



RAN HWANG



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RAN HWANG, *Hope Springs Eternal*  
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CURRICULUM VITAE

# Hope Springs Eternal: Recent Works by Ran Hwang

by David Ebony

*Hope springs eternal in the human breast:  
Man never is, but always to be blest.  
The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home,  
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.*  
—Alexander Pope

Ran Hwang is known for large-scale installations and constructions composed of innumerable plastic or paper buttons or beads attached to the ends of log nails or pins. She hammers these elements into various surfaces—Plexiglas panels, wood, and sometimes directly into the plaster walls. The subjects of her imagery are often monumental-size Buddhist temples, palaces, giant eagles or mythic phoenixes. Sometimes she employs several assistants to help realize these elaborate endeavors.

For her recent works, however, created in South Korea and the United States during the Covid-19 global pandemic, she often worked alone, in solitude, creating more intimate-size pieces with gentle themes—most often white plum blossoms flowering on sinewy branches, with bright, richly hued monochrome backgrounds. She aims to impart with these pieces a spiritually uplifting and positive message of hope in the midst of the devastating pain and tragedy that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused so many people to suffer and endure around the world.

Hwang titled her New York show of these recent works *Hope Springs Eternal*, a poetic phrase first introduced by Alexander Pope in his lyrical *Essay on Man* (1732-1734). Like Pope, Hwang uses the phrase as an expression of unwavering faith that human beings have a capacity to harbor hope and optimism even in the face of the most formidable adversity.

Apropos of the show's theme, the plum blossom image that Hwang favors in these works relates to traditional Korean painting. It symbolizes courage and strength, as one of the earliest signs of spring, defying the last of winter's chill in order to flourish. The ephemerality of the blossoms is significant as it alludes to the fleeting phases of a human existence on earth.

The artist grew up in a Buddhist household in Korea, and her father taught at the local Buddhist temple. In his spare time, he created paintings in the traditional Korean style, which Hwang learned to appreciate at an early age. The plum blossom is one of the so-called Four Gentlemen symbols of traditional East Asian painting, along with the orchid (whose Korean name is related to the artist's name, Ran), symbolizing wisdom; the chrysanthemum, representing peace and well-being; and bamboo, which signifies fortitude and longevity.

Hwang uses the traditional motifs in quite contemporary ways. In *Mystery Life* (all works 2021), for instance, a branch of plum blossoms—white paper buttons pinned to a rectangular Plexiglass surface—appear enveloped in an ethereal mist that shifts from blue on the left to deep lavender on the right. The optical effect, created with the help of tinted Plexiglas, engenders a rather abstract, psychological space, like an otherworldly dreamscape.

*Self Reflection V*, and *Self Reflection Y*, indicate personal meditations, as their titles suggest. The creation of works like these involves an almost ritual performative aspect. There is a rhythmic, trancelike repetition of movement that is integral to the process of the work, from the outset to its realization.

Corresponding to the monks hammering the prayer bells in Buddhist temples, which Hwang recalls from her youth, each of the components—buttons and pins—are pounded into the surfaces with calibrated stokes of the hammer, usually thirty times for each element. This ritual component of the work sets Hwang's methodology apart from other contemporary artists with related techniques, such as German artist Günther Uecker, of the Zero Group, whose hammered-nail compositions aim for a range of purely optical effects.

In addition, Hwang assigns an anthropomorphic attribute to the pins and buttons themselves, as each refers to the human head and body.

"All of my work is a meditation," Hwang frequently says. "With these new works, I hope to bring light into peoples' hearts, and help heal their inner wounds."

Many of the recent works feature Plexiglas hemispheres, some backlit with LED lights, adding to the intensity of the already luminous surfaces. These forms, embellished with clusters of blossoms, hint at the shape of the Coronavirus itself as it appears in microscopic detail. The series *Nothing Forever* has circular shapes surrounded by gold frames, suggesting portals to another times and space. In *Past Memories*, clusters of red blossoms appear embedded on the surface of a round wood tabletop inlaid with mother-of-pearl, traditionally used for year-round Korean memorial services.

The recent works are elegiac in theme, but celebratory in tone. Their physical comportment is full of brilliant color and light; the circular forms of many works convey a centrifugal energy and appear as meditation mandalas related to Asian art. While Hwang's three-dimensional tondos allude to the sublime order of nature, as well as cosmic perfection, the oval compositions, such as the *After Ago* series and *Ode to Second Full Moon* are even more evocative in their internal energy and transcendental allure. As theorist Rudolf Arnheim notes in his influential book *The Power of the Center*, "The oval pays with a loss of centric symmetry for an increase in tension. The Renaissance cherished the circle as the shape of cosmic perfection, the Mannerist phase of the Baroque took to the high-strung ellipse. . . It is true that the ellipse has a stabilizing symmetry of its own."<sup>1</sup> Hwang's work does, indeed, harbor a stabilizing symmetry of its own.

