A Dialogue with Lee Kang-So

Jeong: It's been a while since our last meeting. I'm aware that this isn't the first time your sculptural works have been exhibited, but I don't recall seeing a solo exhibition exclusively dedicated to your sculptures. Could you share your thoughts and feelings with us?

Lee: The art scene in Korea until the 1970s was rigidly compartmentalized, with divisions into painting, sculpture, handicraft, design, and more. A painter venturing into sculpture was often perceived as someone who should stick to their own domain. Fortunately, this situation has gradually evolved over the years, with more artists exploring installation, events, performance, and video. I feel fortunate to have been one of the early risk-takers.

Now, I'm unveiling what I've been experimenting with in my studio for the past forty years. It's a way of presenting my humble endeavors in reappropriating traditional sculptural methods to reflect the contemporary era.

J: Your reputation is built on the dynamism of your brushstrokes, the boldness in leaving large spaces unfilled, and the 'half-finished' or 'non-finito' quality of your works. Now, I'm curious about the relationship between your painting and sculpture. Is the latter an extension of the former, or an entirely different way of materializing your aesthetic ideas?

L: You've touched upon the essence of what I aim to achieve in my artistic journey. Modern science perceives energy as the fundamental building block of the universe, a perspective not far removed from the concept of Gi, or organic energy patterns like Mulri (physics) and Ligi (principle and material force), which held significance in East Asian philosophical debates. The notion of Giun, emphasized in East Asian calligraphy and painting, carries more profound implications than one might imagine.

Whether emanating from a child or an adult, whether primitive or intellectual, Giun is a mysterious realm of extreme subtlety that eludes conceptualization. I believe an artist must tap into their natural Giun to create. The artist's way of life is inseparable from their Giun.

Looking back at history, Western modern thought defined the self as a subject standing on the world, an outlook now deemed outdated as the subject has become undefinable. Hence, scientists have turned to Eastern philosophies like Buddhism, Confucianism, and Neo-Confucianism in search of alternatives.

My work cannot be grasped without considering the notion of Giun. I appreciate your characterization of my work as 'half-finished' or 'given up halfway' because I don't see myself as 'making' paintings; rather, the paintings 'make themselves.' The same applies to sculptures. I aim to create works that offer different impressions with each viewing. That's why I craft sculptures by throwing clay bodies. Clay, inherently mundane, takes its final form based on the unique moments when the conditions of the clay, my body and spirit, and the surroundings resonate as one. Embracing all these variables, the resulting sculpture undoubtedly interacts with the viewer at the quantum level.

J : At which point in your career did you develop this unique form of sculpture, and why?

L: My transition to university employment marked the conclusion of my activist phase, which spanned a decade in the 1970s. With this shift, my time and effort were redirected toward more personal work. Even during my experimental forays into installation, process art, and performance in the seventies, I was already intrigued by the exploration of new painting techniques. I aimed to bridge the gap between traditional painting forms and the contemporary spirit of the times. Bold works like the reed sculpture (<Void>) in 1971, <Bamboo> in 1972, the bar

work (<Disappearance>) in 1973, and the chicken performance (<Untitled-75031>) in 1975 were born out of my realization that the world we perceive is but an 'illusion.' I aspired to create paintings that mirror this perspective on the world, a journey that continues to this day.

Upon joining a regional university in 1981, I gained convenient access to clay in the sculpture atelier. Since then, I've been experimenting with it, driven by the belief that it's possible to reclaim a traditional form and reconcile its inconsistencies with the epistemology of our times. It's hard to believe that forty years have passed.

J: Your sculptural work primarily involves clay molding. What role and meaning do you attribute to clay?

L: Sculpture, alongside painting, has been an integral part of human expression since the dawn of humanity. The extensive history of sculpture provides significant data, facilitating richer forms of expression. Humans share a profound connection with soil, making it one of the most fundamental and essential materials in Korean art as well.

J: Some might characterize your sculpture as 'un-sculptural,' emphasizing its unconventional nature. However, your sculpture adheres to traditional boundaries by being positioned on a pedestal. It appears that you are both pushing beyond conventions and adhering to the principles of the genre simultaneously. What leads you to oscillate between these two perspectives?

