While installing Sheer Delight, Tom Lee double and triple enforced the lines suspending the curtains in front of each window, curtains which are tenuously held together by tiny pins and translucent layers of paste. Laughing at his own paradoxical behavior, his attempts at reinforced fragility, he shrugged and said, “The world is a stronger place than I give it credit for.” It’s this complicated relationship to power, the way Lee revels in the tensions between masculine and feminine, sacred and profane, grim reality and forced optimism, which animates the work. It’s also Lee’s shrug, and his laugh.

Sheer Delight is as delicate and violent as the world in which Lee lives. One gauzy curtain, on close inspection, reveals an image of beastly gore. Great wooden posts, standing upright and rippling with energy, appear to have blown holes through delicate paper doilies as they thrust toward the ceiling. Or are they driving into the floor, having found a suitable hole to fill? Whichever it is, the effect is at once sexy and discomforting.

Lee’s objects play in the space between machine-made and hand-crafted, between improvisational and intensely labored. The posts were hand-turned on a lathe. The lacy doilies that surround them, so intricately cut that they might have been made by a laser, were produced by hand with razor-sharp chisels. Several pieces were sculpted using a 3D printer with the aid of sophisticated digital design applications. When asked to describe his relationship to craft, Lee runs through a list of things that it resolutely is not—casual, ironic, cynical—before deciding on informed.

Informed is a good word to keep in mind when thinking about the entire exhibition, which houses layers upon layers of information. The past is made palpable, contained in the materials and forms, and also in motifs and methods that those who are familiar with Lee’s work will recognize. The lace-like curtains recall an earlier era, as do the images on them, which were cribbed from medieval illustrations. The great wooden posts, which in their past life held up a neighbor’s porch, are the latest in a long line of turned pieces, some earlier examples of which were shown in this gallery in 1996. The posts, palette, and geometry of the exhibition combine to give the effect of a classical temple or the ritual space of a forgotten order.

The foundation of history that Lee works from is deliberately destabilized by a newness that is as jarring as it is generative. It appears most conspicuously in the 3D-printed work that occupies the smaller gallery. It can also be felt, literally, in the warm light that Lee, by uncovering the gallery’s large windows, has allowed to fill the space. This is a rare occurrence; more often than not, the windows remain shuttered to protect the art from the sun, and to shield viewers from potential distraction. Lee isn’t worried about the world getting in. In fact, this kind of infiltration is a necessary condition of both his process and his product.

Lee is open to new materials and processes, to experimentation and potential failure. But he is also receptive to the world in all of its fickleness and absurdity, pleasure and mystery. He throws the windows open wide, leaving nothing but a thin layer of gauze between us and the strong, strange world.

Joel Parsons
Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery

Sheer Delight, Tom Lee, 2013
Images by Chip Pankey, courtesy of the artist