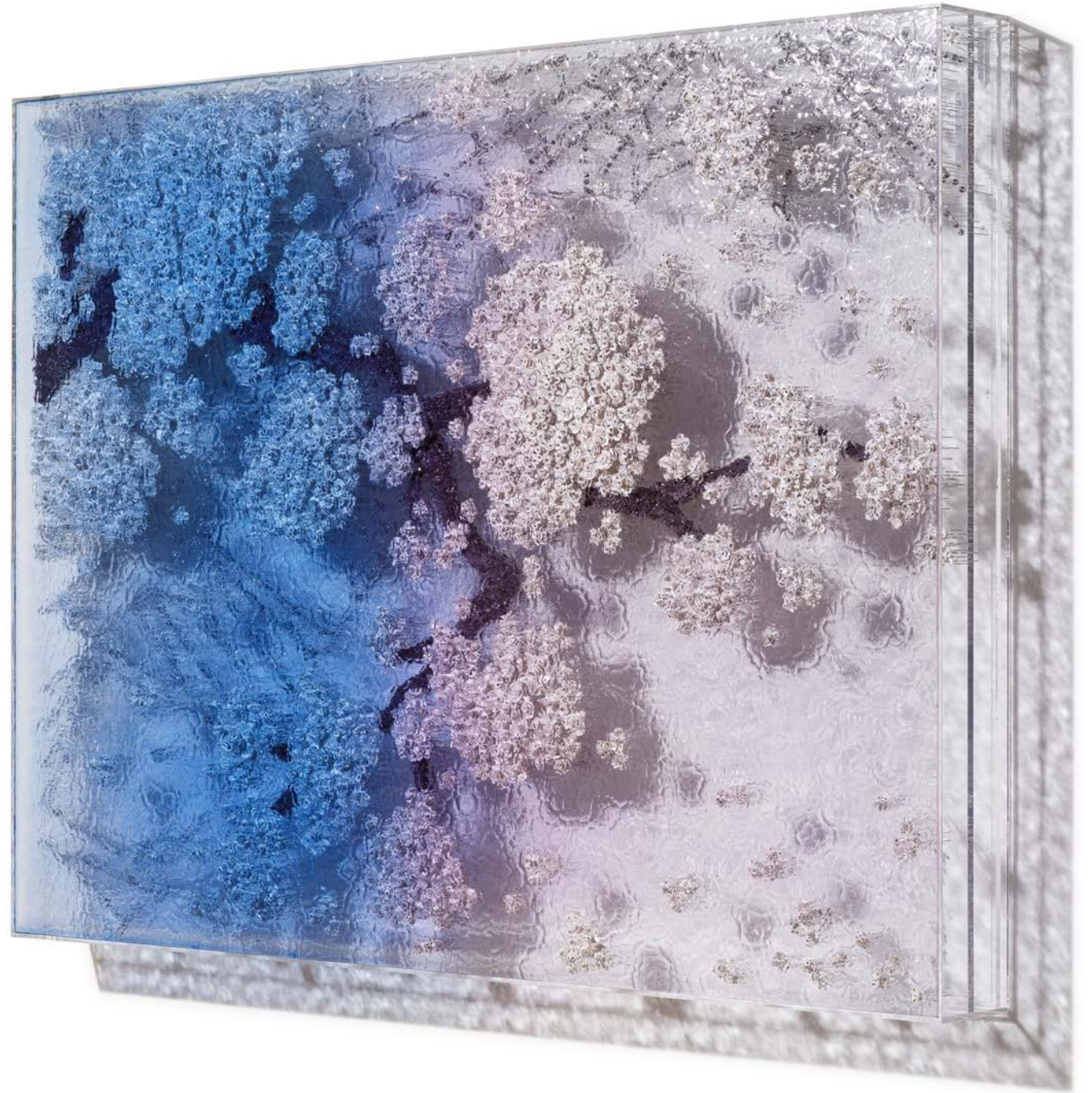
Coinciding with the exhibition of these relatively intimate works, Hwang is in the midst of creating a sprawling mural for the lobby of the Facebook offices at New York' Hudson Yards. The work features a dramatic, intensely colorful image of a hybrid creature—part eagle, partly the mythological phoenix. The eagle as symbolic of the U.S., and the phoenix representing Asia, embodies the artist's situation of dividing her time and attention between New York and Seoul. The bird grasps in its talons a cluster of colorful threads, which the artist suggests represents souls felled by pandemic, as well as a memorial tribute to comfort the families and loved ones left behind. Here, too, Hwang reflects on the present moment, while indicating, metaphorically at least, a dazzling and optimistic projection of humanity's inevitable triumph over this current calamity. In a world full of tumult and uncertainly, the mural, as well as each of the works in *Hope Spring Eternal*, offers a contemplative respite and an emotional calm that lately has been in short supply.

