

Lee Kang-So, Throwing Sculpture

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<Daegu Forum I _ Playground for Poetry>, Daegu Art Museum, Daegu, installation view, 2021

Lee Kang-So seizes the clay bodies produced by the pugmill and hurls them onto the ground, causing them to lose their original shapes, whether cubic or cylindrical. It is not uncommon for the clay to fracture, but in *Throwing Sculpture*, which has been Lee's primary practice for many years, such occurrences are far from anomalous. Clay holds a special significance for humanity, who, from time immemorial, have metaphorically likened the Earth to motherhood, and considered clay as the very substance they are made of. This might elucidate why clay has never been relegated to a diminished status in art. However, delving deeper, what

motivates Lee's relentless throwing? To unravel this, let's closely examine Throwing Sculpture itself.

Throwing Sculpture



Becoming-15-c-181. Ceramic.
60x38x37cm.
2015.



Becoming-15-c-098. Terracotta.
54x21x54cm.
2015.



Becoming-13-c-126. Ceramic.
42x60x18cm.
2013.



Becoming-16-c-096. Terrcotta.
52x19x45cm.
2016.

At first glance, Lee's sculptures appear simple, almost disinterested. But Lee aspires to a realm where the artwork deeply moves the heart despite its apparent disinterestedness, a level of simplicity that appeals to the intellect despite its desire for sophistication. Achieving this demands not only risk-taking and perseverance, but also proper equipment. Lee's atelier, furnished with a pugmill, kiln, and a small crane, resembles a veritable 'factory'.

Lee feeds the pugmill with clay, creating clay bodies ready for throwing. The thrown clay helplessly loses its initial shape, often breaking and cracking as it collides not only with the floor but also with other masses of clay. Internal deformation occurs as it folds into itself under its own weight, intensified by the impact of the fall. Working with clay is no easy task. While Lee may not be directly

involved in the extraction and elutriation processes, this hardly eases the workload. First of all, the sculpting process demands meticulous attention, as various factors such as figuration, work environment, sculptor's physical condition, and ceramic material influence the outcome. The subsequent drying phase, which involves patient waiting for evaporation of plastic water, is followed by the glazing process. Here, the artist faces choices such as clear, opaque, luster, lusterless etc, and decides between high fire (1230-1370 degrees Celsius) and intermediate fire (1120-1190 degrees). Finally, the sculpture undergoes firing, either once or twice.¹

Upon my initial encounter with Lee's Throwing Sculpture, I was immediately struck by its substantial thickness. The question lingered: how did it endure the intricate processes of drying and firing? Like an unpredictable emperor, the kiln can wreak havoc on a sculpture for the slightest dissatisfaction, be it an impurity, an air bubble, or even excessive thickness. A well-known potter once remarked, "Kilns are built deep in the mountains, because they are fit for weeping," alluding to the capricious nature of fire. The drying process poses yet another challenge, particularly when dealing with a thick mass of clay. "From the 80s to 2003, I had no choice but to resort to traditional methods like plaster, bronze, and iron casting. Fortunately, in 2003, a new ceramic technique emerged, enabling me to dry thick clay masses without seeking alternatives," Lee explains. Consequently, his practice

¹ Depending on the firing temperature, pottery is classified into earthenware (600 degrees, 900-1000 degrees), stoneware (1100 degrees or higher), and porcelain (1300-1350 degrees). Terracotta pottery is typically fired at lower temperatures without glazing (approximately 650-1000 degrees).

of clay throwing is now liberated from technical constraints. Nature (light, fire, and earth) proves to be a demanding collaborator. Initially, the artist throws the clay, but as the drying and firing stages unfold, the roles reverse, placing the artist in a position of thrownness orchestrated by Nature.



<The Wind Blows: about the sculpture>, Leeahn Gallery Seoul, installation view, 2023

Lee utilizes a blend of clays, sourced primarily from rural areas in Korea, including Sancheong and Gyeongju, as well as white porcelain clay. Through experimentation with the distinct properties of each clay type, varying the mixture proportions, and adjusting the firing temperature, Lee skillfully crafts a distinctive palette of colors.

"The Gyeongju clay, typically employed in crafting Korean jars and bricks, transforms into a terracotta red hue when fired at 1050 degrees Celsius. When subjected to higher temperatures, it takes on a chocolate tone. Firing Sancheong-produced clay at 1230 degrees for 30~35 hours results in the color resembling the soil in its purest form—yellow ochre."

