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**Line
Between
Object
and
Shadow**

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A Conversation with

Soo Sunny Park

Imaginary Spaces Within

Silver Linings, 2015. Stainless steel, tar paper, Mylar, and natural and artificial light, 9 x 58.33 x 19.916 ft.

DEAN DIXON



BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Starting with ordinary materials such as chain link fencing, Soo Sunny Park’s sculptures and installations “catch” and interact with natural light. In a radical twist, changing light, rather than the work itself, is central to the viewer’s experience. Park’s most recent work reconfigures normally hidden construction materials such as rebar chairs, which support rebar within concrete, and metal lath, which reinforces plaster walls. Viewers entering her installations find themselves within consciousness-altering spaces that combine changing perspectives with concepts from physics, geometry, psychology, and aesthetics.

Jan Garden Castro: *You’ve pointed out that Lygia Clark’s *Creatures* (1960–61) and *Abyss Mask* (1968) challenge “the ways we ordinarily experience space and the things that inhabit it.” Why is this concept so important to you?*

Soo Sunny Park: As an installation artist, I don’t think of myself as presenting viewers with things in space so much as offering them new kinds of spaces to inhabit. You can’t do an installation without putting things in space, of course, but I hope that the things I put there transform the entirety of the space into something it was not before. Works like Clark’s *Abyss Mask* and *Sensorial Gloves* (1968)

BioLath, 2017. Metal lath, Plexiglas, and light, dimensions variable.

are things that we see and touch in a different way. I try to create environments in which viewers feel their senses work differently. Sometimes, shadows are just as important as objects; sometimes light, rather than what we see by means of it, is the main element in our experience.

I am fascinated by interstitial spaces—spaces that exist only between other spaces—and they have become a theme in my installations. Fences and glass usually divide, but in my work, they are forms that fill space. In more recent work, I have used tar paper, usually found in roofs, and metal lath, usually found inside plaster walls, to shape the viewer’s space. In *Boundary Conditions*, viewers occupy a space between a form and its projections. Smaller works sit somewhere between drawing and sculpture.

JGC: *How did you conceive BioLath?*

SSP: I wanted it to be about projecting active shadows onto the wall. I don’t use the word “moiré,” but it’s about light changing the natural projection of the shadow. There’s no longer a drawn image of a shadow, but there are layers of sculptural forms with their animated shadows on the wall. With this piece, the shadow itself is moving.

JGC: *How did you make that happen?*

SSP: I mounted strong LED lights on four 12-foot-long tracks facing and crossing each other in 70 feet of space. The lighting is angled up and slowly moves across. Metal lath forms project the shadows onto and across from each other. Because the tracks are moving in different directions, the viewer sees through them. They have edges



