

Lee Kang-So: Becoming

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“...I have tried to experiment with paintings in which my will to express myself is weakened and [with] three-dimensional works that remain distanced from my intention. My paintings achieved by randomly rendered brushstrokes and works created by randomly hurling clay are the result of exploiting my whole body including my brain and seeking integration into my surroundings¹...”

Lee Kang-So, 2014

My introduction to the work of Korean artist Lee Kang-So involved a predominantly blue painting from 2021. Its hues ranged from bold ultramarines to a softer lighter lavender, with small areas of yellow and orange that, for me, recalled the sun peeking through clouds. Although the work itself was gentle, the brush strokes were strong gestures, intuitively put down. In the West we would consider a relationship to Abstract Expressionism, but there are other modern touchpoints in Asia. In Korea there’s Tansaekhwa (also spelled “Dansaekhwa”), which literally means “monochrome,” but encapsulates a slightly broader range of Korean painting.² Lee has been called a second generation Tansaekhwa artist,³ but the term doesn’t take into account the scope of his work or its experimental nature.

The blue canvas I was looking at was titled *Serenity*, part of a series of that name that goes back to 2016. Like all of Lee’s paintings, it walked a line between abstraction and figuration, but it also invited metaphor. For me, it had strong associations to sky and water. There was a

particularly bold blue brush stroke in the upper middle of the canvas, no doubt made with a very large brush, and beneath it was white, almost like the white cap on a wave. Two relatively small linear forms in black were positioned toward the bottom left of the canvas and the middle right. If you follow Lee’s paintings from the 1980s to the present, images of ducks slowly morph into shapes like these.

From the beginning, Lee has taken an experimental approach to art making. When he speaks, in the quotation above, of weakening his will to express himself, it reflects modesty, but also a desire to leave space for viewers to encounter the work on their own terms. His art, no matter the discipline, is a form of engagement. For me, it recalls Marcel Duchamp’s “The work of art is completed by the viewer.” Duchamp was the father of Conceptual art and, as a young artist, Lee was, in Western terms, a Conceptualist, a maker of performances and events. *Disappearance, Bar in the Gallery* of 1973 is perhaps his best-known work from this period. At Myong-Dong Gallery in Seoul (one of the city’s few contemporary art galleries at the time) he recreated an almost mystical experience that he had at a tavern with a colleague. The bar was quiet when he noticed that the tables and chairs bore the marks of all the customers who had occupied his seat over the years, “the scars from stubbed-out cigarettes and burned sizzling pots.” “The worn-out surfaces of the tables and chairs,” he recalled, “emitted a light and the rumblings and roar of countless people engulfed in a cloud of smoke seemed to reach my ears when I brought my face close to their wooden surfaces.”⁴ Feeling compelled to share these sensations with others, he purchased all the tavern’s tables and chairs and opened a bar in the gallery for one week.

From documentary photographs, it looks like the exhibition was well attended. The work must have created a sense of joy in the comradery it elicited, followed by a sense of loss when it closed, for the bar's original customers and for the encounters that Lee provided.

Lee participated in the 9th Paris Biennale of 1975 with an untitled work involving a live rooster. To set up, he brought the bird to the Biennale space along with its food and water, which he placed on a mat surrounded by white flour. He tied the bird's leg to a string that was almost six and a half feet long, allowing it to move around within a circle. The rooster tracked flour throughout its space, leaving its footprints wherever it went. He drew a circle in chalk, indicating the animal's range of movement, left the food, water, mat, and flour where they were and departed with the bird before visitors arrived. Its footprints were the trace of a living thing that was no longer present. Lee was provoking the imagination of viewers, allowing them to feel the absence of the creature in their own bodies and encouraging them to create scenarios regarding how the footprints got there.

Performances, events, and other conceptual forms occupied Lee throughout the 1970s. For *Painting of 1977*, he used an artist's brush to cover his naked body in water-based paint and then wiped the paint off on a piece of canvas that he dropped on the floor. The impulse to make the work came from his interest in tactility, the feeling of paint on his skin in contrast to the way the audience viewed that experience. The title is significant as Lee came to see the performance as a new kind of portraiture.⁵ This dove-tailed with his desire to create a way of making paintings that would be new. Lee sees painting as the oldest medium for art, which suggests an intellectual and emotional depth that other mediums cannot match. For several years he had been experimenting with two-dimensional forms, drawings, photographs, and serigraphs, often combined with paint on hemp, while he continued to create Conceptual works. Today he sees *Painting (the event)* as a way of exploring traditional paint on canvas, but it was "not there yet," like his two-dimensional work of this period.

The early 1980s was clearly a time of searching and

experimentation. In 1981, he began to make sculpture, and works from 1984 already resemble his three-dimensional art of today. He makes rectangular or cylindrical slabs of clay that he throws across the room until they take on a shape with which the artist feels he can work, then he clusters the slabs together to make sculptures. He relates the making of these works to the ancient art of calligraphy. Just as the location of the human body, the paper, the tip of the brush, and the surface that is supporting the paper impact calligraphy, the location of the sculptor's body, the weight of the clay, and the humidity impact the sculpture. Today, the works made in this way are titled *Becoming*.

