

A Synthesis of East and West

Vivien Raynor (Art Critic of The New York Times), 1993

Whether they are read as direct impressions or as automatist evocations, Kang-So Lee's paintings refer to landscape that is more water than land. Each includes the outline of a duck or a boat (mostly it is the duck, or ducks), which the artist includes as if inscribing his signature.

Another prominent feature is the color—or lack of it. As hung on the alternately gray and white walls of the Bergen Museum of Art and Science here, these pictures either open windows or project themselves into the gallery; it depends on whether they are predominantly blue-gray mixed with white and touches of pink, or white marked with gray and blue. Introducing Mr. Lee in the catalogue, the museum's director, David Messer, remarks on the thriftiness of his repertory and the way he excludes the figure. He likens the artist's "somewhat mystic" calligraphy to that of Mark Tobey.

Mr. Lee, however says nothing—in this catalogue or the one that accompanied his recent show in Manhattan. Thus, the enigma comes to rest in viewer's court. Mr. Lee has been around—in Korea, where he was born 50 years ago, and in the United States, where he has taught, notably at the State University of New York in Buffalo. He has more than 25 solo shows to his credit—in Seoul, Tokyo, New York City and London—and the groups he has appeared in are legion. To begin with, it looks as if a comparable synthesis of East and West had taken place in his art, even if much of the Western part does come from earlier marriages between the two.

Be that as it may, Mr. Lee uses his pigment thin, applying it at first in broad strokes, up and down and from side to side. Gradually, the rhythm, quickens, with some gestures becoming zigzags and, like a boat cutting through water, it sends up a wash of dribbles and splashes reaching a climax in a tract of creamy impasto.

As in the picture illustrated on this page, the climax is the "cloud" dripping white over the boat that floats on grayer white. In one of the darker works, it is in the white form that hangs like a deflating parachute over the white outline of a duck, afloat. Gradually, these images that come on as tranquil landscapes fit for contemplation become totemic, and never the brushstrokes grow systematic. At the same time, the artist, though he never loads the canvas down with pigment, tends to paint from lean to fat in the supposedly European fashion.

Visitors who, like the reviewer, try following the trail left by Mr. Lee risk bafflement. The artist employs a technique that in the West is the ultimate, no-holds-barred method of expressing the

self. Yet he himself remains out of reach –or does he? The canvas conveys an impression of desolation, which is beautiful in its own way, may also be personal and could easily spring from the effort to bridge the unbridgeable abyss between East and West.

The Western concept of self can seem boorish, and to see Asian artist embracing it can be an embarrassing experience. But, clearly aware of the dangers, Mr. Lee has avoided them, producing images that if they do not bridge the gulf manage to speak of both sides.

There is canvas of black hieroglyphs gouged into white grounds that suggest calligraphy, the doodings of Cy Twombly and birds in Flight. And in some blue and white images the duck "ideogram" has a hint of cartoonish humor, which are stakes of clay squares that seem as pliable as tofu. This is a handsome show by an artist who walks a very fine line.