

ARTFORUM

Jewyo Rhii

Barakat Contemporary

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Jewyo Rhii, Turn Depot, 2021–23, aluminum, iron, stainless steel, 11' 4 5/8" × 8' 10 1/4" × 8' 10 1/4".
From the series "Love Your Depot," 2019–.

To the novelty bonanza that was Frieze Seoul's second edition, Jewyo Rhii—hailing from a generation of Korean artists old enough to remember the millennial art boom that preceded the current one—offered an earnest if cheeky retort. The exhibition “Of Hundred Carts and On” gestured to the schlep of art practice and to a fact hovering over the art market that is rarely discussed: Most artworks are eventually disposed of. Though primarily consumed as digital images these days, artworks are still, almost always, insistently material. Made, shipped, and stored somewhere, they “bear the weight of reality,” according to the press release. Only the rarest of artworks are lucky enough to be sold and enter a collection; often, when artists are too broke or itinerant or dead to care for their unsold works, they are destined to be discarded or abandoned, much like the rest of the world's material culture.

Rhii's project “Love Your Depot,” 2019-, takes a functionalist approach to this precarious fate of artworks that fail as commodities by devising a sumptuous “open storage system that houses and displays artworks neglected from the dominant art market logic.” The scaffolding construction Painting Plate, 2019-23, resembles an institutional storage system, with paintings hung on industrial aluminum and steel frames, making them seem to levitate in midair. But, as generously demonstrated by the artist and the gallerist during my visit, a few assertive pushes reorient the entire structure from flat to mazelike, devising new sight lines for the canvases on display (in this case, a selection of Korean artists from various generations; purchase of the structure includes a onetime curation by the artist with work from the buyer's collection). Similarly, Drawing Rack, 2019-23, proposes an idiosyncratic architecture of delicate metallic rectangular frames intended to display drawings, hung freely from metallic clips, like laundry.

In the basement gallery, Rhii's sculptural finesse was evident in a loose installation of more storage systems housing several of her well-known earlier works, such as the series of drawings and installations “Lie on the Han River,” 2003-2006, and her enigmatic “Typewriter” series, 2010-, self-devised machines that produce cryptic scripts using ink-blotted jabs and taps. Tower Depot, 2019-23, and Turn Depot, 2021-23, are majestic structures that simultaneously obstruct what they frame: artworks elegantly arranged in open crates or on small platforms, or vertically suspended, visible but continuously pointing to their inescapable objecthood—things that must be kept safe, clean, unbroken. Most compelling was Unidentified (En)lightening Object, 2004-23, a pile of miscellaneous parts of Rhii's own old artworks covered entirely by semitransparent vinyl wrap. Glowing from within, it signals the intense labor—and inevitable failure—that underlies the rare “successful” artworks that are awarded the privileged life of continued circulation.

Wavering between the concrete functionality of storage and its intangible aesthetic allure (the new archive fever?), “Love Your Depot” echoes an emergent architectural typology in the museum world recently identified by art historian David Joselit: art institutions refashioned as open-access strongboxes with curatorial responsibility delegated to individual browsing visitors. See, most spectacularly, Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, where new auteur architecture has turned the museum into the “first publicly accessible art storage facility.” It is unsurprising that Rhii, who has worked in museums for more than two decades, would anticipate this new curatorial technology, considering she has long been concerned with the vulnerability of bodies—human, object, and other—in spaces of capital. She has articulated these themes in terms of the fraught arena of the primary market, so notorious for virtualizing its assets or hiding them in duty-free storage centers, preying on youth, and leaving aging artists out to dry until their late-career or even posthumous revival. Rhii's proposal for nurturing the longevity of artworks is a critical and poetic provocation to all art-world actors, demanding an inventive response to a simple ethical question: How can we care for each other and our material artifacts under the demands of the profession?