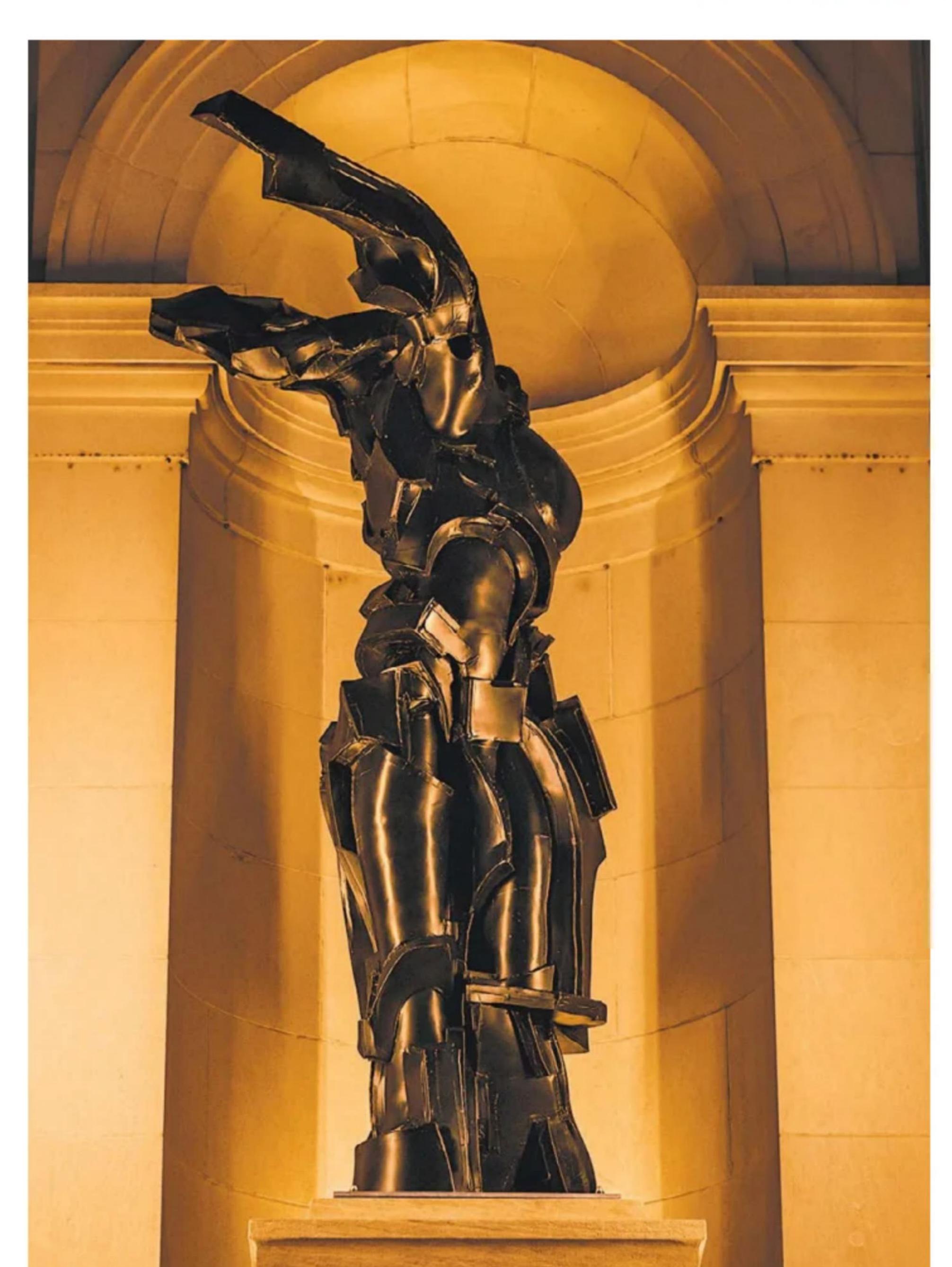
## Fine Art

MARTHA SCHWENDENER ART REVIEW





## Giving the Face of the Met a New Look

"I HAVE MANY MOTHERS," the South Korean artist Lee Bul said as she stood in the Louise Bourgeois painting exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in 2022. The curator Lesley Ma, who was there with her, related this anecdote to a packed auditorium on a recent evening when Lee's four sculptures, titled "Long Tail Halo," opened to the public. They are the fifth edition of a commission for a contemporary artist to fill the niches on the Met's facade.

We all have many mothers and fathers and others who've guided us in the paths we've chosen in life. This is the perfect

## The Genesis Facade Commission: Lee Bul, Long Tail Halo

Through May 27 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan; 212-535-7710,

statement for Lee, who for four decades has, like Bourgeois, pushed the boundaries of the human body in art.

After graduating from art school in Seoul in 1987, Lee made "Cyborg" sculptures that fantastically reconfigured the human body, and gave guerrilla performances on the streets. Some of these protested a repressive regime in South Korea but also the country's abortion policy. For the New Museum in New York in 2002, she offered wild karaoke "pods" that challenged the viewer to participate. "I felt like I could change the world," she recently told my colleague Andrew Russeth, in a New York Times profile.

