

Isolated Island

by

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Abstract

This thesis consists of collage and installation works. The collage is composed of photographic images of Seoul, before and after the demolition. This work started from the observation that the image of the city brought about by the process of redevelopment and demolition has two aspects: ruin and development. It expresses from the perspective of the observer two different and confusing aspects that the urban redevelopment and ruins bring to the city dwellers. The installation work also reflects the difference between the present and the future of the city through the use of shadows and lighting of discarded industrial waste, and also asks what the city looks like. I was inspired by the works of Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Bradford, and Yang Haegue. I tried to approach the essence of an endless mutual story between society and art from an aesthetic point of view through this thesis.

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1. Introduction

The ruined apartment complex was quite large. The abandoned area was like a city left with wounds after a war. Standing in the middle, I felt as if the souls of those people who left the place were still there. As I passed by a bus, the scenery of Seoul seemed to change suddenly every year. Sometimes it felt like the buildings suddenly disappeared without a trace. This sudden change occurred with my childhood apartment complex and university buildings. Having lived in the middle of Seoul for about 40 years, I got used to the changes. Now I wish to document the memories of Seoul in this rapid development.

Who is this development for? Eulji-ro District is an important street for finding artist's materials and producing artworks. One day, I felt the appearance of this place changing rapidly. As I drove by, I could easily see the shops disappearing and the buildings being renovated. Artists are made to go elsewhere in order to produce materials for their works. The development period of Eulji-ro and its new appearance would not have been the decision of artists who usually conduct business with these store owners and industrial fabricators in this place. Who agreed to the development of this place?

In the Korean context, gentrification is a term applied to neighborhoods that create a free and artistic atmosphere.¹ Pretty cafes, art galleries, and studios emerge in these so-called new areas. In other words, artists contribute to turning a particular area into a gentrified neighborhood to some extent. However, the existing redevelopment concept conjures up images of poverty and backwardness, with no aesthetic or cultural aspect.² I look at the areas related to redevelopment and consider the images that the redevelopment area triggers to my mind, with my artwork representing these thoughts.

¹ Shin Hyunjun and Lee Kiwoong, *Seoul talks about gentrification* (Paju: Green Forest, 2016), 64.

² Shin Hyunjun and Lee Kiwoong, *Seoul talks about gentrification*, 179.

Isolated Island is composed of two bodies of work, titled: *Ant Cave*³, and *Shelter*. Through this project, I would like to reflect on the reality behind unbalanced urban development, examining aesthetic meanings of urban space using found objects, installation and collage. Through my research, I have tried to discover the hidden and dual reasons for the city's perpetual destruction and reconstruction, and the identity of the city's common people wandering in the interface. I sought to record the city's imperfections, traumatic feelings, and unfulfilled human desires. In researching the works of Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Bradford, and Yang Haegue, I observed challenging artistic projects that provided ideas on how to connect the thoughts and views of artists living in modern cities.

Isolated Island is a visualization of the backside of a high-level localized urban space, and it started with my question to examine the function of the city as a social space. All cities in the world have grown explosively due to continuous movement, migration, industrialization, mechanization, and large-scale redevelopment. The combination of materials used in the architectural space originates from my desire to reveal hidden stories behind the redevelopment in a way that visualizes the elements inherent in the lives of people in a city. I wish to be identified as a history keeper and act as a medium between art and daily life. *Isolated Island* uses an ambiguous approach with symbolic or metaphorical functions, with the hope that viewers will use the opportunity to think about how cities influence human relationships.

