

Lee Kang – So's Paradox

Philippe Dagen (Art Critic),
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The recent painting by Kang-So Lee are entitled 「From A River and From An Island」. The numbers following the titles indicate the orders in which they were painted. Those viewers who encounter these paintings without preparation find themselves caught off-guard by unexpected elements in them. When seen from a distance, they appear to be violently gestural abstract paintings. The artist's gestures introduce strokes, points, and spirals onto the pictorial surface and leave stains and traces of messy paint pigments. The background is white or dark gray. Against the white, Lee uses tones that range from black to bright gray. If he had used ink instead of acrylic paint, these paintings could have passed for watercolor. Against the gray, he paints with white, an impure white mixed with gray. Here, questions arise. If these paintings belong to the abstract expressionism of the day, why do they refuse colors? Why does the artist tether himself to such a somber asceticism? Such questions grow amplified when one realizes that the lines and stains are not simply the results of dynamic gestures. The artist erases or smudges his own gestural marks, or even jams soaring lines with a single stroke. Sometimes, he also leaves untouched unformed masses, such as liquid puddles and muddy splashes. The familiar array of art historical and critical terms often mobilized in the analysis of the work of Jackson Pollock or Joan Mitchell are found inappropriate here. It is clear that the purpose of Lee's painting lies not in repeating or verifying the abstract notion of *écriture* or calligraphy (terms that have been utterly overused and misused over the years). Not that he is incapable of doing that. He certainly very well could have. For this artist, the well-known methods of painting—such as following preexisting styles, performing a choreography of the energetic brush on the canvas, weaving and disentangling black on the canvas, weaving and disentangling black and gray stroke lines—are, as a matter of fact, easier ways of doing things. Nevertheless, Lee keeps distance from such painting methods. His way of thinking is far more complex, and his painting is also far from simple. Reexamining his work, one feels certain of this intensely gestural abstraction not only seems restrained, or as if caught in a trap, but also is threatened and negated. At first glance, it is hard to believe. Should we really read those signs, executed with lines and scattered here and there on the lower part of the pictorial space, as ducks? You approach the paintings and compare them to others. No doubt about it. They are ducks seen from above or from the side: beaks, heads, and

wings are easily discernible. These ducks seem afloat on water, invisible, gray or white under the sky thick with clouds and shower, can we really say "under the sky"? As soon as our eyes recognize the birds and latch onto these legible signs, we start composing the surrounding landscape. And Lee understands this well. Our visual perception easily believes that. It can deduce and interpret anything even with the smallest fragment of representation. In other words, if there are ducks, why not the sky and water? Furthermore, the paintings are named with watery motifs such as "river" and "island". Once seeming to be an abstract painter, then, Lee transforms into a painter of evocative landscapes.

Even when seen simply in this way, Lee's work is interesting enough. But the more and starts analyzing it, the more intriguing it becomes. There's something about Lee's painting that makes one feel unsure about any possible interpretation s/he may have on it. There are too many different styles in his painting. The duck's appearance is downright arbitrary. If he were painting some sort of landscape, he should give some uniform style to it even if it were abstract. He shouldn't have mixed painting and drawing mutually distinct from each other – that is, wide open, fluid painting and tense, meticulous drawing—in one pictorial screen. Stylistic uniformity is often thought to be a very basic concept. And there must be an incontrovertible reason why he didn't comply.

In order to understand the reason, we must trace our way back to the early 1970s, when Lee, born in 1943 and not even 30, had never had a one – person show. He did two installations in sequence, titled 「Reed」 and 「Bamboo」. Both works were made by a same method: a bundle of reeds or bamboos is planted in a cement block which functioned as a sculptural base, and the stems and leaves were daubed with color pigments. The 1975 installation work 「Untitled」 consisted of silhouettes of three deer chalked on the floor; in the first one, the skeleton of a deer is reconstituted in near completion, and in the other two, scorched bones and remains were scattered. The bamboos, dug up from a garden and plated in the cement block to sprout, were placed against a dark backdrop, working both as a sculpture and a white painterly motif.

The deer were also represented directly, if incompletely, with their bones and fragments. Repeated three as standardized silhouettes, they were represented also mechanically and indirectly. That is, three-time repetitions through three separate methods. One could easily imagine certain may very well be added to these installations: written words on the wall? la Lawrence Weiner or a

naturalistic painting in the style of Gustave Courbet. Similar thing can be imagined about the reeds and bamboos.

In 1981 and 1985, Kang-So Lee did a series of paper-based works that utilize silkscreen and other techniques. He used silkscreen to transfer ghostly photographic images of rocks onto paper—ghostly as the images were only incompletely printed. At the same time, they are fully photographic enough so that the surface textures and qualities of the rocks are easily noticeable. In some cases, the artist weakly defines the volumes of the rocks. Added thin paint stains indicate either adjacent rocks or shadows. Sometimes, the same rock is printed twice to suggest a second rock. In such terse and unforced images, representation doesn't seem to be the quite appropriate word. Nevertheless, Lee's main interest is the issue of representation. He juxtaposes and compares a number of visual languages, which range from photography, that undeniably definitive and mechanical method of representation, to a pencil drawing that seems to pass by swiftly. Just as in his earlier installation works, the artist combines various representational methods; in most cases, each method is effective in its own realm and does not mix well with other method. A photographer does photography; a painter does painting; and a watercolorist does watercolor. For instance, even when there is a common subject matter, say, a rock, each artistic method doesn't wish to concern itself with other methods.

