

Beyond Categories – The Work of Lee Kang-So

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White Box, New York, 2006

LEE Kang-So's work defied categories – It inhabits a realm between abstraction and figuration, between photographic "truth" and painterly "illusion" and between Asian traditions of calligraphy and landscape painting and Western abstraction. At time, it even seems to defy time, presenting fleeting impressions which seem to shift and reassemble themselves before the viewer's eyes.

Lee is well known in Korea and internationally for his serenely simple paintings in which presence and void interweave in a never-ending dance. In these works, a few free floating strokes of blue or gray paint are set off against a shadowy white ground. The marks suggest doorways, rudimentary boats, birds taking flight, ducks bobbing in water and the ripples they leave on the surface of a lake. Light seems to emerge from within the painting, production unexpected depths. Many critics have commented on Lee's beautifully poised interplay between the aesthetics of traditional Asian ink painting, western minimalism of the more poetic variety practiced by artists like Agnes Martin and Cy Twombly and such Asian modernist traditions as Korean monochrome and Japanese Mono-ha.

This exhibition, which pairs Lee's paintings with his black and white landscape photographs from rural Korea and Tibet, highlights the qualities which make Lee's work unique. His paintings and photographs deliberately confuse normal distinctions between representation and abstraction. The painting, despite their unmistakable references to landscape, could not be further from the Western conception of landscape painting as an arrangement of elements within a rational space. Instead, here space is created by the intermingling of latter and void. We can read his marks as schematic references to objects in the real world. Or we can perceive them as abstractions or as calligraphic strokes from a language we cannot read. They inhabit a richly modulated ground whose tactility reminds us of the way clouds and air have a palpable presence in traditional Asian landscapes.

Similarly, the photographs Offer a play of light and dark, matter and void and presence and absence which defies normal habits of perception. They present fragmentary image of stairs, streets, corners, thresholds, and walls. Through cropping, close-ups, and selected details, these

photographs turn our attention from the ostensible subject to the formal relationships. In the process they reveal the natural abstraction of photography.

The element of abstraction in both paintings and photographs allows Lee to introduce an element of duration into our perception. In this respect, the western art tradition they echo most closely is that of Impressionist painting. The Impressionists broke from the western landscape tradition by focusing in the ephemeral. They tried to simulate fleeting moments – light glancing from the water, sun passing over field of waving poppies – rather than fixed elements in the same laws of relativity which shape our own every day experience.

In the work of LEE Kang-So, we see the fruitful result of the process of cross fertilization. He transcends traditional boundaries and distinctions between media, artistic traditions and representations to bring us a vision of a world in constant movement.