2. Inspiration for Thesis Art Works

2.1. Robert Rauschenberg

Robert Rauschenberg was an artist who used everyday objects to narrow the distance between arts and rediscovered the aesthetic meaning of everyday objects. Rauschenberg collaged photographs to record how the experience of the city inspired him, mainly using specific photographs

³ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, trans. Kim Jeongah (Paju: Stone pillow, 2007), 136.

as source material. His collage images allowed the viewers to recognize both elements as abstract expressions of paints and objects used in reality are used together. In this context, his Combine paintings encompassed both artistic and everyday contexts. The copied image used by Rauschenberg played an important role in the formation of Combine painting as a pictorial element, and he integrated these copied images with everyday objects: paint cans, blankets, newspapers, and so on, that appear slightly artificial in urban and modern settings.⁴

Robert Rauschenberg's work *Bed* is a combination of paintings made by attaching objects to traditional canvas supports. However, instead of canvas, he used a well-worn pillow, sheet, and blanket, which he then scribbled upon with a pencil and painted. This work, like a traditional painting, was hung on the wall.⁵ Rauschenberg's other works embraced everyday objects as collage elements such as Coca-Cola bottles, stuffed animals, and waste. In *Winter Pool*, a ladder inserted between canvases installed together with traditional painting came into the audience's space and became a part of the real world.⁶

In *Untitled [matte black painting with Asheville Citizen]*, Rauschenberg used the newspaper to give his work the function of a diary, linking the painting directly with the repetitive stories of everyday life. At the same time, he expressed the daily meaning of newspapers and the relationship between art, like a photograph that records the specificity of time and place.⁷ Rauschenberg seemed to choose a method of re-creation of disorder that characterizes everyday life without constructing the layout of the materials he found by calculated order. In *Monogram*, the heterogeneous elements were presented together, but the identities of each component appeared to be symbiotic, representing a unity. His work actively depicted the world through a mixture of objects and painting and expanded the meaning of diversity in a painting by using various materials.

⁴ Son Jimin, "Robert Rauschenberg's Repetition, Existential Theology Beyond Differences," *American Studies* 85, no. 1 (2019): 69-73.

⁵ Kim Hee-young, "The historical and cultural significance of Neo Avant garde through the Combine Painting of Robert Rauschenberg." *Research on the History of Contemporary Art* 17, (2005): 114-115.

⁶ Branden W. Joseph, *Robert Rauschenberg* (Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 2002), 29, 34-35.

⁷ Branden, *Robert Rauschenberg*, 76-78.

Like Rauschenberg, I incorporated a diversity of materials into my artwork, such as my collage on an aluminum plate rather than canvas. Rauschenberg's work provided an important point for thinking and researching why an artwork should be created on a canvas and what it means to create a collage using different materials.

2.2. Mark Bradford

Mark Bradford's works are primarily constructed from end papers, which are for protecting hair from overheating in beauty salons. In *Juice*, he repeats the dual process of attaching and peeling a variety of discarded paper materials, such as merchant's posters, broadsides, and even billboards found in downtown Los Angeles to create multiple layers, with the debris used to create an overlap of colors.⁸ Bradford also used an end-paper layer in *High Roller Kats Gonna Pay for That*, lightly pressing translucent end papers, and poeticizing his experiences in the city through pieces of billboard posters collected near his studio. In Mark Bradford's works, it is possible to see the grid pattern, which is intended to induce viewers to enter the fictional space he has created so that he can capture various imaginary experiences and interpretations of life in a big city.⁹

Los Moscos seems as though one is looking at an aerial map of a large urban area and the title is derived from a figure of speech that demeans migrant workers in San Francisco.¹⁰ His work is about a densely populated city, and it makes me imagine various socio-cultural stories of people entangled in the city. The grid he shows is like a mental map. Through his collage work, I thought about the social meaning conveyed in the repeated images of the ruined city. Additionally, when the image of the city is transmitted to the viewers through the act of collage work on an anti-slip

⁸ "Mark Bradford", Mark Bradford: End Papers, Black Art in America, accessed February 19, 2020, <https://www.blackartinamerica.com/index.php/2019/08/21/modern-art-museum-of-fort-worth-presents-mark-bradford-end-papers/>

⁹ Evelyn Carol Hankins and Stéphane Aquin. *Mark Bradford: Pickett's Charge*. (Yale University Press, 2018), 6-7.