The photographer, the painter and the watercolorist each believes that his/her technique is superior to others. I would think that each one of them has many convincing reasons why his/hers outshines other. In the process of their squabble, an order would somehow be established. Lee, then, creates a dangerous encounter between the different methods of representation to cause troubles. (In fact, such a strategy has been in effect since he set up temporary bar at the gallery where he held his first one – person show in 1973; the show had little for viewing, and was simply an opportunity to meet with friends and strangers.) This sort of situation fundamentally causes uncomfortable, opinion-dividing problems. For instance, for the purpose of giving form to the idea of bamboo, is it better to draw it or present it naturally as is? In order to depict a rock, is it better to work with a camera or a box of watercolor paint? We may very well perform such an experiment and ask ourselves. We are bound to find ourselves in the tricky situation in which the opposing voice is armed with common-sense convictions such as "to present real bamboo is no art" and "photography is most accurate," or we can do no better than conclusions such as "nothing can symbolize water better than swimming ducks" or: nothing can symbolize water than

abstract traces of flung paint”

This precisely characterizes Lee the best and is what constitutes his wisdom. He endlessly doubts, problematizes, refuses definite positions, and shuns universal convictions. He is an artist who experiment everything without leaving any hypothesis out. There is a work composed of three different kinds of pictures in his boat painting series from 1980. In the upper register, a flower tree is depicted in an almost expressionist style; in the middle, a meticulous rendition of a moat; in the bottom, a highly gestural abstraction on black, white, and pink. In another painting from the following year, an image of a deer executed in a prehistoric drawing method pursues –nay, assaults—another impressionist image. There are many other instances of such a composition. Based on these evidences, one can come to the preliminary conclusion that Lee belongs to a group of artists located outside or in the limit zone of art history. Artists in this group combine a variety of quotations and methodoloigies culled from the museum of world art with a firm grasp on the vast range of cultures and with equally accomplished talents. The museum of world art has been formed and generalized all over the places thanks to the globalization of knowledge since Andre Malreaux originated the notion of “imaginary museum: half a century ago. This sort of artist has appeared here and there in Europe and the United States over the past 20 years. S/he is sometimes cynical and other times poetic, and draws subject matters out of utterly personal stories or universally-known mythologies. In fact, it is not so important where the sources of the subject matters are. For most of these artists make works that at once compromise, self-contradict, and are seemingly irrelevant to their art. In the United States, Malcolm Morley juxtaposed various genres, such as Greek and Roman, medieval, and modern styles. David Salle became famous for his complexly combined collages made up of image appropriated and re-created from the works of the seventeenth-century Dutch master painters, advertising pictures, and photos of women from smut magazines. Even Warhol redid or humorously recalled his earlier masterpieces through silkscreen or random painting processes. In Europe, Sigmar Polke and Gerald Casiorowski had similar ways of caused reactions whose force was considerable enough to give birth to a new neologism, postmodernism. Juxtaposing distinct methods in single paintings and interpreting different styles unpredictably, Kang-So Lee may very well be a postmodern artist who paints from a certain distance and enjoys such a method of painting. These painters completely understand the process of painterly creation and take that process a s their true subject matter · in other words, they are post-conceptualist painter. It is necessary here to mention Lee’s works from the late 1970s: two works, which are painting on silkscreen, titled 「Liquitex」 and 「painting」, which

shows the artist's hand and arm applying pigment on a canvas. It would be hard to imagine works that objectivize the act of painting itself photographing the act of painting, transferring that image onto a canvas, dabbing paint on it, in other words, dramatizing the incomplete state of image in the middle of the pictorial screen. There is something more to it to Lee's painting than this, however, as it supersedes any formalist analysis. Let us revisit 「from A River and From An Island」. As abovementioned, these works are located at the point of convergence where more than two concepts of painting meet. In that sense these works contain the principles—i.e., posing problems, experimentation, and reflection—which the artist has embodied in his work from early on. But, the large canvas rich gestures unfolding in it, and fluid, vibrant black and gray tones open a new door to the poetics of allusion and foreshadowing. One may say that this artist, who has long researched the techniques and paradoxes of painting, is now newly confident in painting and thus forms a new relationship with it. From A River must be understood in various ways. First, the title can mean: about, or with regard to the river"; the river, as a motif, is nothing more than a pretext for meditating the strengths and weaknesses of painting. The meditation is then completed through objects other than "river". Another way of reading the painting is as "memories of the river" In this case, the painting is a result of less theoretical than subjective, autobiographic work. In this case, the painting is a result of less theoretical than subjective, autobiographic work. In memory, visual feelings get mixed up with other physical feelings such as tactile sensations, smells, and movements. The river in the artist's memory is a whole in which all these different sensory experiences are inseparably entangled: wind and waves, undulating water plants, birds in flight, boats half · submerged and decomposing, swimming ducks. All of these things are tangled and mixed up to invoke different sorts of sensations, rendering the memory even stronger. Kang-So Lee's recent work summons rhythms closer to tactile and olfactory senses and to dance through its visual devices. After the long time spent on rigorous and continuous analysis of painting, the artist is now able to project himself and the world into that space of painting.