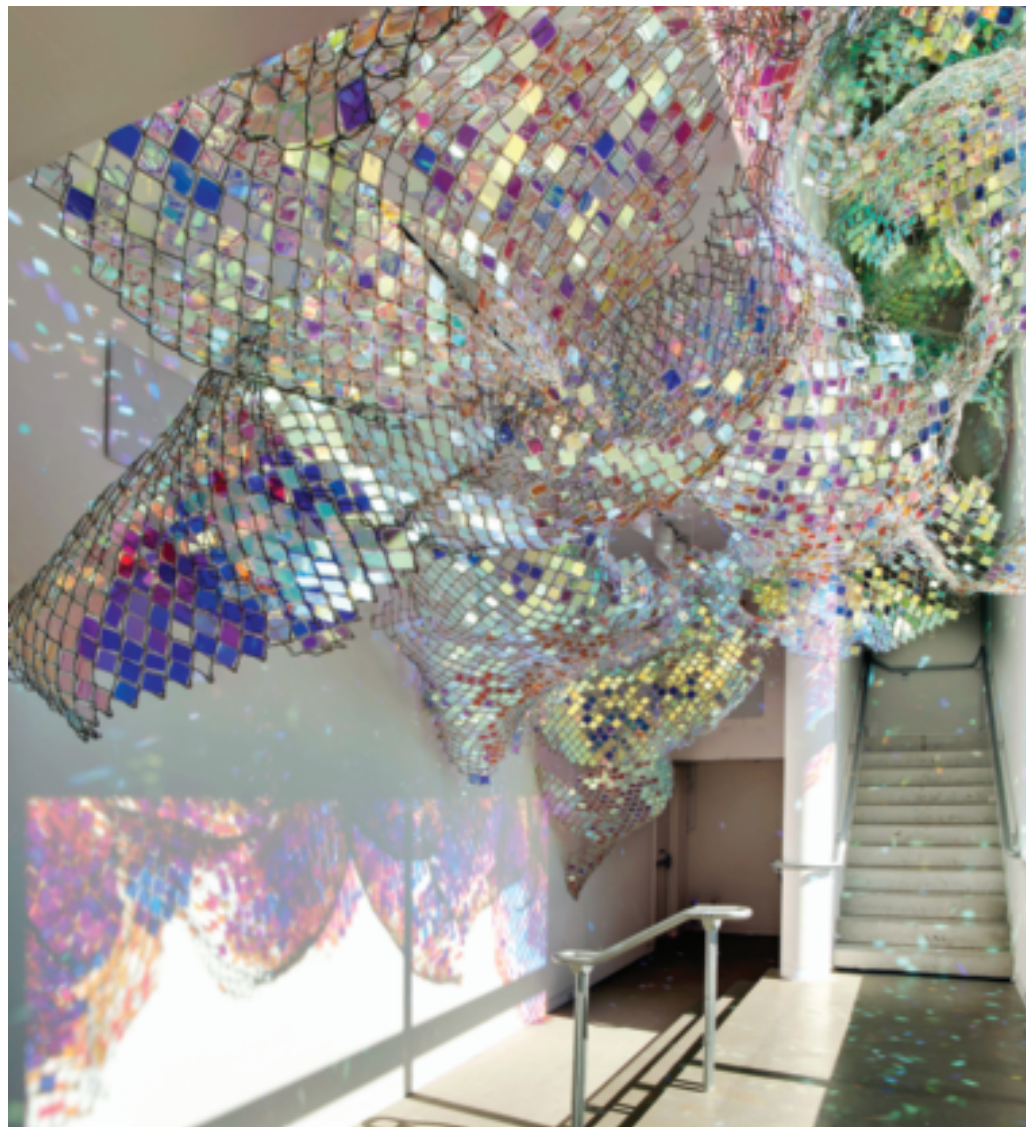
Above: *Unwoven Light*, 2013. Chain link fence, Plexiglas, and natural and artificial light, room: 15.5 x 44 x 40 ft. Right: *Capturing Resonance*, 2011. Chain link fence, Plexiglas, holosonics, audio spotlight panels, low-frequency bass exciters, motion sensor, computer, and natural and artificial light, installation view.

and are crushed into boulder forms of different sizes. The shadows have different thicknesses and widths and are not even patterns. People think that the shadows are floating like water. It can also feel aerial or as though you're under a shelter like Stonehenge. The forms are lower to the ground and project toward the ceiling; the shadows stretch into the air. It's interesting to think about space *in* time and how our perceptions change. I use light as my collaborator. The angle at which light hits the piece changes it—or the viewer can be caught between the light and the shadows. I wanted the shadows to be more dominant.