David Ebony is a Contributing Editor for *Art in America*, and the author of "*David Ebony + Art Books*," an ongoing column for Yale University Press online. The author of numerous artist monographs, he lives and works in New York City.

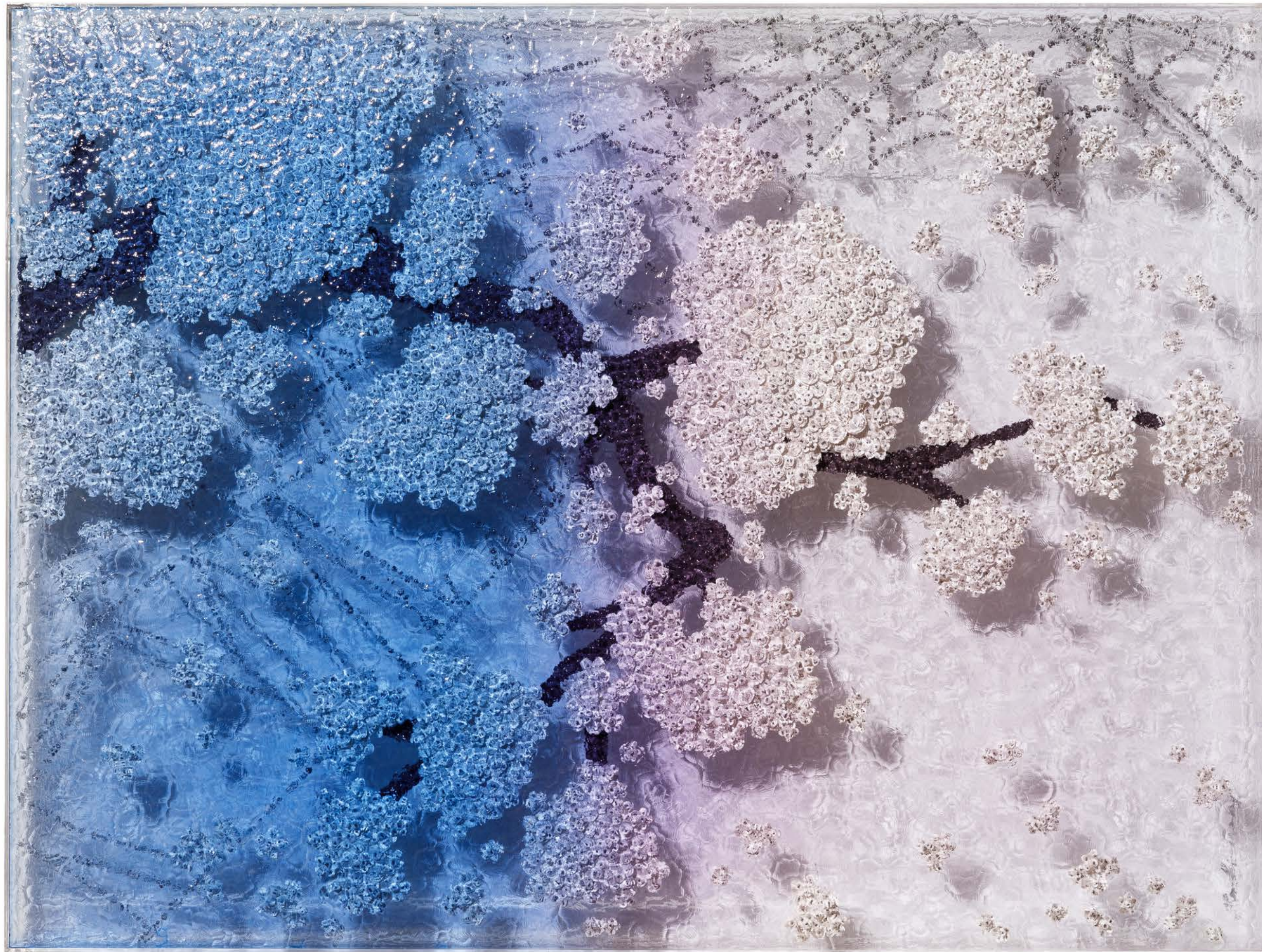
<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, p. 88-89