"As Lee delves deeper into the language of Nature, it enables him to visually interpret the diverse narratives that Nature unfolds."



Becoming-17-c-031.
Ceramic. 51x56x35cm. 2017



Becoming-17-c-041. Ceramic.
31x67x32cm. 2017



Becoming-13-c-147. Ceramic.
66x54x22cm. 2013.

Despite undergoing significant deformation, the dignified beauty of Korean traditional white porcelain is notably evident in certain sculptures created by Lee.

"I occasionally employ clay commonly used for traditional white porcelain, including Ball Clay, Kaolin, Chamotte. After allowing it to dry, I apply glaze—either

transparent or translucent—before firing it at temperatures ranging from 1230 to 1270 degrees for 30 to 35 hours."

Upon hearing the term "Kaolin," I inquired about its origin. My disbelief was palpable when Lee revealed, "it's from Jingdezhen, China." Encountering a Korean artist using this material is exceptionally rare. As Shim Moon-seop, a sculptor and friend of Lee's, often emphasizes, "the nature of the sculpture is predetermined the moment you choose the material." The clay's quality can influence the entire process, including glazing and firing. Fortunately, Lee acquired a substantial quantity of Jingdezhen Kaolin. This clay is not only tacky and robust but also low in sodium, magnesium, calcium, potassium, and high in aluminum. When fired, it attains a whiter and smoother texture than Venus's skin depicted by François Boucher, almost taking on a bluish hue. The luster emanates as if it were too potent to be contained.

A pottery's luster can be graded, from crude to noble. Occasionally, nature bestows an upgrade through the application of a special glaze known as 'time.' Due to its exceptional quality, the use of Kaolin, also known as "royal clay," was restricted outside the imperial household. It has earned nicknames such as 'White

Gold' and 'Mysterious Clay.' Even today, the Chinese government prohibits its exportation. The only way to create artwork using Jingdezhen Kaolin is to visit the region, craft the work, and bring it home. The 'high-fire glaze' Lee employs exceeds the standard 1250 degrees, reaching over 1300 degrees. This intense heat permeates the clay, producing a subtle yet profound luster.

The creative method of 'throwing' has a distinct origin and did not emerge spontaneously. The inclination to throw, which was dormant in Lee's earlier practice, eventually materialized into sculpture. It is now time to delve into its process.

Drawing to Throwing



Lee Kang So, From a River-99175, 1999, Acrylic on Canvas, 259x194cm.



Lee Kang So . 허 虛 Emptiness-09063, 2009, Acrylic on Canvas, 130.3X162cm



Lee Kang So, Untitled, 1985, Oil on Canvas, 72.7x90.9cm.



Lee Kang So, Untitled-85031, 1985, Bronze, 16x28x26cm.



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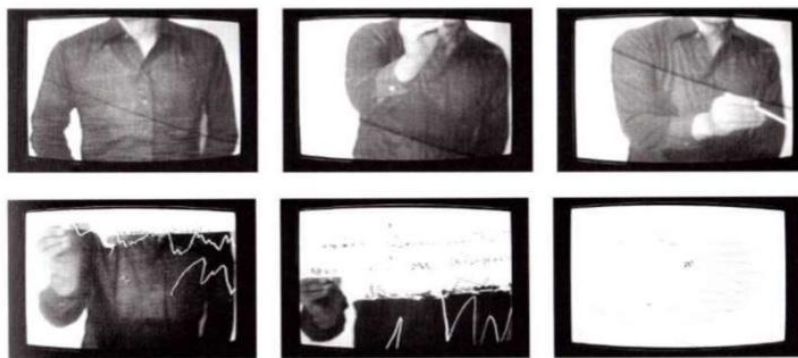
(credit: Park Myeong-rae)