¹⁰ Kathryn Brown. "The Artist as Urban Geographer Mark Bradford and Julie Mehretu." *American Art* 24, no. 3 (2010): 102-104.

aluminum plate, which is used for city construction, the collage work will remind the viewer of the coexistence of the new city construction and the ruins.

2.3. Yang Haegue

Yang Haegue was a representative artist of the Korean Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale, who is currently active in Berlin and Seoul. Yang Haegue's first solo exhibition, titled *Sadong 30*, expresses her emotion about leaving her country and living in Berlin as a foreigner. Her exhibition took place in an abandoned small house in Sadong of Incheon, a suburb of Seoul.¹¹

Sadong is a marginalized area, even within Incheon, and her work was presented in an abandoned house, which was barely maintaining its shape, in a narrow alley of Sadong. Inside the house, the wallpaper was peeling off and the roof was damaged in places. She mainly used the concept of light and reflection obtained from the ecological characteristics of the dwelling house. For example, a strobe light, which emits a strong light, momentarily creates a kind of stationary state; a three-dimensional stereoscopic object made through origami creates a mysterious and abandoned small space as a new space. In addition, an observatory was set up for the viewers to observe the exterior of the house and the aura.¹²

Yang Haegue's interpretation of the Sadong house provides an opportunity to examine the metaphorical meaning of the house and the symbolic hometown as an aesthetic reflection. *Sadong 30* reinterpreted the meaning of personal artifacts and objects left by the residents, and it expresses the futility brought to the individual by urban redevelopment.

¹¹ Wes Hill. "Haegue Yang missed connections at the IMA." *Art Monthly Australasia*, 310 (2018), 39.

¹² "Yang Haegue", Yang Haegue, accessed September 1, 2019, <http://www.heikejung.de/content.html>

3. Thesis Art Works

3.1. *Isolated Island*



Isolated Island MFA exhibition, School of Art Gallery

Isolated Island contains stories about social issues that have arisen all over the developed world, resulting from globalization and late-stage capitalism. High-speed urbanization, lack of housing, and gentrification are the results of urban redevelopment from excessive expansion. It is a common global occurrence.¹³ As urban development and regional development intertwined, the distinction between urban and rural areas becomes increasingly obscure, which has brought conflicts between rural and urban areas, creating partly urbanized rural landscapes.¹⁴ However, old and new cities do not seem to mix easily, the city becomes half slum and half paradise. Rapid urban growth has

¹³ Mike, *Planet of Slums*, 8.

¹⁴ Kerry Gold, "The Highest bidder: How foreign investors are squeezing out Vancouver's middle class," *The Walrus*, (May 2016): 23-32.

produced unavoidable consequences such as increased slums, unauthorized shanty houses, unofficial rents, and homeless people. It is a common feature of numerous cities for the poor to be pushed into dense slums, like “ant caves”, while the rich make full use of gardens and vacant lots.¹⁵

In Korea, a new type of residential space created in this global phenomenon is called *Jjokbang*. *Jjokbang* first appeared in a form of rental accommodation through residential redevelopment projects in Korea. Since the early 1980s, several settlements have been demolished as a part of urban gentrification and redevelopment projects. With forced evictions, people have been scattered throughout the city and some of them still remain in the city center.¹⁶ However, due to the rapid rise in land prices and residential costs, there was not enough affordable space for people who had no place to go after forced eviction. That was when renters started creating small living spaces by dividing pre-existing rooms and renting them out, creating the current *Jjokbang* village in the center. This space rental system is usually illegal, and the size of *Jjokbang* is 120 cm (W) x 200 cm (H), therefore it is called a “prison without bars”.¹⁷

The process of urban redevelopment can be compared to the colonists' looting of third-world countries' resources and manpower, and subordinating people for profit. Just as many colonies on Earth suffer from colonial heritage even after their outward independence, the suffering of urban overdevelopment continues after development. For hundreds of years, numerous places and buildings were brutally destroyed by conquerors, trying to rewrite history and strengthen control by destroying the past, present, and future memories of the people.¹⁸ In other words, to discuss the development of the city is also to discuss the destruction of the city.

