines material experimentation with philosophical depth.**

**Made possible through a major international museum partnership, this exhibition at M HKA resonates with Antwerp's history as the birthplace of utopia.**

*Lee Bul: From 1998 to Now* is co-organised by **Leeum Museum of Art** and **M+** in collaboration with M HKA. Following its presentation at M HKA, the exhibition will travel to the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, where the tour will conclude in late 2027.

The exhibition is co-curated by **June Young Kwak**, Head of Modern and Contemporary Art Department II at Leeum Museum of Art (Seoul) and Hoam Museum of Art (Cheoin-gu), and **Doryun Chong**, Artistic Director and Chief Curator at M+ (Hong Kong), with **Heyeon Kim**, Curator at Leeum Museum of Art and Hoam Museum of Art and **Sunny Cheung**, Curator of Design and Architecture at M+. The presentation at M HKA is organised by **Nav Haq**, Associate Director at M HKA.

*Lee Bul: From 1998 to Now* at M HKA is generously supported by **BB&M** and **Hauser & Wirth**.

### COLOPHON

**Lee Bul:**
**From 1998 to Now**
13.11.2026–07.03.2027
M HKA, Antwerp

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Lee Bul

**Curators**
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June Young Kwak
Nav Haq

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## GLOSSARY

**Below are 12 key concepts to help you immerse yourself more deeply into Lee Bul's artworks. In the exhibition, you will find both short descriptions of many artworks and references to these key concepts. Together, they weave a web of associations and references around her practice.**

### AMBIGUITY

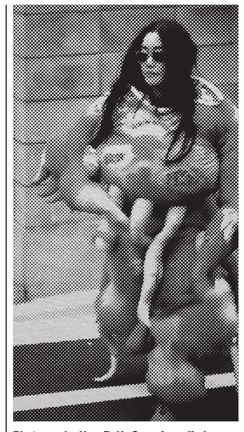
Derived from the Latin for 'having two sides', ambiguity suggests a state of uncertainty or unresolvedness. For Lee Bul, ambiguity is not merely a stylistic choice, but a central artistic strategy. Having grown up in the patriarchal, authoritarian society of South Korea during the politically turbulent 1970s and 80s, she often uses hybrid or amorphous, shape-shifting bodies to challenge absolute truths and ideologies. Her works are often deliberately contradictory, which generates multiple possibilities for connections and interpretations.

### ARCHITECTURE

In *De architectura* (c. 25 BCE), the Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio describes architecture as the balance between three principles: beauty, robustness, and usefulness. Lee Bul uses architectural concepts to examine how the ideals of a society change, particularly within the context of Korea's rapid modernisation. In her inquiry, she is often drawn to the modernist architecture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For her, it embodies both the belief in progress and the utopian ideals of Western modernity—and their darker undercurrents: totalitarian control and uniformity.

### BODY

In the mid- to late 1980s, Lee Bul created a series of performances in which she wore 'soft sculptures' as corporeal extensions to confront societal ideals of femininity and gender roles. Since those early years, Lee has continued to explore the body through wide-ranging sculptural forms, techniques, and materials. In later works, such as the *Cyborg* and *Anagram* series, she continues to probe the tensions between the natural and the artificial, approaching the body as both a physical presence and a cultural construct.



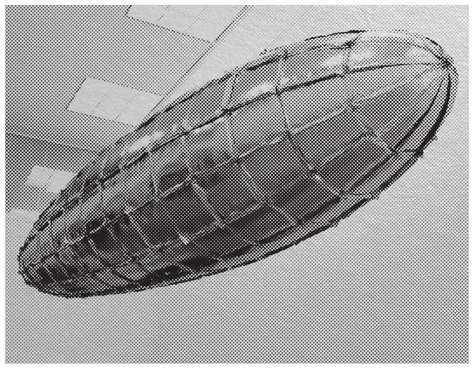
**Photograph of Lee Bul in *Sorry for suffering — You think I'm a puppy on a picnic?*, 1990.** 12-day performance at the 2nd Japan and Korea Performance Festival, Tokyo, Japan. © Lee Bul. Courtesy of the artist

### CYBORG

The cyborg—a synthesis of biological and technological elements—serves as a potent metaphor for the fluidity of identity. Drawing on philosopher Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), Lee Bul investigates the transformation of human experience in a world increasingly defined by technology. In her *Cyborg* series, she questions entrenched archetypes of beauty and cultural constructions of gender and the female body. Typically presented as fragmented, suspended forms, these sculptures remain intentionally ambiguous. For Lee, the cyborg is not an unequivocal feminist symbol, but a liminal figure poised on the borders between human and machine, male and female, power and vulnerability.