Calligraphy and Eastern painting serve as the subtle underpinnings of Lee's artistic expression. Growing up alongside his grandfather, an art enthusiast and skilled calligrapher, Lee inherited a rich heritage. The practice of calligraphy

inherently carries elements of performing arts, evident from the illustrious Lanting Xu (Orchid Pavilion Preface) in imperial China to the tradition of writing on the ridge beam in Korean architecture, where the act of writing is accompanied by a performative aspect. Lee, in modernizing this tradition, incorporates reflections of the contemporary political landscape. The concept of space, as embodied in calligraphy and Eastern painting, diverges significantly from the Western notion of space. For instance, when a novice endeavors to depict an orchid, the emphasis shifts from replicating the physical leaf in black ink to the primary task of creating the spatial context enveloping the leaf. Noble terms like 'the Eye of the Phoenix,' 'the Eye of the Elephant,' and 'the Broken Eye of the Phoenix' signify the diverse spaces formed as the leaves intersect. Bada Shanren's fish drawing exemplifies this, where the solitary fish is depicted, yet the viewer senses the water's ripple extending beyond the drawing's edges. As conveyed in the ancient saying, 'calligraphy and painting are one flesh,' these two art forms bear striking similarities in both material and principle. In Lee's paintings, which encompass drawing and throwing painting, the being resides within such a space—either throwing or being thrown. In Lee's *Throwing Sculpture*, we encounter an amalgamation of empty spaces inspired by traditional calligraphy, Sagunja painting, and landscape painting, awaiting our exploration.

Throwing Installation and Performance

Encountering a contemporary artist who practices 'Throwing Art' is still a rarity, with Lee standing as a unique exception. However, one might argue that ancient humans engaged in a precursor to this practice, as their survival hinged on the ability to throw objects. Before evolving into an artistic gesture, throwing served as a means of distraction, rooted in the instinct for survival. While the ancient Greeks spoke of "βάλλω" (bállo), the origin of the English word "throw" lies not in Greek but rather in medieval ("þrawan") and Germanic ("thrawana") roots. Around two million years ago, Homo Erectus, the first upright man, achieved a significant milestone by developing the ability to fling objects—a pivotal moment in Homo Sapiens' history. The act of throwing served both hunting and self-defense purposes. Over time, throwing transformed into a form of game and entertainment, eventually evolving into organized sports and games involving spears, discs, hammers, and iron balls. Additionally, throwing found its place in religious rituals. Despite its prevalence in various aspects of human life, the act of throwing remained relatively understated in fine art until Lee took the initiative. After two million years, Throwing Art emerges as a culmination of the successive stages of human throwing: survival, distraction, and the sublime.



Painting 78-1, 1978, Video, 30min- the self-effacing being leaves only blank space



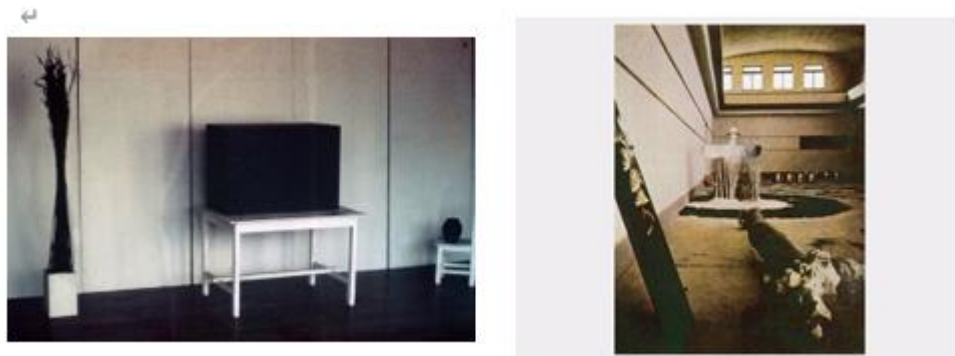
Reed, 1971, Plaster, paint, reed, 1000 x 1200 x 250cm

<The Dynamics of Expansion and Reduction: The Current of Geometric Abstraction and Post-Modern>, KEPCO Plaza Gallery, Seoul, Korea, 2003

Throwing transcends a singular mode of existence, contingent on 'who (subject) throws what (object)'. When propelled into the world by an external force, the mode is passive. Conversely, when I launch myself into a realm of potential existence, the mode is active. In Lee's earlier works, created during his critical youth, the active mode was seldom showcased. In <Painting 78-1>, white paint obliterates both the being (the artist himself) and its dwelling (language). Michel Foucault's poignant expression becomes apt, likening the man to being "erased, like a face

drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."² The erasure extends beyond the individual as a rational figure generating macro-level discourse. The erasure starts from the head, the symbol of rationality, and descends to the heart. Ultimately, the artist's writing is effaced, alluding to the demise of the grand discourse. The vast blank space merely implies the past presence of something. Over the years, this void accumulates, eventually resurfacing as Throwing Sculpture.