Gordon Matta-Clark was the artist who talked about the development and destruction of the city at the same time. In the 1960s and 1970s, New York had serious urban problems. Matta-Clark worked to break the boundaries of the city by choosing places that revealed New York's problems

¹⁵ Mike, *Planet of Slums*, 27.

¹⁶ Ha Seong-Kyu, “Housing poverty and the role of urban governance in Korea.” *Environment and Urbanization* 16, no.1 (2004):142-143.

¹⁷ Ha Seong-Kyu, “Housing poverty,” 139-140.

¹⁸ Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

outside the gallery. Matta-Clark's urban intervention piece, which divides space and breaks boundaries, destroys the walls of buildings.¹⁹ Titled *Splitting*, the work of dividing the exterior walls of the building and the work of *Conical Intercept* took the form of breaking and cutting the inner walls and windows of the building. Matta-Clark's work on destroying buildings talks about the problems of the modernist building process in New York, where the city was divided into pieces and the very specific reality of social discrimination and alienation emerged.²⁰

3.2. *Ant Cave*



Ant Cave, 2021, collage on aluminum, 71x138 inch

I mix and spread images, the repetitive photographs are reminiscent of a garbage dump, which was intended to express the private and emotional elements of the city's extinction like a home that was abandoned after the surrounding area was demolished. *Ant Cave* shows consecutive,

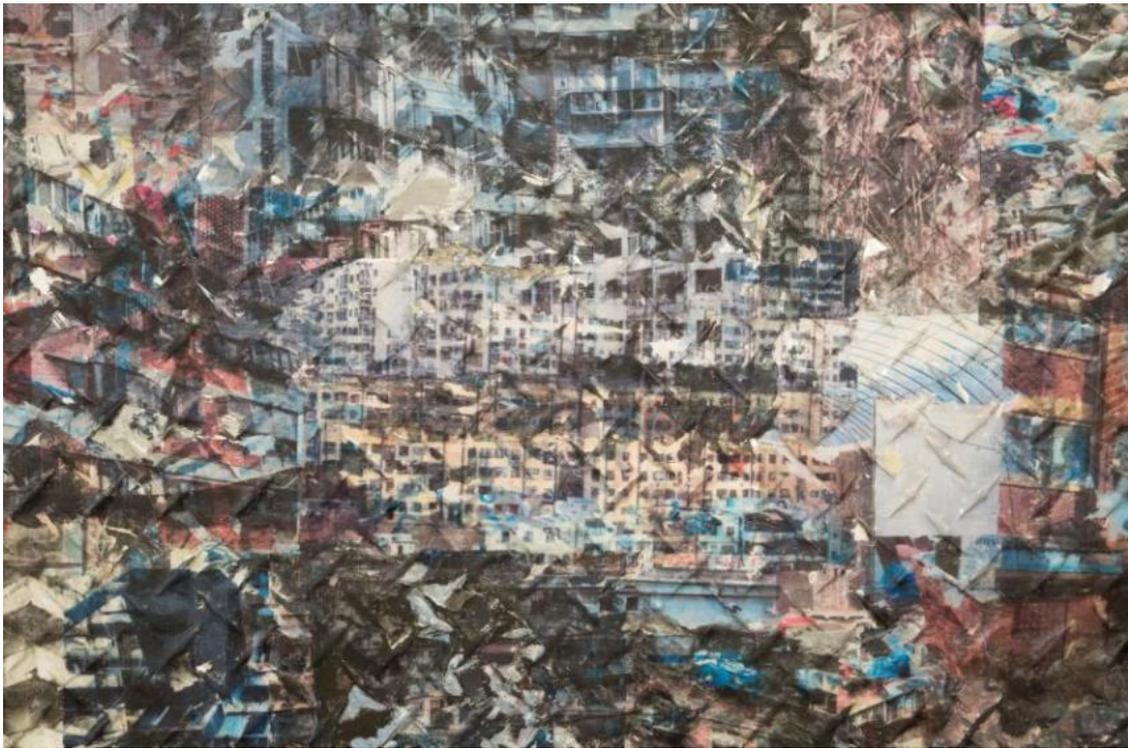
¹⁹ Park Soohyun. "Urban Intervention in Works of Gordon Matta-Clark : Centering on Urban Problems of New York in 1960-70s." (Master diss., EwhaWomans University, 2011), 43.