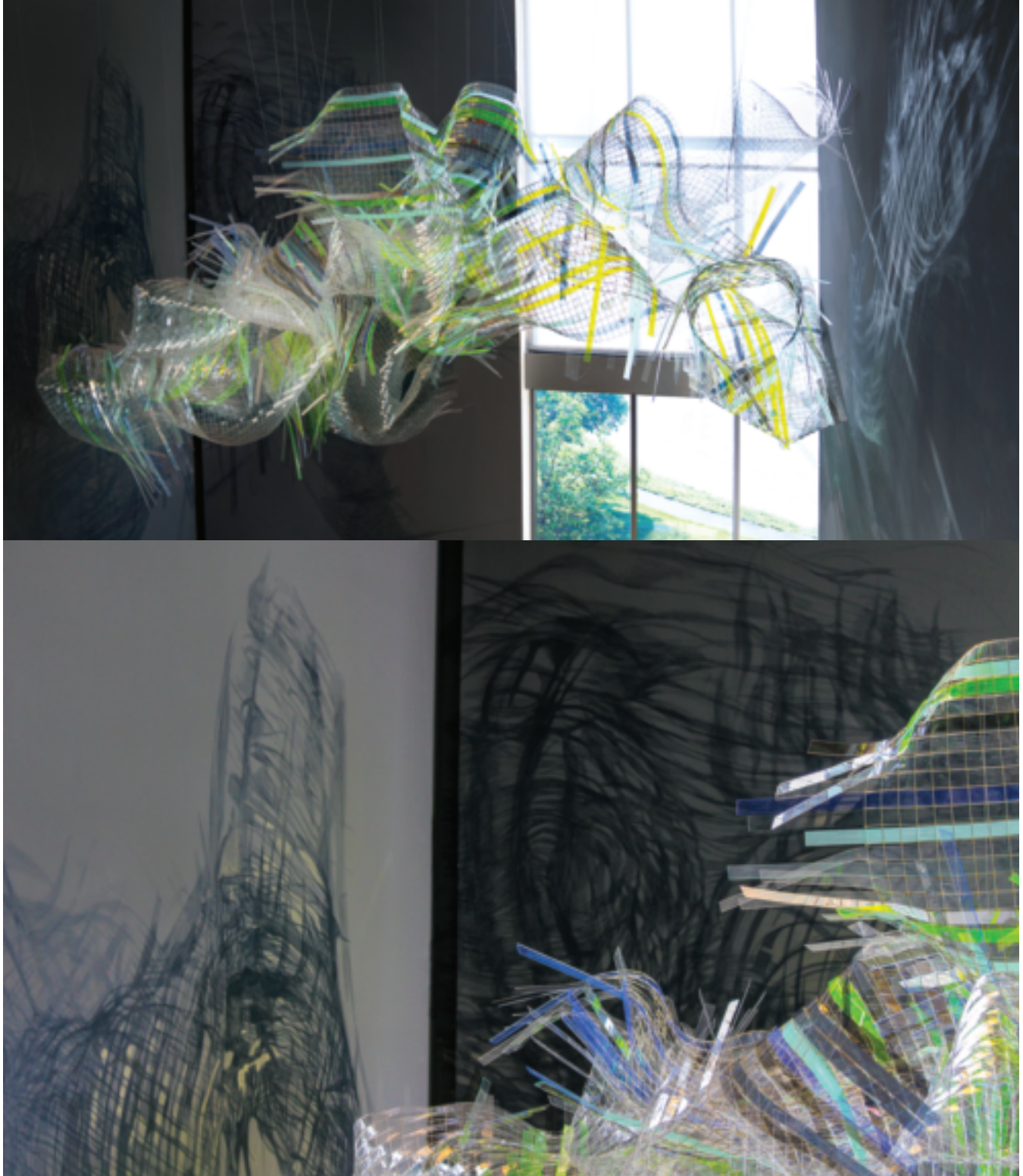
JGC: *Unwoven Light* uses fencing and dichroic glass to produce ethereal prism effects.

How do you install this work in different settings, and how do viewers interact with it?

SSP: Dichroic glass, which dates back to Roman times, is a fused material with reflective, iridescent properties. It comes in many spectrums. I use the greener tints. *Capturing Resonance*, the first version of what became *Unwoven Light*, was installed in a narrow, two-story-high space at the deCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in



TOP: NASH BAKER / BOTTOM: PETER HARRIS



Boundary Conditions, 2014. Plexiglas, stainless steel, paint, and natural and artificial light, 2 views of installation.

Lincoln, Massachusetts. The space is transitional, including a stairway that connects the upper galleries to the lower ones. One side is a huge plate-glass window, so it gets lots of direct sunlight from different angles throughout the day. You can view the space from a lookout above, from the stairwell, from below, and even from outside the museum, but there is only one narrow walkway through it. The piece had to be structured to interact with viewers as they walked that narrow path. Sound artist Spencer Topel set up sensors that played sounds depending on how many people were at differ-

ent points along the path. This gave the piece another dimension, allowing it to change as people walked through it. Because the space is so narrow, I had to construct a scale model before we showed up; otherwise it would have been impossible to install it in a reasonable amount of time.

