



The negative space bed is composed of 10 pieces of carved pine that fit the negative spaces of Jae Rhim Lee's body when she is lying down on her back, plus a chair/foot rest set.

Jae Rhim Lee

INTERVIEWED BY CARRIE BODLE

CB: I wanted to talk a little about the social aspects of your customization and what your relation with this value is, this value of old ways of doing things and maybe your response to the industrialization of machine making and the standardization of machine making, like for example shoes... any thoughts on this?

JRL: Until body scanners and CAD/CAM technology become widespread, we still have to use mass-produced standardized objects which often don't fit us. For example, clothing is still made based on really old anthropometric data which assumes incorrectly that there is an average human. No one person has all the average measurements.

I'm 5'2" so I'm far from any average which means that most clothing doesn't fit my body, my feet rarely reach the floor when I take a seat, etc. So I'm constantly frustrated with mass-produced stuff. The negative space bed and previous furniture and clothing pieces were based on these experiences.

At the time I made those pieces, I didn't know about the body scanner or how to use CAD/CAM technology, and I was really into woodworking. My choice to make the bed by hand wasn't a conscious rejection of the machine, but more of a practical choice. But of course, returning to the craft is ultimately a rejection.

CB: You have the artifacts of what you are making, but you also have this process of carving. I watch how you make your objects, the fitting and testing involved, then your reworking process. So I want to know where your work is in there, is it a combination of both or is it more focused on the product?

JRL: The process is key—it begins with asking yourself what you need, observing your own body, and then providing for yourself, ultimately. And the different stages involve my questioning of the basics—what makes me comfortable, what my needs are. I'm really inspired by Abraham Maslow's work on the hierarchy of needs—the idea that once you have your basic needs met, you move up the ladder to higher order functions like leaving your mark on society, etc.

The process of trying to make things fit is also a commentary about society and my place in the world. It's a critique of how nothing fits, that who I am, my body doesn't fit in society in many ways. I don't specifically reference race and gender in my work, but those themes are there.

CB: What I've seen from your work is identifying with the physical space, with the clothing piece, working with your architectural surroundings, but is there a way internally working with your middle surroundings that you also do, or that you have really thought about, maybe one thread would be the meditative aspect?

JRL: There's a dialogue between the physical object and my body which helps create an internal harmony and comfort. Being surrounded by objects that only work for you and bring you comfort is pretty powerful psychologically. I've come to think of the bed pieces as tools for meditation and rest, rather than a real sleeping surface. They help induce a meditative state. Once I'm lying on the pieces, and they are positioned perfectly, I tend to forget about my body, almost as if I am floating in pool of water.

CB: So it's not a one or another situation? It's like they're informing each other. How does time work with this is it like a cyclical change, like a pattern or non-pattern. Were there days when if felt very comfortable in one spot and then a sore muscle or even how your bones lie, I can imagine change.



Jae Rhim Lee. *Vertical Bed*, 2004.

JRL: I decided I would never need another bed after I made those pieces, and I slept on it for about a week. But it was so uncomfortable at the end of the week. I would get up to go to the bathroom and get annoyed that I had to reposition myself. Or I would shift in my sleep and then I would be in a lot of pain. It became a great nuisance. Someone was just telling me that more generic forms are better for your body and are more comfortable than something that is perfectly molded to your body.

CB: It's interesting that you mention that more generic forms fit, why is that? Do you think our body is trying to customize a space and when the space is already customized it's not comfortable anymore?

JRL: No, I think even then we would learn to adapt. It's amazing how our bodies adapt in different ways. Right now I'm interested in vertical sleep as a survival mechanism. There's a tribe in Kenya or somewhere in Africa where they've learned to sleep standing up. They are perched on one leg and the other leg is bent and rests right above the knee of the standing leg.

CB: So do you feel at this point that your needs are being satisfied or do you feel still hungry for this process in making these object as you are now? What direction do you think that this is going in?

JRL: I think more and more my work deals with the question of what it is to survive. But I think survival is the wrong word, because I'm referring to a higher level of functioning. A friend of mine commented that although you don't need a bed that exactly fits your body, comfort is an important aspect of modern life. For example, plus size people don't absolutely need fashionable clothing but it's just as important as anything else and we're at a level of development in our society where we can ask for those things.

Also, I'm beginning to work with my friend and former college professor to make objects for her body. So I've been just sharing meals with her, helping her out at home, observing how she moves around her space. But it's a really slow process. I've been in my body for almost 30 years, and it's taken that long to even understand some basic things. But Adrienne and I have known each other for only ten years, and I see her maybe once a month. So then the question is: How do you figure out someone else's body and what her needs are? How does that understanding develop and how long does it take?



Jae Rhim Lee, in her *Vertical Bed*, 2004.