**Lee Bul, Monster: Black, 2011 (reconstruction of 1998 work).** Collection of Leeum Museum of Art. © Lee Bul. Photo: Jeon Byung-cheol. Courtesy of the artist.





**Lee Bul, *Willing To Be Vulnerable–Metalized Balloon*, 2015–2016.** Installation view at *Lee Bul: From 1998 to Now*, M HKA, 2026. Photo: M HKA

### FICTION

Fiction denotes narratives that unfold within the shared imagination of the author and reader. Science fiction, in particular, typically presents speculative stories about future technology, scientific advancement, or alien worlds. Fiction and science fiction are central to Lee Bul's work, where she envisions worlds at the intersection of reality and imagination. She conjures these fictional realms to pose questions about possible futures and the persistence of our dreams of an ideal society—visions in which utopia and dystopia often become indistinguishable. For Lee, fiction serves as a critical lens to examine the modern world, technological progress, politics, and humanity's place within them.

### MATERIALITY

Materials are central to Lee Bul's practice. While her sculptures often possess a contemporary or even futuristic aesthetic, they are grounded in meticulous craftsmanship and often incorporate rigorous, manual processes. Seamlessly bridging industrial production and artisanal techniques, she makes use of a wide range of materials. These choices are not purely aesthetic; they often carry deeper historical and personal resonance. For instance, the use of beads evokes memories of her childhood, when her mother took up beadwork to support the family. Other materials, like celadon porcelain, reference the heritage of traditional Korean ceramics. By layering such disparate materials, Lee weaves together personal memory and cultural history with technological innovation.

### MEMORY

Memory is the human capacity to store and recall experiences, images, and emotions. In Lee Bul's work, personal history is often interwoven with the turbulent history of her native Korea, frequently referencing historical upheavals and collective traumas. She investigates how political systems, conflicts, and societal ruptures leave traces in collective memory. Her work also explores the inherent instability of memory—how it is continually reinterpreted, distorted, and reconfigured over time. For Lee, the past is not set in stone but remains a vital part of how we experience the present and imagine the future.

### MODERNITY

Modernity denotes both a historical period (the modern period) and the framework of socio-cultural norms, attitudes, and practices which emerged in Europe during the 18th century. The essence of modernity was shaped by rationalisation, industrialisation, secularisation, and individualisation. While it led to enormous technological and social progress, modernity also precipitated colonial and imperialist expansion, the displacement of traditional knowledge and belief systems, and the onset of ecological crisis. Lee Bul explores the promises and failures of modernity, with particular attention to technological developments, futuristic architecture and utopian ideas. Her work invites us to navigate the ruins of modernity without falling into simplistic glorification or condemnation. For Lee, the modern period remains fundamentally ambiguous: a force of both creation and destruction.

### MYTHOLOGY

Mythology is the collective term for stories through which cultures attempt to interpret the world, the emergence of humanity, and the fundamental mysteries of existence. They often feature mythical places, gods, heroes, and supernatural beings, reflecting the values, beliefs, and fears of a society. Lee Bul draws on both Eastern and Western mythologies to explore contemporary questions about power, gender, technology, and utopia. She investigates how national myths and collective memories are used to forge a shared sense of identity, origin, and history, while also examining how such stories can be turned into propaganda or come into conflict with the changing realities of a society.

### SCALE

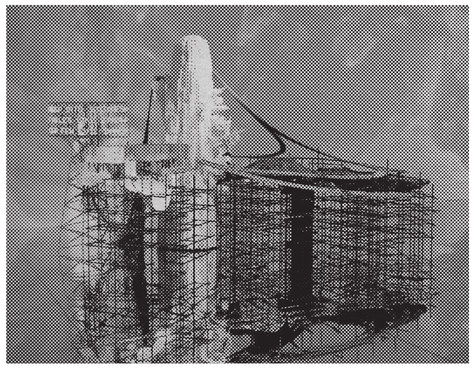
For Lee Bul, drawing and model-making are essential modes of thinking. Her ideas first take shape in her drawings and maquettes, yet these studies are also works of art in their own right. Typically, an idea will evolve across various scales, from the intimate to the monumental. This process enables her to make complex constructions and grand narratives tangible and comprehensible. By playing with scale, from small, handmade models to monumental architectural installations, Lee invites us to engage with ideological concepts through their embodied physical presence in space.