It wasn't until the mid-1980s that Lee felt that his paintings were successful. On a winter day in the park with his family, he saw a group of ducks playing at the center of a pond that was otherwise frozen. They were full of movement and vitality, and he knew that energy was what he wanted to capture. He tried many approaches before he got to the images that are now well-known. In the mid-eighties and early nineties, Lee's canvases were more figurative than they are today. They included deer, a small rudimentary house, ducks in flight or on the water and a simple rowboat. The deer are not in evidence today, but the boat and the house are still present, and the ducks remain a constant. When flying, they are reduced to simple lines that suggest movement, so much so that they often seem interchangeable with wind or rain. The artist terms their highly simplified forms "incompleteness," meant to give viewers room to interpret the work for themselves, activating their imagination and satisfying a concern, reflected in the opening quotation, which has been with Lee at least since he brought a rooster to the 9th Paris Biennale in 1975.

That ducks held the answer to Lee's paintings is significant. He believes that his work is, in essential ways, East Asian, and ducks and geese play an important role in East Asian cultures. In Korea, ducks symbolize fidelity and love, and a pair of them are traditional wedding gifts.⁶ His paintings are also influenced by Korean literati works of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), which were made by an elite and powerful class of gentlemen-scholars, many of whom were proficient in calligraphy, poetry, and ink painting.

Their paintings are often in black ink on a single-color background, as Lee's have often been. In a 2023 painting from *The Wind Blows* series, viewers look down on flying birds, represented by a few bold black lines. Far below them is the simplest and most delicately drawn of row boats. The mark-making is both gestural, full of verve and movement, and delicate and quiet.

Lee brings color into his paintings in a major way in the late 2010s, seduced by the beauty of acrylic paints that he had bought twenty years before.⁷ In these new works, his focus remains on ducks in nature, but the shift to color somehow increases the impact of weather in many of these new works. In another 2023 painting from *The Wind Blows* series, rainbow hues are largely hidden beneath bold brushstrokes in white and tones of grey, yet they suggest the possibility of sun, while the lightness of the palette evokes a strong but pleasant breeze. A duck, swimming calmly by, adds to the peaceful feeling of the work. The emotional content of these canvases varies. In another one, the dominance of black and the agitation of the brushstrokes create a sense of threat. A black line like those associated in Lee's work with flying ducks, shoots downward from the top of the canvas, like a bird dive-bombing into the water. Two others fly just above the water line. They seem to be chasing a swimming duck that looks back, perhaps frightened, as it retreats. (If this is too literal an interpretation, it is mine, and if Lee's goal is to awaken viewers' imaginations, this work has done that for me).

In addition to his ambitions for his painting and sculpture, Lee remains interested in his Conceptual output. In 2018, he remade *Disappearance* at Gallery Hyundai in Seoul, and he has created new events. For the 2012 edition of Dalseong Daegu Contemporary Art Festival in his home town, he created *Three Views*, an 18'-long, rectangular sculpture made of iron, with three identical vertical rectangles cut out of it. Placed on a hill, it provided three different views of foliage. The geometry of the sculpture recalls Minimalism, but its openings provided Impressionist landscapes, works deeply influenced by East Asian art.⁸ For the same festival in 2022, he created *A Memory of the River*, positioning four industrial speakers high up on tall polls facing a river, so that the sound of the river flowing melded with sounds of rain, creeks, crashing waves, and waterfalls coming from the speakers.

Lee Kang-So is, and has always been, a complex thinker. It took him ten years to figure out his relationship to painting. He says that it didn't have to be that medium. He just thought, "Since painting has such a long history, why don't I explore it?" This kind of research is at the core of everything he does, and it is conceptual in nature, which may be why his works done decades ago remain of interest to him. His paintings reference traditional Korean art, and are made with acrylics, a relatively recent invention from the West. His art simultaneously looks backwards and forwards in time, and it is always in the process of becoming.

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1. Lee Kang So, "Becoming," in Lee Kang-So (Saint-Étienne Metropole: Musée D'Art Moderne at Contemporain, 2016), 357. Statement is from 2014.
 2. See Joan Kee, Introduction in *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.
 3. Toshiaki Minemura, "Lee Kang-So: The Deepening Middle," in Lee Kang-So (Saint-Etienne Metropole: Musée D'Art Moderne et Contemporain, 2016), 27.
 4. Lee Kang-So, "Artist's Statement," in Lee Kang-So (Saint-Etienne Metropole: Musée D'Art Moderne et Contemporain, 2016), 59.
 5. Author's recorded interview with Lee Kang-So, September 5, 2023. All quotations and ideas attributed to Lee that are not otherwise footnoted, are from this interview.
 6. See, for example, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/114057>.
 7. Lee's response to queries translated from Korean, received September 14, 2023.
 8. Lee was a core organizing member of the Daegu Contemporary Art Festival, which ran from 1974 through 1979. Upon its reintroduction in 2012, the festival was renamed the Dalseong Daegu Contemporary Art Festival. The artist created *Three Views* to celebrate the reopening of the festival in 2012.