While <Painting 78-1> portrayed the Cartesian figure of the doubting self dismantling itself, <Void> illustrates the thinking self metamorphosing into a fossil. Influenced by language, anthropocentrism, prejudice, and preconceptions, the "thinking reed" (Pascal) or humanity's perspective on the world fossilizes everything, including the human being itself.



A Sacrifice for the Modern Art, 1971. Installation view of Sincheje exhibition

Dried fish. 1972/2018/ a submission to the Third A.G. exhibition in 1972

² Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses, Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Editions Gallimard, 1966.

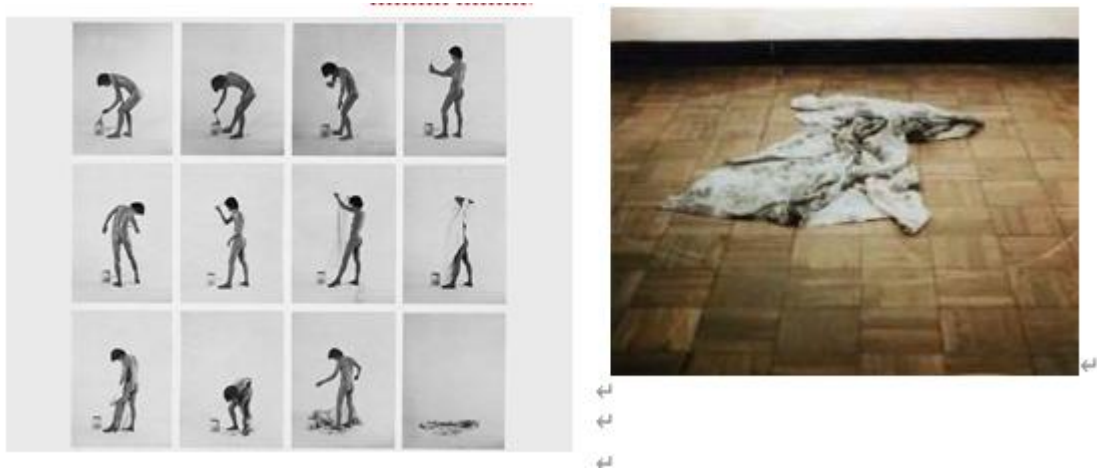


Disappearance(At The Bar), 1973, Myungdong Gallery, Seoul

The manifestation of the human condition of thrownness is unmistakable in <Untitled> (1971), a piece showcased in a Sincheje (New Methodology) group exhibition. The composition, featuring a box adorned in funerary black and an empty frame symbolizing the demise of painting as an art form, coupled with the contemporary political context, readily invites such an interpretation. Born into a world not of their choosing, human beings find themselves in a state of thrownness, a foundational determinant of their existence. This bears resemblance to the influence of DNA, as articulated by Richard Dawkins. At the genetic level, our thrownness is dictated by our genes, exerting substantial sway over our physical attributes, health conditions, and behavioral inclinations. Both human beings and inanimate entities alike are thrust into this world, exposed and vulnerable, devoid of protection. In this state, little can be done beyond engaging in conversations about emptiness, based on old remnants and hazy memories. The modern man is eclipsed in <Disappearance>, replaced by 'idle talk (Gerede), curiosity (Neugier), ambiguity (Zweideutigkeit)'. As beings, thrown into the banality of daily life, gather

at the bar, their departure leaves nothing behind but traces on the tables and chairs.

The modern man ceases to exist in <Disappearance>, replaced by 'idle talk(Gerede), curiosity(Neugier), ambiguity(Zweideutigkeit)'.³ When the beings, thrown into the banality of daily life, drink at the bar and leave it, nothing remains except the traces on the tables and chairs.



'Painting(Event77-2) : Lee paints his body with paint (left) and wipes it off with cotton cloth.

All we see is the trace of the act. (right).



³ Martin Heidegger Sein und Zeit, Fünftes Kapitel §§ 28–38.