Hope Springs Eternal  
**RAN HWANG**



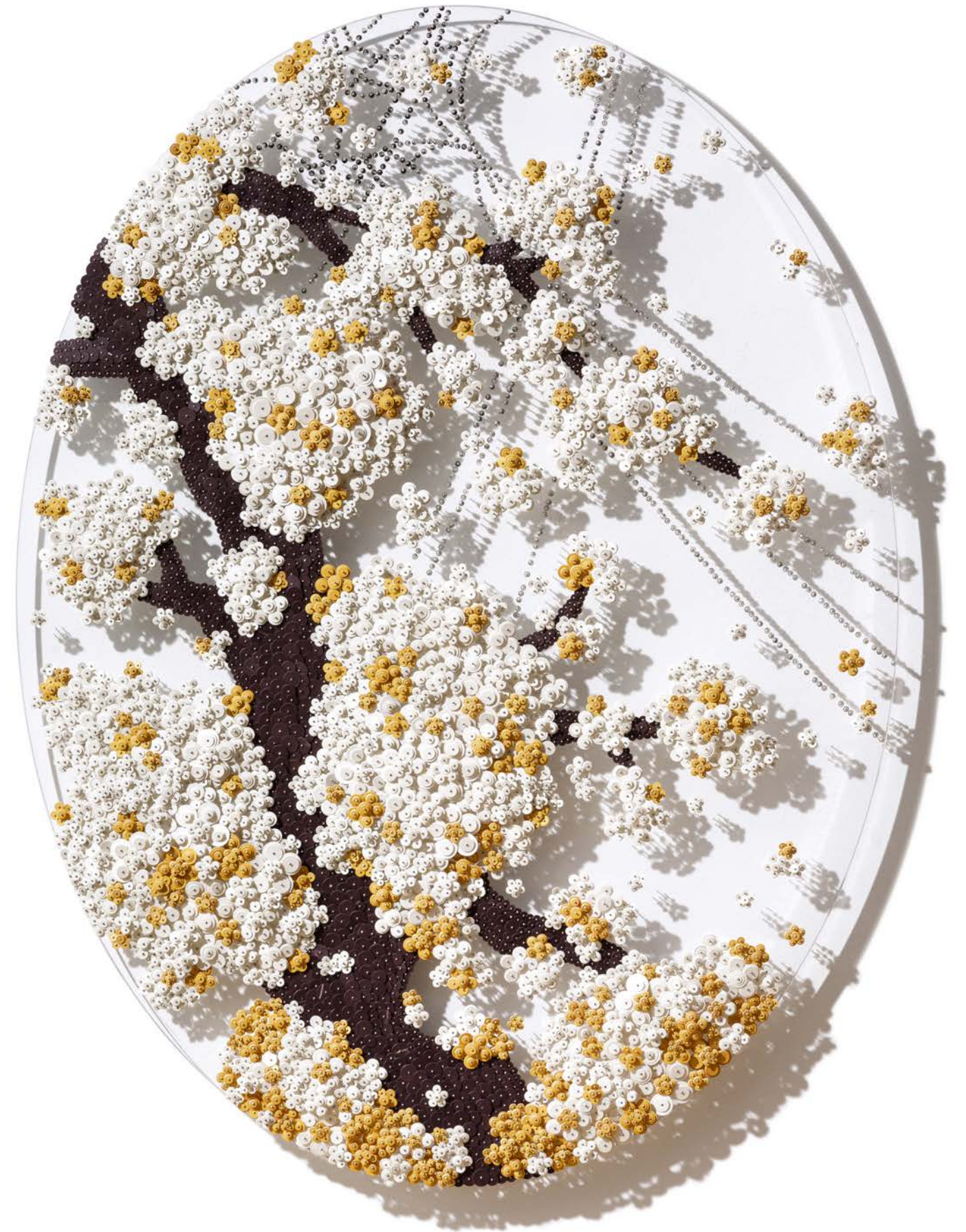
















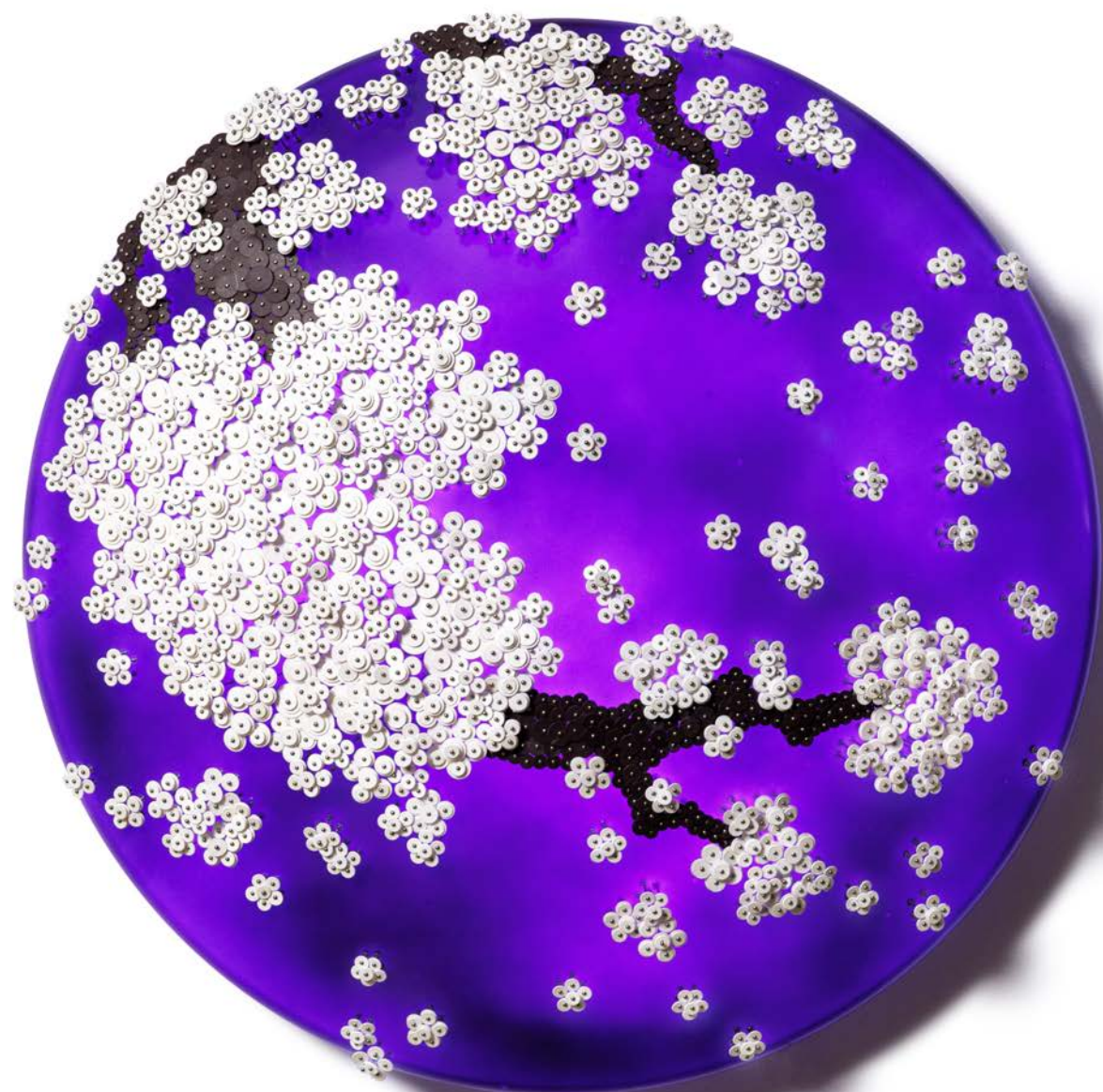




























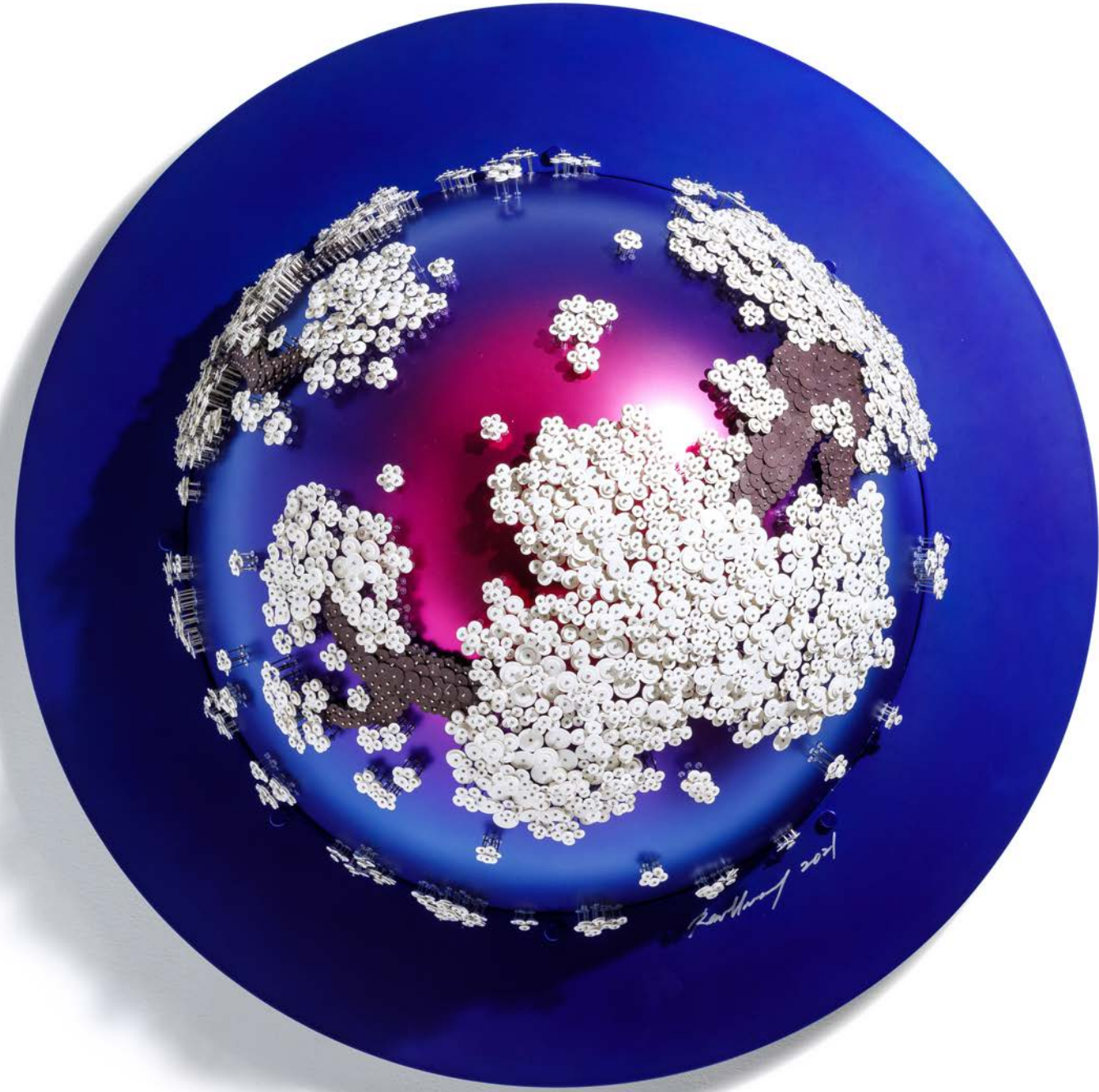
















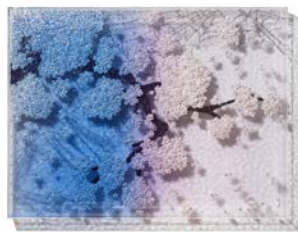






ART WORKS LIST  
2021

front + back covers, page 9 - 11  
*Mystery life\_BW*, 2021  
Paper Buttons, Beads, Pins on Plexiglass  
and Acrylic Frame  
35.4 x 47.2 x 4.3 in. / 90 x 120 x 11 cm.



page 12 - 15  
*Ode to second Full Moon\_WG*, 2021  
Paper Buttons, Beads, Pins on Plexiglass  
35.4 x 47.2 x 2.1 in. / 90 x 120 x 5.5 cm.



page 16 - 19  
*Nothing forever\_RG*, 2021  
Paper Buttons, Beads, Pins on  
Acrylic Dome  