Lee's subversive, questioning approach has incorporated materials as varied as fabric, metal, silicone, porcelain and dead fish, whose stench was so bad the Museum of Modern Art removed the installation raising questions of cultural bias and anti-Asian sentiment.

So how did a radical artist like Lee approach the commission at the Met, whose neo-Classical niches were left empty for 100 years after the facade was completed? In many ways, the overall presentation is a little underwhelming. This is largely due to the absence of color. In ancient Greece, facades like the one the Met copies had

brightly painted sculpture to adorn them. Here, there are two different types of sculptures. The outer two niches feature icy white and silver faceted forms, almost like abstract prisms, tumbling gently away from the building and toward the viewer. The northern sculpture, titled "Long Tail Halo: The Secret Sharer III" (2024), resembles a Cubist canine with forms spilling out of its head, as though the creature were vomiting artifacts. (What you're looking at is actually a steel armature with a kind of

vinyl acetate skin stretched over it.) The title "Long Tail Halo" doesn't mean anything in particular, according to the artist, but conjures a sense of time and space and the aura of these objects, which can be seen at night, in the rain or snow, at sunset and sunrise, and appear different under each condition.

The inner two sculptures are more classical and representational, standing tall and hands, arms, legs. They are made of stainber, paint and polyurethane. One, which is airplanes. very dark, looks like a cross between Darth Vader and "The Winged Victory of Samothrace" in the Louvre, with her unfurling wings. The other has a surface that looks like acid-washed jeans (not necessarily a of the niches to be empty, as if the sculpture bad thing). Both recall medieval armor, as had fled the pedestal. Lee suggested having well as the cyborgs in Lee's earlier sculp- a sculpture, for instance, lying on the stairs

Lee Bul, the South Korean artist commissioned to fill niches on the museum's facade, created four Cubist sculptures that blend cultures and traditions.



Lee's niche sculptures also sit in the context of the other artists who have received the Met facade commission. In 2019, the Kenyan American artist Wangechi Mutu offered seated women that looked both tribal and futuristic. Hew Locke, a London-based sculptor raised in Guyana, made splendid gilded "trophies" that played off the idea of colonial booty. The Iranian-born Nairy Baghramian made colorful chunks of aluminum that suggested flotsam and jetsam while the American Carol Bove used aluminum to create neo-modernist tubes and disks. (Jeffrey Gibson, the Choctaw and Cherokee artist representing the United States in the current Venice Biennale, has

been chosen for next year's commission.) Lee's works sit midfield in this group. They are not as successful as Locke's zany and clever trophies or Mutu's eerie women, but they are more evocative than some of the chunky modernist efforts. I admire the conversation she set up with the modernists — Boccioni, in particular — and the armory wing of the Met, whose objects speak to protecting the body in violent times.

Lee Bul is the perfect choice for this commission at a moment when South Korea is center stage in art. Frieze Seoul, the multicity art fair, just concluded. Social media was flooded with photographs of the lavish Korean museums and galleries that have risen alongside an over-pumped contemporary art market.

Artists like Lee Bul are chosen because they have a radical vision. Then they are in-



Lee Bul, above right,

overseeing the installation,

above, of "Long Tail Halo:

The Secret Sharer II" at the

Met; top, "Long Tail Halo

CTCS #1" and "Long Tail

Halo: CTCS #2"; middle,

niches of the Met facade.

Bul's sculptures in the

ture — and an artwork inside the Met: Umberto Boccioni's Futurist "Unique Forms of Continuity in Space" (1913), a landmark of erect, even without discernible heads, European modern art that attempted to capture a human figure moving swiftly less steel, ethylene-vinyl acetate, carbon fithrough space in the age of automobiles and

If Lee's niche commission isn't as bold as some of her other projects, whose fault is that? In the opening conversation, Ma revealed that Lee's first proposal was for one of the Met. This got a solid No.

Scaling it back, Lee decided to engage more with the sculptures in the Met's col lection, like Boccioni's Futurist figure, Cubist Fernand Léger ink-on-paper work t tled "Two Figures With a Dog" (1920) hence the canine figure in the niche — and another Cubist experiment, Pablo Picasso's charcoal drawing "Standing Female Nude" (1910). All of these works rethink our relationship with art and technology and bodies, from transportation to cinema to war-

fare. (Boccioni himself was killed on a bat-

tlefield in 1916.)



structed to be less radical. Be innovative but not to the point of offending or sparking controversy. This has been the game for millenniums, and artists must play along if they want to participate at the highest lev-

Lee has done a fine job of filling the Met's niches with hybrid sculptures that effectively look forward and backward, blending cultures and traditions. To do this while agitating with materials and forms, even a little bit, is a huge feat. The question is what the Met will do going forward. Perhaps rather than anointing an individual artist for this commission every year, it might try something different: several artists, nonartists, performances rather than sculpture, or even a platform, like a Speakers Corner in Hyde Park, London. After 100 years of silence, almost anything seems