'Untitled75031' : a chicken is tied to the post for three days and moves around (left) All we see is the trace of the movement, the white footprints. (right). (1975 Paris Biennial)

The thrown entity endeavors to shift the dynamics and propel itself forward. In <Untitled 75031>, presented at the Paris Biennial, a rooster with its leg tethered to a rope strives to transcend its given constraints, evident in the multitude of footprints. Sartre asserted that human existence involves projection—individuals throw (ject) themselves forward (pro-) into the future. The concept of projection implies an endpoint, a telos, whereas thrownness does not. Beginning with the 'spear,' the narrative of 'the history of throwing' has evolved to encompass the 'ball' and, now, 'oneself.'⁴

⁴ Cf. Dawkins argues that genes employ diverse strategies to achieve their 'telos.' This underscores the intentionality inherent in being and action, akin to the concept of 'projection.' Genes shape the 'project' by facilitating replication and influencing the properties and actions of the living organism. While Heidegger's philosophy centers on subjective experience and the creation of meaning, Dawkins's theory zeroes in on the objective biological mechanisms. Within the spectrum of these two perspectives, various other viewpoints exist, illustrating the diverse ways in which humans comprehend existence and meaning.



Untitled 912227, 53.7x107.3x10.2cm,1991 bronze

According to Martin Heidegger, the human being embodies both a thrown object and a projecting subject—a fundamental paradox that gives rise to forceful collisions. Lee meticulously captures the imprints left by these collisions, as seen in the vacant bar, the footprints of the absent chicken, and the cloth used to wipe paint from the artist's body. The essence of Lee's early installation and performance works finds unambiguous expression in the sculpture piece <Untitled 912227>. Here, the bronze rectangle symbolizes the world into which we are thrown. Although the boat is in the process of departing, the indentation it creates lingers in the world. This visual trace, acting as an inscription of movement despite its apparent immobility, later resurfaces in *Throwing Painting and Sculpture*.

Throwing Painting

In the early 1970s, Lee primarily engaged with installation and performance (or process art). From 1975 onward, his focus transitioned to painting and later to sculpture in the 1980s, with Lee concurrently exploring both mediums. Rather than a radical departure from the past, this marked a continuation with a formal shift. In the postwar era, the art world abandoned the pursuit of shaping absolute and eternal truths, associated with the notion of 'logos'. Consequently, 'gestural' works gained prominence, utilizing movement and ephemerality—dripping painting, dribbling painting, pouring painting (soak-stain style), color field painting, and more. The emergence of performance and media art also echoed this trend. The evolution from dripping art to color plane signifies an internalization of movement. Despite this historical context, Lee did not need to turn to the Western world to conceive his gestural work. The Korean tradition of calligraphy and literati painting prioritizes vitality and is inherently gestural. Lee contends that "due to its spatiality and three-dimensionality, calligraphy is an art form that is less painterly than sculptural."⁵ This explains why every calligrapher aspires to create a single stroke brimming with

⁵ Even in contemporary times, the introduction to calligraphy places greater emphasis on the gestural dimension of writing, often referred to as 'penmanship,' rather than focusing primarily on the semantic aspect. Instruction tends to concentrate on imparting the diverse techniques and types of gestures involved in the act of writing.

movement and life. Renowned Chinese contemporary artist Zeng Fanzhi (b.1964) incorporates elements of cursive-style calligraphy. When questioned about its meaning, Zeng responded, "there isn't one. I don't see it as writing. I am merely mimicking my old master's gestures." and encouraged me to try it myself. In a similar vein, when Western artists like Cy Twombly (1928-2011) produce unreadable writing, the motivation is akin.



Untitled 91182, 1991, 218.2x333.3cm, Oil on canvas



Serenity 16102, 2016, 360x310cm, Acrylic on canvas

Lee initiates his paintings with broad brushstrokes, engaging in a state of complete mindlessness. While influenced by past experiences, memories, and training, Lee approaches the canvas without preconceived intentions, maintaining an openness to the world and facilitating communication. As the initial viewer of the work, the artist can choose to add a touch or leave it untouched. For instance, if the broad marks evoke a cloudy sky, Lee might incorporate a figure resembling

a house. In the presence of waves, an 'empty boat'⁶ may find its way into the composition, treated minimally with just a few lines, almost submerged by the sea. In the absence of circulatory movements, the planet would lack an ecology. Circulations are inherent in 'emptiness,' aligning with Laozi's concept of the functional aspect of the Dao and the universe's primal vitality. Nature, human existence, and civilization rely on the circulation enabled by emptiness. The situation becomes problematic, even tragic, when boundaries become definitive, and channels of communication are sealed. Within Lee's paintings, two contrasting poles coexist: the dynamic Flow of the broad brush, filled with energy and devoid of intention, and the vague Form, characterized by its indistinctness. The slightest breeze could erase the Form, a mere cluster of fragmented lines. These two poles starkly contrast within the same frame, echoing the tension between nature and humanity, DNA and free will, climate and ecology. The thrown being shares the canvas with the one projecting, creating tiny marks barely visible. This scene could metaphorically represent the climate crisis. Lee's paintings visually mediate the human condition, teetering on the threshold between thrownness and projection. <Serenity 16102> serves as a singular work synthesizing various forms, from drawing to throwing performance and sculpture. The vague figure of the duck can be perceived as a drawing, while the large brushstrokes resemble the white footprints of <Untitled 75031>. If each brushstroke were extracted from the canvas