31.4 x 31.4 x 11.8 in. / 80 x 80 x 30 cm.



page 20 - 21  
*Nothing forever\_B1*, 2021  
Paper Buttons, Crystals, Beads, Pins on  
Plexiglass and LED Lights  
19.6 x 19.6 x 3.9 in. / 50 x 50 x 10 cm.



page 22  
*Self-reflection\_V*, 2021  
Paper Buttons, Beads, Pins on  
LED Lights  
22.8 x 22.8 x 17.8 in. / 58 x 58 x 20 cm.



page 23  
*Self-reflection\_Y*, 2021  
Paper Buttons, Beads, Pins on LED Lights  
20.8 x 20.8 x 5.1 in. / 52.8 x 52.8 x 13 cm.



page 25 - 27  
*Eternal Muse\_21WG*, 2021  
Buttons, Beads, Pins on Acrylonitrile-  
Butadiene-Styrene on Plexiglass  
24.4 x 24.4 x 7 in. / 62 x 62 x 18 cm.



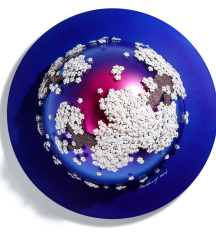
page 28 - 31  
*After Ago\_RWL*, 2021  
Buttons, Beads, Pins on DIASEC  
33.4 x 45.2 x 1.9 in. / 85 x 115 x 5 cm.



page 32 - 35  
*Past memories\_R*, 2021  
Buttons, Beads, Pins on Acrylic Panel,  
Korean mother of pearl inlaid table  
27.5 x 27.5 x 5.5 in. / 70 x 70 x 14 cm.



page 36 - 37  
*Nothing forever\_PB*, 2021  
Paper Buttons, Beads, Pins on  
Acrylic Dome  
31.4 x 31.4 x 11.8 in. / 80 x 80 x 30 cm.



page 38  
*After Ago\_TWL*, 2021  
Buttons, Beads, Pins on DIASEC  
31.4 x 31.4 x 1.9 in. / 80 x 80 x 5 cm.



page 39  
*After Ago\_GWL*, 2021  
Buttons, Beads, Pins on DIASEC  
23.6 x 23.6 x 1.9 in. / 60 x 60 x 5 cm.



page 40 - 41  
*After Ago\_PWL*, 2021  
Buttons, Beads, Pins on DIASECWW  
33.4 x 45.2 x 1.9 in. / 85 x 115 x 5 cm.