At Rice University, the first stop for *Unwoven Light*, the space was a very large open box with a glass front. Viewers could walk among the different parts of the installation. There, I could lay the parts out, try something, and change it. It was important to

TOP: JODY DOLE

get the artificial light just right, because there was less natural light to interact with the piece. I liked the vibrancy of the reflections and shadows in *Unwoven Light*. It can also be homogenous and ghostly—like having different personalities. In effect, the piece generated drawings throughout the day as the light interacted with it differently.

All of these installations aim to make light a central element, so the cast chromatic shadows and reflections are as important as the fencing and Plexiglas, if not more so, because they are what really transform the space. Dichroic Plexiglas is an interesting material because it can appear colorless, but once you look at it from different angles, or shine light through it, it reflects greens and yellows while transmitting purple and red shadows.

JGC: In *Boundary Conditions*, mesh and colored Plexiglas compete with painted images, light, and shadows. How do viewers respond to being inside these correspondences and differences?

SSP: In *Boundary Conditions*, I decided to draw some shadows myself. After the piece had been installed, we projected light through it from different angles and I painted those shadows on the wall. The piece casts its own shadows, too, responding to natural and artificial light throughout the day. The interesting part is that most people don't initially realize that the shadow paintings are paintings. They think they are real shadows. Once people realize that they are looking at paintings, their sense of the work

changes. It's not a three-dimensional object suspended in the atrium or a painting on the wall, but a new space that challenges your expectations concerning what you see. I want viewers to understand the woven Plexiglas, the paintings, and the real projections as structuring a new kind of space. I recently installed a variation on this theme in a smaller space at the Kate Shin Gallery in New York City.

JGC: *Silver Linings* is one of your "darkest" works in terms of the density of materials. What was the concept behind it?

SSP: I did *Silver Linings* while I was the Martin Shallenberger Artist-in-Residence at the Cheekwood Museum in Nashville. It's similar to *Boundary Conditions* in that a steel mesh is woven with differently reflecting materials, but it's also different because I moved from transparent Plexiglas to two opaque materials—tar paper and Mylar. Here, instead of projections through the piece, I want the viewer to focus on the contrast between the black tar paper, which is a very good absorber of light, and the Mylar, which is an excellent reflector. Neither material has much local color to it, but the tar paper frames the mirrored pieces, which, in turn, capture the black of the tar paper while also reflecting the people who move through the gallery. I wanted this piece to get people thinking about light and how it helps us to see.

JGC: Could you talk about your explorations of dimensionality? Was *Harpeth Perforation* inspired by *Lucio Fontana*?

Silver Linings, 2015. Stainless steel, tar paper, Mylar, and natural and artificial light, 9 x 58.33 x 19.916 ft.



DEAN DIXON

SSP: I've been experimenting with a few different ideas. Fontana's cut canvases are amazing hybrid objects that occupy space like sculptures. I'm indebted to him, and most of my non-installation work occupies a space between drawing and sculpture. I made *Harpeh Perforation* for the *T Magazine* series "A Picture and A Poem." David Baker's "Pastoral" is filled with grief, and the words are presented in a grid. In response, I covered white paper with wax and graphite, drew a grid behind it, and then punctured it from behind with an awl and a clay tool. The result is that the insides of the paper reach out to the viewer, and the marks are made not on the surface, but with the insides. At a quick glance, the "picture" looks as though it's a stone tablet with an inscription.

In other work, I let the depth of a piece affect how it is presented. Some pieces layer Plexiglas with honeycomb aluminum, so that the appearance changes as one moves around them. Others make use of mirrors and moving reflectors. My work is a metaphysical expression of an idea—an imaginary space within. The viewer's relationship to the work is important. It's not about the image. It goes back to Malevich's "Black Square" series and the idea that there's a space within the black square. Fontana's "Concetto spaziale" series responded to Malevich's work by saying it's not about the red on the canvas but about the actual object in space.

Luminous Muqarna, 2016. Steel, Plexiglas, and artificial light, 11 x 25 x 18 ft.

JGC: *You've had many prestigious residencies, including one at the Rockefeller Center in Bellagio. How do different locations affect the genesis of new projects?*

SSP: I find it inspiring to move away from my studio periodically. If I can, I like to go away for at least a month each year. I bring some materials, generate drawings, interact with new people, and try to work up new ideas. Things I work on during residencies take root in my work about two years later. At the Rockefeller Center, I worked on a large, dark drawing, because the space they had for me was just the right size for doing that. My proposal was to study reflections on the lake. Watching how light fragmented the water, I did a series of white porcelain and clear plastic models about the breaking light. This, in turn, led to the "Unwoven Light" series. Together, the Bellagio drawing and the Mylar work also planted the seed for *Silver Linings*, completed at Cheekwood, which, unlike many residencies, is geared toward producing large-scale installations.