### TECHNOLOGY

Technology encompasses the techniques and systems through which humans shape their environments and themselves. In Lee Bul's work, it serves as a mirror for humanity's fascination with modernity and progress: the promise of advancements designed to optimise the world and transcend biological constraints. Yet her work also exposes the precariousness of this trajectory, addressing our dependence on these systems and the inevitable casualties of 'progress.' She traces the arc of such utopian aspirations, focusing on the tension between the dream of perfection and the possibility of failure. In doing so, she unsettles the divide between nature and technology, revealing how new potential emerges from their convergence.

### UTOPIA

The word 'utopia' was devised by the English humanist Thomas More as the title of his 1516 treatise. More conceived and wrote part of *Utopia* in Antwerp, where he situated a fictional encounter with a traveller who describes an ideal society. The ambiguity of the word 'utopia' lies in its dual Greek roots: *eu-topos* (a good place) and *ou-topos* (a non-existent place). Lee Bul investigates how utopian visions have been imagined and put into practice across different times and places. Her work reflects on the recurring failure or distortion of these ideals, but also on how they continue to shape our dreams and visions of the future.



**Lee Bul, *Mon grand récit: Weep into stones..., 2005.*** Installation view of *Lee Bul: From Me, Belongs to You Only*, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2012. Collection of HITEJINRO Co., Ltd. © Lee Bul. Photo: Osamu Watanabe. Courtesy of the artist. Photo courtesy of Mori Art Museum.

## SEARCHING FOR UTOPIA: LEE BUL and DORYUN CHONG in Conversation

**Spanning the past three decades of her multifaceted practice, this major survey delves into Lee Bul's endless fascination with the body, technology and lost utopias. From biomorphic compositions and hybrid figures to large-scale installations of decaying and unfinished monuments, the artist's works encapsulate the precarity, contradiction and misplaced hopes that haunt our troubled present. In the artist's words, "The endless drive to transcend human limitations is part of human destiny"—but along which treacherous paths might our ambition lead us, and will this journey compromise our humanity?**

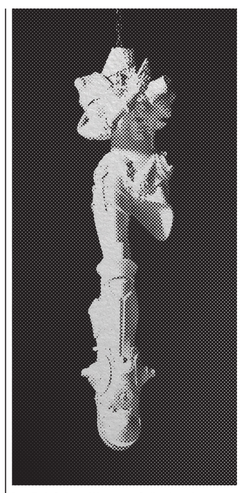
**In this conversation with M+ Artistic Director and Chief Curator Doryun Chong, who also co-curated this exhibition, Lee Bul contemplates these questions, which continue to animate her astute and uncanny works, while reflecting on the evolution of her practice and her creative process.**

**DORYUN CHONG How does it feel to see these works—some of which you haven't seen in nearly 20 years—together in one place?**

**LEE BUL** When I see this exhibition, I find myself asking, 'What does this exhibition mean to me now?' The themes and materials in my practice may change over time, but each artwork summons memories within a landscape. This exhibition follows the same structure. As I often say, the work is my perpetual 'present', whether it was made 30 years ago or a few years ago. What I focus on is the present. To borrow an expression, 'the present is the moment when the past flashes into view.' That's what I aim to reveal in my work structurally. When you encounter my work, you might wonder: why are we talking about old theories or a past that's almost forgotten? But to me, the present isn't just a single moment; the past arrives as well. And looking at the present slightly askew, seeing all the lights from the past reach us—I think that's what contemporaneity is.

**DC You came to international prominence in the late 1990s and early 2000s with your *Cyborg* and *Anagram* series, consisting of hybrid forms that interrogate the interrelationships between nature, technology, and the human body. In the decades since you began making these sculptures, the world has radically transformed. How do you make sense of these changes?**

**LB** Back then, discussions about the intersection of humanity, technology, and the environment were still largely in the realm of imagination. Now, they've entered our reality. I never expected this to happen in just 30 years. What I was exploring back then was the relationship between technology and power, and I find it interesting that we're now facing this not just in theory but in reality.