²⁰ Matta-Clark, Gordon. *Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure*. (Whitney Museum of American Art: 2007).

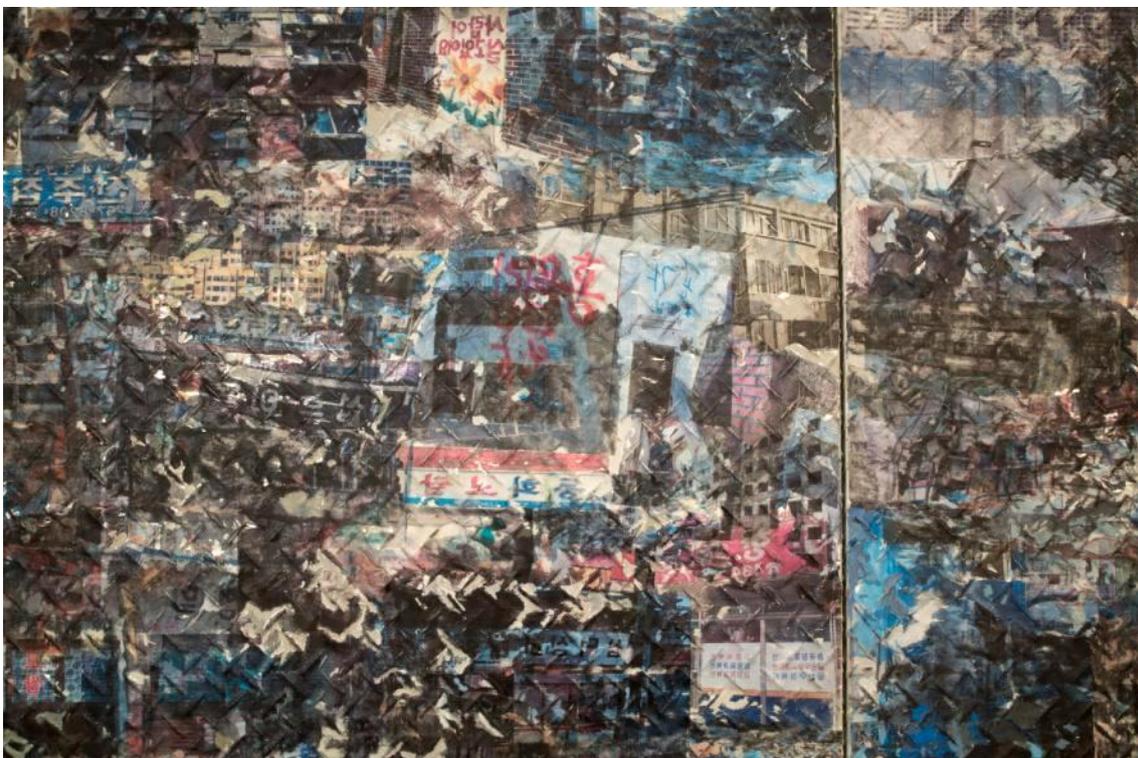
sometimes disconnected, and repeated images of the destroyed city. I gathered and rearranged images of the city's destruction to create a negative yet true, depiction of the city. Cities are becoming overdeveloped, but we must continue to see what has been abandoned and destroyed in cities at the same time.

