

Working with Nature

Tate Liverpool, U.K.

Lewis Biggs, (Curator of Tate Gallery), 1993

Kang-So Lee is much the youngest of these artists, and belongs really to another generation, although he has gradually found his artistic development bringing him closer to the older generation. To put it another way, he has discovered that a deeper source of energy can be found in the context of working with his own cultural tradition than by appropriating the “contemporary” signs of modern urban life. In the seventies, he made many prints of everyday objects which might be identified with the Pop Art movement. But he also made installations which brought “natural” forms (a bamboo grove, a live chicken) into the gallery space. The chicken was white and was tethered in a white chalk circle. Was this the Monochrome movement in three dimensions, carrying some message of the purity of the “natural”?

At the start of the eighties, natural and landscape forms began to predominate over Pop image in his work, but it was only in 1985 that he began to paint. He is consciously seeking to work between “modern” and “traditional” forms. For instance he works with his own black and white photographs (of ducks on a pond, for instance) for reference in his left hand. Although the paintings are in oil, they are made as if they were traditional ink drawings, working fast on a wet ground, so that the speed of the stroke is paramount. (In traditional art, the extent to which ink is absorbed by the paper depends on the speed of the stroke.) Beyond the manner of working, it is the “energy” of the tradition that appeals to him—the accumulation of meaning and association clinging to an ancient form. These “given” conventions and meanings are a challenge to work with but also to transcend.

In fact, neither “landscape” nor “figure” is the reference Kang-So Lee IS SEEKING. He is concerned with concepts, with the moment of surprise when we perceive a configuration of lines or tones, the moment at which our perception calls out a stored raft of associations from memory, when percept and concept are the same thing. For this reason, simplicity is essential to him—no specifics or particulars must detract from the energy of the generalized, abstracted image. In Western terms, he has set himself the task Brancusi set himself—the revitalization of a traditional genre. His images are ducks, boat—duck and stags (in this show only ducks, boats—ducks and stags in Korea are “lucky” animals) what these images seem to have in common is the idea of freedom—they are “free floating”. Of all man-made objects, boats are perhaps the most animate: we give them considerable respect, endow them with character, gender and life of their own. The way in which these images are treated is impersonal, telling us nothing of the artist’s frame of mind. They mythologize “nature”, reduce it to a communal memory. These archetypes may tow

behind them a netful of emotions (conveyed in the gestures and tones of the paint) ranging from the light, airy and lyric to the thunderous and glowering, but they are consciously floating free of the specific or the personal. The color blue is chosen for the same reason, for its association of infinity and of boundless spaces.

In many of the paintings, the dominant image has a "shadow" or secondary image beside it. I remarked to Kang-So Lee that in the boat paintings these seemed to create a sense of duration, of time passing, an after-image persisting from where the boat was a moment ago. With the ducks, however, the image just seems to multiply. He replied that nature is plural while the man-made is singular.