**Lee Bul. *Cyborg W6*, 2001.** Collection of Leeum Museum of Art. © Lee Bul. Photo: Jeon Byung-cheol. Courtesy of the artist and Leeum Museum of Art.

**DC I think many of these works were misunderstood at the time or interpreted in a narrow way as being influenced by Hollywood or Japanese sci-fi films. Do you expect a deeper understanding of the themes from visitors at this exhibition?**

**LB** It was a pity that my work was reduced to that interpretation 30 years ago, but I think the problem is resolved. Today, we see the ways that technology can advance civilisation, but we also worry about the sociopolitical changes that this entails. The *Cyborg* series includes meticulously layered references that address the issue of technology and power. I wanted to study unrealised visions: how were they sustained and how did we process their failure to materialise? Back then, this wasn't such a big topic, so people focused on the formal references instead, and my work was misread as an examination of the relationship between beauty and technology, or the boundary between pop culture and high art.

**DC Another longstanding series in your oeuvre is *Mon grand récit*, which you began in 2005. The title translates to 'my grand narrative' and is a somewhat ironic reference to 20th-century post-colonial and post-structuralist discussions around grand narratives of progress and modernity that came under scrutiny in the wake of the First and Second World Wars. Why are you interested in utopia, and are there new meanings that emerge from these works in the context of Hong Kong?**

**LB** With *Mon grand récit*, I wanted to expand my exploration of modernity. After 20 years of immersing myself in this topic, many questions still remain unresolved. I think this pursuit comes from the desire to understand humanity and the world.

The references in my work, whether historical or imagined in literature and film, all point to the same thing: human attempts to envision and realise utopia, as well as their inevitable failure. Many utopian projects in history have ended in failure or outlived their original purpose and turned into something else. In some cases, people continue despite knowing their visions can never be realised. I mix such references with my own personal memories and impressions—my 'present'.

**DC Another section of the exhibition showcases your sketches, maquettes, and architectural models, giving visitors a sense of what's inside your mind and your studio. Today, artists have many advanced tools at their fingertips, such as digital 3D modelling and 3D printing, but you insist on making drawings and models by hand. Could you elaborate on your creative process?**

**LB** I use high-tech tools to the extent that they give me the effect I want; I can't fully rely on them yet as the results don't meet my expectations. Also, I'm cautious about realising ideas too quickly. By holding onto an idea for longer, I can doubt it, reinforce it, develop it further. My initial ideas are raw and fragmented. It takes time to refine them carefully into works. I'm obsessed with materiality. During the conceptual stage, I think about theme, subject, and form. But to fully embody them, the material must relate to the structure I'm exploring as well. So, I invest a lot of time researching the properties of materials, going through tests in the studio. When my work is finished, I believe its materiality should also express what the work is about. I want to deliver my work to the audience in a way that activates all modes of perception, including sensation.

The majority of my sculptures start from drawings. Every morning I wake up, grab a cup of coffee, and go straight to the studio. I sit in front of a blank sheet while I sip my coffee and think. I don't make drawings with the intention of showing them; they're just records of thoughts that I stick to my wall. I try to write everything down: materials, actual scale, and so on. This is a good method for sculptors because we can't realise everything in our imagination. The building stage is when I figure out how to work with gravity—it's labour-intensive and time-consuming. The drawings show how I conceptualise, with fragments of ideas floating around me and connecting in different ways. This is when I let my imagination run wild and free.

**DC What are your thoughts on the future? Will we ever find utopia?**

**LB** We all know that the inevitable premise of the word 'utopia' is that it can never be realised. Yet this idea has survived. It goes by different names now that the original term has become a cliché, but the underlying aspiration is the same.

I'm not an optimist, but in my own life and artistic practice I want to keep pushing as far as I can, even if I don't know where this pursuit will take me. I want to understand. I still haven't given up on the absurdity of the world.

This article is extracted from a conversation between Lee Bul and Doryun Chong on 14 March 2026, originally conducted in Korean and translated by Nicole Kim.

**Portrait of Lee Bul.** © Lee Bul. Photo: Dan Leung. Courtesy of M+, Hong Kong.