I chose metal for my collages, and I create a new visual space through the meeting of metals and urban imagery depicting ruins. Metal is usually recognized as a cold, sharp material. On the other hand, it has the advantage of being strong, durable, and reflective. The choice of collage on aluminum plates began with the intention of further expanding the limited material choice of conventional image supports. Aluminum plates maintain the material properties of this metal even after finishing collage work. I create layers of the city's ruined images by combining and rearranging them to express a large landscape. Images of the ruined city are reconstructed in a new context through cutting and rearrangement. Amid repeated development and destruction, the image of the city seems to be fragmented and distorted, collapsing into the ridges of the anti-slip aluminum plates.

The first step for *Ant cave* is to print and cut pictures of demolished areas in Korea and transfer them with a gel medium to the aluminum plate surface. Transcriptional images are torn off in the process of appearing on the aluminum plate and producing results such as overlapping each other or the adding of new colors as a coincidence effect. This process is repeated several times. The imagery evolves over many layers, appearing gradually and changing from fragmentary and unrelated areas towards a more coherent overall composition. The next step involves removing excessively dark or crushed images, which is the necessary process to go beyond the mechanical process of transcribing printed images, and this is the step for observing the entire image and balancing the overall color. After cutting out the parts that need to be removed, a bright series of acrylic paints must be used to connect the individual image to the surrounding images. This last step is the most specific and meaningful work, such as unifying and disconnecting printed images that were initially thrown indiscriminately. I try to create a unique and new atmosphere by using print images for *Ant Cave*. Overlapping and coincidental effects of the process and the mixed images of demolition sites enable me to reconnect the emotions that I had experienced in the demolition area.



Ant Cave, 2021, Detail 1



Ant Cave, 2021, Detail 2



Ant Cave, 2021, Detail 3



Ant Cave, 2021, Detail 4

3.3. *Shelter*

SOCRATES - GLAUCON

AND now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened:—Behold! Human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.²¹



Shelter, 2021, Installation view

In *Shelter*, a shadow is used for showing the relationship between the material and the

²¹ Plato, “Book VII,” chap. 7 in *Republic*, trans. Choi Kwang-yeol (Seoul: A Beautiful Day, 2014).

immaterial. Shadows are natural phenomena that exist only when there is light. Shadows can be used for a variety of meanings, from existence and non-existence to harmony and disharmony, regardless of the dichotomous structure of light and darkness. Plato refers to Socrates' allegory of the cave and refers to the reality and illusion that prisoners who have lived their entire lives looking at their shadows cannot accept light. Plato's metaphor of the cave reveals much in realizing the self-portrait of a city. Cities are transformed into completely different shapes through redevelopment. However, in the process of redevelopment, the city we see is a ruin itself, as opposed to the new city we will experience. It is repeated over a long period of time where the city we see is not the city we experience. We do not see a ruined city and act as if a refurbished city will not once again become a ruined city.

In *Shelter*, the three pillars are lined with screens and plastic industrial materials. These materials are intertwined and create a variety of shadows. It can create a sense of confusion about whether the actual objects are real or shadows. If the shadows are too obvious they offset the meaning of the real objects. The well-developed city we see is dizzyingly great, but in this lump of concrete, lives seem to be lived in meaningless hope, like prisoners with tied hands and feet in a cave who do not know their true nature and the existence of light. In other words, there is hope that the city, which is being renewed with new buildings, will make our lives richer, but this building will suddenly disappear one day. The owner of this city we use and live in is not the individual, but the invisible power that controls us.