# CURRICULUM VITAE

B.F.A., School of Visual Arts, New York  
M.F.A., Graduate School of Arts Chung-Ang University,  
Seoul, Korea  
Art Practice, School of Visual Arts, New York

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2021 Leila Heller Gallery, New York  
2019 Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai, United Arab Emirates  
2017 Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore  
Leila Heller Gallery, NY  
2016 Asian Art Works, Busan, Korea  
2015 UNESCO Paris Headquarters, Paris  
MASS MoCA, Massachusetts, USA  
International Museum of Art and Science (IMAS),  
Cardenas Gallery, Texas, USA  
2014 Aloft at Hermès (former Third Floor-Hermès), Singapore  
Leila Heller Gallery, NY  
Asian Art Works, Beijing, China  
2012 Leila Heller Gallery, NY  
2010 Hakgojae Gallery, Seoul, Korea  
2009 Kashya Hildebrand Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland  
2007 2X13 Gallery, Seoul, Korea  
2006 Haas Gallery, Bloomsburg University, PA, USA  
2005 Open Studio, Vermont Studio Art Center, Jonson,  
Vermont, USA  
2004 Hutchins Gallery, Long Island University, NY  
2002 Hudson River Gallery, NY  
Yeemock Gallery, Seoul, Korea  
2001 Hudson River Gallery, NY  
2000 Artsnal Gallery, Paris, France  
1999 Hudson River Gallery, NY

## SELECTED TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2019 Easel Gallery, Shenzhen, China  
2016 Korean Cultural Service, NY  
2015 Asian Art Works, Busan, South Korea  
2005 2x13 Gallery, NY  
Space Shin Choi, NY

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2020 Art Appel Gallery, Athens, Greece  
2019 Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), Dubai, UAE  
SA+ Gallery, Hong Kong  
Leila Heller Gallery, NY  
Hermitage Museum & Gardens, Virginia, USA  
Kang Collection  
Asia Week NY, NY  
2018 Brooklyn Museum, NY  
AHL Foundation, Yonsei University Dental Hospital,  
Seoul, Korea  
Korea Cultural Center, NY