JGC: *Which location had the most unusual light conditions?*

SSP: When I arrived in Solf, Finland, for the Ateljé Stundars residency, the sun would not set. It was July, and I spent two months working with Mylar, lace patterns, and forms inspired by reindeer lichen I found out in the woods. The nearest store was five miles away. It was a big change from mountainous, small-town New



SOO SUNNY PARK STUDIO, COURTESY SHARJAH MUSEUM OF ART



SSVT Vapor Slide, 2007/2012. Brazed chain link fence, plastic cups, cotton strings, river rocks, iron oxide, and natural and artificial light, 9.833 x 23 x 42 ft., 12 x 30.916 x 29.166 ft.

Hampshire to flat, small-town Finland, and the light was amazing. I would see people out for strolls at two in the morning, during the long twilight. By the end of my stay, it would get dark at night — experiencing that transition was disorienting and inspiring.

JGC: *Could you describe Luminous Muqarna (2016) and your experiences with the Sharjah Art Museum?*

SSP: Sharjah, which is part of the United Arab Emirates, hosts an Islamic Arts Festival each year. The curators seek artists whose work relates to the annual theme in interesting ways. That year, the theme was architecture, and I made an installation using Plexiglas forms set in frames that I welded out of chair rebar. They reminded me of something I had seen but could not place. When I looked into Islamic architecture, I realized I had been thinking of a *muqarna*, which is a decorated arch made out of repeating patterns. I was thinking of installing these repeating forms in an enclosed space and cut the Plexiglas in an Islamic-inspired pattern. The installation is a *Luminous Muqarna* because the illuminated Plexiglas glows at the edges and casts amazing shadows. It was shown at the Brattleboro Art Museum earlier this year.

JGC: *Do natural conditions play a role in your work?*

SSP: Moving to the Upper Valley from St. Louis in 2005 was a big change for me. It's much colder and snowier, but it's also very muddy in the spring, completely beautiful in the fall, and lovely in the summer. The first house I rented had a very long, steep driveway that was treacherous in the winter. *SSVT Vapor Slide* (named after South Strafford, Vermont) was directly inspired by these conditions. I imagined the ground covered in snow and tried to build a piece that would allow the viewer to occupy the space between the two. This was the first time I used welded chain link fencing — before I got into Plexiglas. I was inspired by seeing plastic cups stuck in a fence. I welded the fence into an undulating pattern,

filled its spaces with plastic cups, and suspended rocks from the center of each cup. Viewers could wander between the “snow” overhead and the ground below.

Another thing about living in the country is that it gets very dark at night. When I moved here, I noticed the brightness of signs made with retro reflective paint when you pass them in the car. I incorporated retro reflective paint (which includes glass beads) into a couple of pieces. I am currently working on a project that involves showing large-scale retro reflective paintings in dark spaces where viewers are given flashlights.

JGC: *How do you discover the materials you work with?*

SSP: I am always looking into new materials, asking for samples, and trying to do things with them. Usually, I find materials that occupy interstitial spaces to be the most compelling because they have been designed to serve one purpose but can be transformed to do something else.

Transforming materials, which is time-consuming and difficult, is often at the center of my pieces. Welding chain link fencing is dangerous, backbreaking work. Before I got access to laser-cutting facilities, I learned how to cut and sand Plexiglas using woodworking tools. I used to cut delicate patterns into Sheetrock, and *BioLath* uses one of the most ornery materials I have encountered to date. Wall lath reflects light beautifully, but it is sharp and abrasive. It took many hours to figure out how to shape it into biomorphic forms, and at least as much time to figure out how to sew it closed and turn in its sharp edges. Making the Plexiglas melt around it and then figuring out how to rivet it without breaking it were also difficult. But meeting these challenges of transformation is just as important to me as the conceptual side of the work.

Jan Garden Castro is a Contributing Editor for Sculpture.