Nicolas Bourriaud said, "Waste represents a temporary category-one that is largely arbitrary and prone to infinite renegotiation."²² In modern art, I can find examples of artworks that talk about the city with discarded objects collected by artists. Mexican artist, Gabriel Orozco created a simple work in 1993 by collecting pieces of trash to express the skyline of New York City.²³ The trash is lined up in front of a cement block, contrasting with the buildings in New York City that actually exist

²² Nicolas Bourriaud. *The exform*. (Brooklyn, New York: Verso , 2016). 11.

²³ "Gabriel Orozco", Mutual Art, accessed March 25, 2020. <https://www.mutualart.com/Article/Orozco-Set-to-Captivate-Crowds-at-New-Ta/B41E4A7F51D82FD8>

behind, evoking a heterogeneous emotion. Through this work, I can see how cleverly trash was used to artistically express the everyday world. Similarly, a contemporary artist Gedi Sibony presented several paintings on cut pieces of dismantled semi-trailers at Greene Naftali in 2014.²⁴ His paintings were made on top of aluminum doors in abandoned trailers instead of fabric canvas. These works are very abstract; however, they destroy the boundaries of daily life and art that abstract paintings on canvas cannot replicate.



Shelter, 2021, Installation view

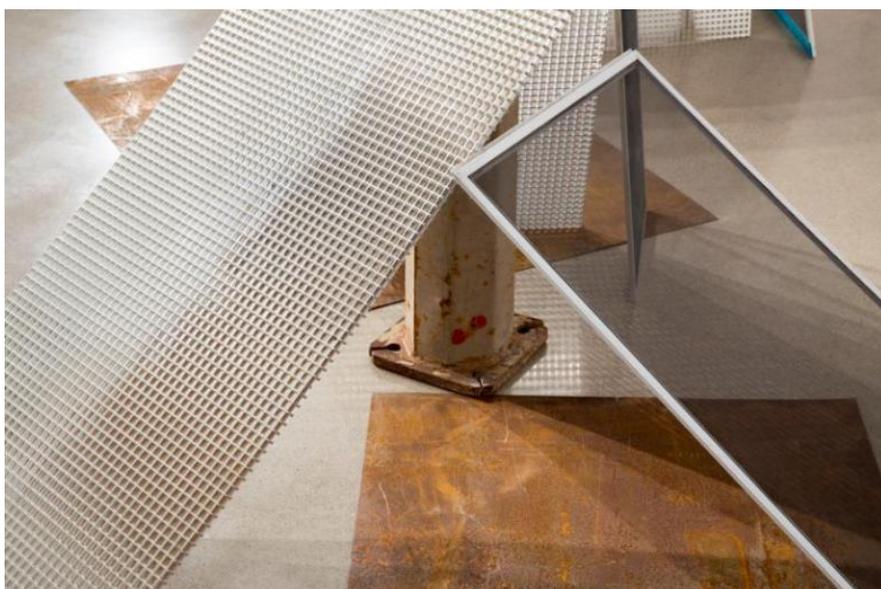
Through a combination of abandoned industrial products prevalent in late capitalism and my aesthetic point of view, I try to approach the essence of the endless mutual story between society and art. The discarded items I use as materials contain stories to tell, and they have the meaning of preserving, exhibiting, and recording them through the process of using them. Following the process

²⁴ “Gedisibony.” Greene Naftali, accessed December 01, 2019.
<https://www.greenenaftaligallery.com/artists/gedi-sibony/a-exhibitions>

of collecting and rearranging them in a new context, I wish to revive emotions such as human nostalgia for a particular time and space, and at the same time, this work extends the life of the objects I used. The traces of human-made life, which cannot be expressed with any new art data, are historical materials and are also the best way to express my artistic intention to record the memories of the city through art. Abandoned objects are filled with different meanings and roles than originally designated, and they provide a critical reflection process, questioning the reality and structure of power hidden in the modern city.



Shelter, 2021, Detail 1



Shelter, 2021, Detail 2



Shelter, 2021, Detail 3

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