⁶ Cf. the 'Empty Boat' as mentioned in the 'outer chapters' of Zhuangzi.

and thrown on the ground, it would be indistinguishable from Lee's sculpture. If early installation and performance serve as the origins of Lee's Throwing Painting, Throwing Sculpture represents its future.

Throwing Art as a framework



Three Views, 2012, Iron, 240x560x120cm

Left : Lee's sculpture at Lee Kang-So Atelier / Right: One of the traditional buildings, named Shim Soo Jeong, located at Lee Kang-So Atelier. Providing three different perspectives for the visitor — front, left, and right — it served as inspiration for the sculpture on the left.

While Lee's work can be appreciated from various perspectives, this essay takes a 'Throwing' approach to examining his creations. The image on the left showcases a large-scale sculpture in Lee's atelier, while on the right is a traditional building, also situated in his atelier, modeled after Shim Soo Jeong from Yangju, in Gyeongju. In the past, buildings with only one wall or no walls allowed individuals,

who spent most of their day in four-walled structures, to have views in three or four directions. What Lee envisions is the acknowledgment of 'more than three points of view.' Dao De Jing, the influential classic of Asian philosophy, asserts that 'Three is at the origin of All,' therefore suggesting that 'three viewpoints' imply 'an infinite number of viewpoints.'⁷ Hence, the sculpture on the left embodies this concept.

Shim Soo Jeong and Lee's sculpture exemplify the intricate relationship between Nature and human beings. Examining Nature through architectural and sculptural lenses, humans engage in contemplation, giving rise to two distinct types of sceneries: 'borrowed scenery' and 'scenery of the self.' 'Borrowed scenery' directly borrows from an existing landscape without imposing artificial alterations. In contrast, in the 'scenery of the self,' the viewer integrates into the landscape, akin to the objects in Lee's paintings that assimilate into the natural surroundings, becoming a seamless part of it. While it is crucial to recognize the diverse facets of nature and consider various perspectives in dialogue, an equally vital aspect is

⁷ Embracing three perspectives is inherently challenging, yet it paves the way for a multitude of viewpoints. The concept of three as the origin of the universe finds its roots in Laozi's Dao De Jing, which states, "The Tao begot one. One begot two. Two begot three. And three begot ten thousand things" (Chapter 42). In this context, 'one' represents Ki, 'two' symbolizes Yin and Yang, and 'three' signifies the origin and harmony of all things.

acknowledging the framing through which nature is observed. In short, it is essential to realize that human cognition is conditioned.⁸



Serenity 18214, 2018, 112 x 145 cm, Acrylic on canvas.

Becoming-13097, 2013, Ceramic, 41.5x57x19cm,

According to Heidegger, "human life is a process of projection by the thrown being." In Lee's installations and performances, we observe the inherent thrownness of being. In his paintings, the potential for projection persists despite the condition of thrownness. The Shim Soo Jeong sculpture hovers between borrowed scenery and scenery of the self. The distinctions between projection and thrownness,

⁸ 'Borrowed scenery' and 'scenery of the self' are terms rooted in gardening and architecture. The former involves incorporating the natural landscape, framed by windows or doors, as an integral part of the garden scenery. The latter achieves harmony with the surroundings by integrating artificial constructions like ponds and stone bridges into the garden.

borrowed scenery and scenery of the self, are merely logical, as we exist in the tangible space or emptiness that lies in between. Lee's fascination with enigmatic concepts like 'the in-between, the space, the emptiness' traces back to the early stages of his career. In <Serenity 18214>, two kinds of blank spaces intersect—one that has been drawn and another yet to be drawn, or one that has not disappeared and another that has yet to appear. These blank spaces materialize into Throwing Sculpture, reminiscent of the white spaces between the mountain and the river in traditional landscape paintings, forming clusters of emptiness.