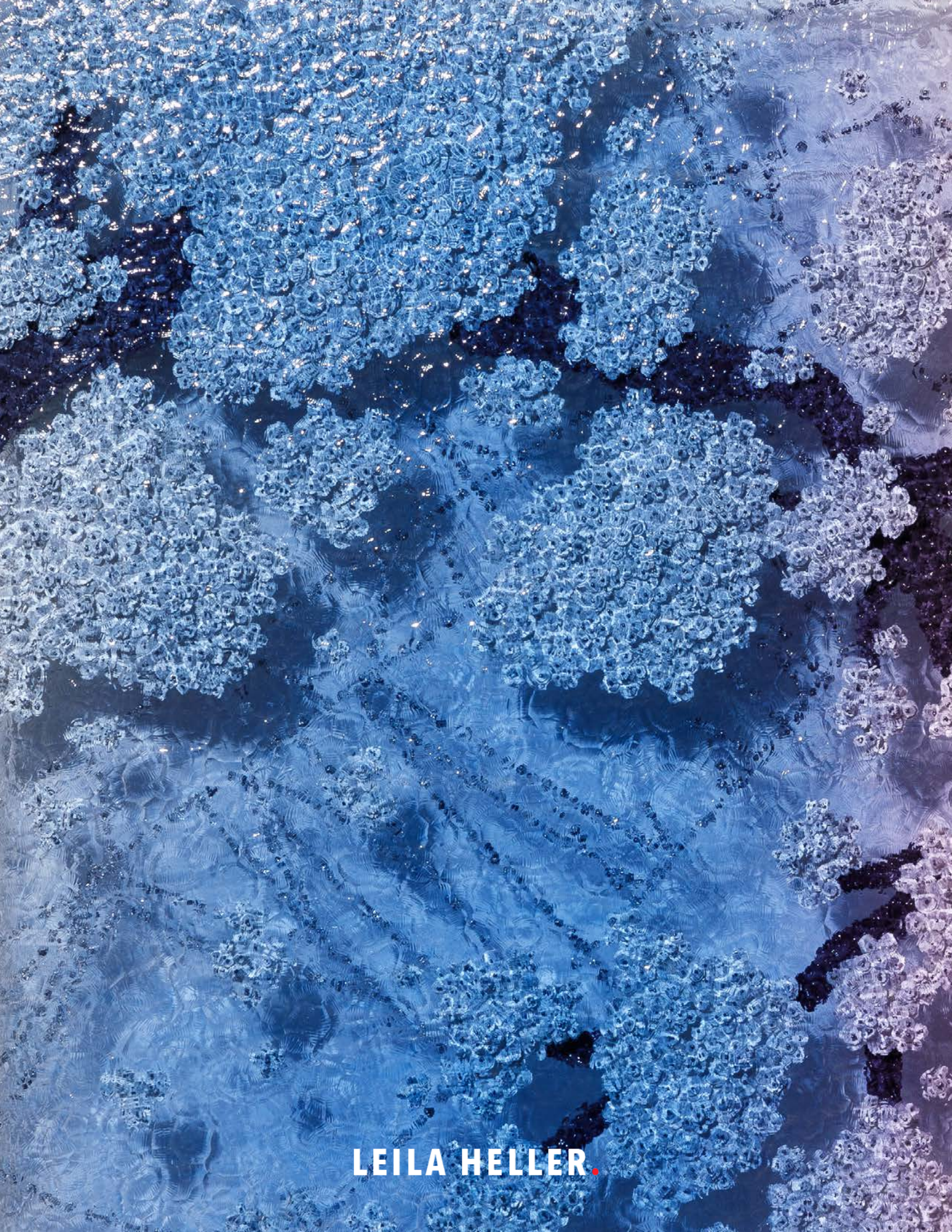
2018 Museum of Contemporary Art of Crete, Rethymno,  
Greece  
2018 Asia Week New York, NY  
Korean Cultural Center of New York, NY  
Opera Gallery, Monaco  
2017 Brooklyn Museum, NY  
Opera Gallery Beirut, Lebanon  
Mykonos Biennale, Mykonos, Greece  
Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada  
2016 Art Space Ben, Seoul, Korea  
Contemporary Calgary, Alberta, Canada  
Asian Art Works, Beijing, China  
The Surrey, NY  
Kang Collection, NY  
House of Dior, Seoul, Korea  
Doris McCarthy Gallery, Ontario, Canada  
KANEKO, Nebraska, USA  
2015 Opera Gallery Paris, Paris, France  
Art Space Ben, Seoul, Korea  
Anya and Andrew Shiva Art Gallery, NY  
Leila Heller Gallery, NY  
Buk Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea  
Brooklyn Museum, NY  
Guangzhou Library, Guangzhou, China  
Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan  
2014 Asian Art Works, Beijing, China  
Korean Cultural Service, NY  
Art Space Ben, Seoul, Korea  
The Watermill Center, Water Mill, New York  
Queens Museum of Art, NY  
Fabergè, New York, USA  
2013 Guild Hall Gallery at Hammond Museum and Japanese  
Stroll Garden, North Salem, NY  
Asian Art Works, Busan, Korea  
Asian Art Works, Busan, Korea  
Leila Heller Gallery, NY  
Mass Moca, Massachusetts, USA  
Des Moines Art Center, Iowa, USA  
2012 Asian Art Works, 798 Beijing, China  
Pagoda Paris Gallery, Paris, France  
Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, NY  
Mana Contemporary, New Jersey, USA  
2011 Hangaram Art Museum, Seoul Arts Center, Seoul  
Amateras Foundation, Sofia, Bulgaria  
Jeju Museum of Contemporary Art, Jeju Island, Korea  
2010 B.I.E.N.N.A.L.E + ONE, Gwang-ju, Korea  
Fokus Lodz Biennale 2010, Lodz, Poland  
2009 Kashya Hildebrand Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland  
National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul  
Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales, Montevideo,  
Uruguay  
2008 Seoul Art Center Museum, Seoul

2007 Hammond Museum & Japanese Stroll Garden, NY  
The Metropolitan Pavilion, NY  
2005 Tenri Gallery, NY  
2004 Gallery Korea of the Korean Cultural Center, NY

## SELECTED GRANTS, AWARDS & RESIDENCIES

2021 FB Air Program, Facebook, New York, USA  
2017 AHL-Jason J. Kim Grant, AHL Foundation, NY  
2015 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, The Pollock-Krasner  
Foundation, NY  
Artist in Residency, International Museum of Art  
and Science (IMAS), Texas, USA  
2014 Selected for 2014 program, Third Floor-Hermès,  
Hermès Foundation, Singapore  
The Studios at Mass MoCA, Residency Program,  
Mass MoCA, Massachusetts, USA  
AAW Artist Studio Residency, Asian Art Works,  
Beijing, China  
2011 PS122 STUDIO Residency Program, NY  
2006 AAI-Artist Alliance, Lower East Side-Rotating &  
Long Term Studio Program, NY  
2005 Full Fellowship, Vermont Studio Center Residency  
Program, Vermont  
2004 Gold Prize, The 1st Contemporary Visual Arts  
Competition, AHL Foundation, NY  
1995 Gold Prize, Korean Watercolor Association, Seoul





LEILA HELLER.