L : I believe that the difference between painting and sculpture is only a negligible one. The two differ merely in terms of form and material. Examining Cezanne's paintings, each brushstroke is a result of both his conscious intent and the unconscious patterns and colors created by unintended gestures. Similarly, Rodin's sculpture evolves through the accumulation and interaction of small

masses of clay shaped by his hands. Art creation involves a collaboration between conscious decisions and the unconscious. My goal is to modernize traditional sculpting methods to convey contemporary modes of thought.

J: Your artistic output spans various themes, materials, and forms, from tableaus to sculpture and photography. What common thread ties these diverse works together? Is it a quest for new ways to represent the world, driven by a skepticism towards images and their ability to capture 'reality'?

L: The unfolding world, experienced through our five senses, from vision to touch, is shaped by biological specifics and individual experiences. Different species, like bees and dogs and spineless creatures, perceive the world differently based on their senses. Considering this, it becomes natural to question whether the phenomena and the individual's perception of them are identical. Individuals with distinct experiences cannot share the same perception of the world. This fundamental realization guides my work. My focus is on paintings influenced by free-flowing Giun, constantly evolving with each viewing, and sculptures in the process of becoming—shaped by the interplay of the artist's body and the environment, resonating with a natural Giun. Now, a few words about photography.

I am captivated by halftone dots, distinct from the light particles perceived by human vision. My interest isn't in capturing events or objects but in photographing spaces infused with a specific atmosphere. The space between the object and the camera manifests itself on sensitized paper as a halftone image, following optical and chemical processes. For instance, a secluded corner in a ruin, bearing traces of human presence from the past, possesses a unique Giun that halftone dots can sense. Silly as it may sound, the halftone image draws me into the Giun of the ruins. In my artistic process, I follow my desires without

hesitation, leading me into other genres like installation and video—a habit I can no longer resist.

J: How many hours do you typically spend in the studio? When do you feel most productive, and which activity consumes the most time in your daily routine?

L: I lead a secluded life in the countryside, only venturing into cities when necessary. My days are centered around the studio, while nights are spent in another building for reading and sleep. Early mornings involve self-care, and around eight, I return to the studio to check materials and commence work. Thoughts flow rapidly, and my body responds instinctively without hesitation, whether I'm working on sculptures or installations. These days, I spend five to six hours in the studio, as I find myself getting tired more easily. This mountain lifestyle has been my routine for the past thirty years.

J : I get the impression that you are an artist who thinks in terms of process, as opposed to other artists who think in terms of structure. It seems to me that such a difference lies at the core of your body of work. Please correct me if I'm wrong.

L: I appreciate your understanding; it resonates well. If I'm not mistaken, synchronicity has somewhat fallen out of favor in recent times. Each individual carries a unique personal history, resulting in a diverse temporality, and our encounters are fleeting. Through interactions with artworks, I hope people grasp the illusory nature of concepts.

J: In the late 1960s, Korea's art scene was dominated by geometric abstraction and avant-garde experiments. What was your stance during that period?

L: I was in primary school when the Korean War broke out in 1950, but despite the challenges, I received a decent education. In fourth grade, I had a specialized art instructor who taught painting, calligraphy, and handicraft. Opting for painting

as an extracurricular activity, I also participated in art competitions. In middle and high school, our art classes became more advanced, involving discussions on Impressionism and Cubism guided by art teachers. Upon entering college, I encountered Brutalism, Surrealism, Informalism, and Abstract Expressionism. When I graduated, Pop art, Op art, and Kinetic art were in vogue, and I felt disheartened by the constant imitation of changing Western trends. I wasn't alone in this sentiment within my generation. After graduation, I experimented with imitative works for about five years, during which the Western art scene underwent a transformative shift.

In summary, artists began moving from architectural to natural spaces, growing disillusioned with modern art categories and creating forms relevant to the contemporary spirit—such as earth art, installation, sky art, event, performance, and happening. This shift was a shock to East Asian artists of my generation, as it signified newfound freedom. In 1971, at the third group exhibition by the Sincheje Group (New Methodology), I submitted a work resembling a formal memorial service titled 'A Sacrifice for Modern Art.' It marked a liberating phase in my artistic endeavors.

J: When considering structure and process, what are your thoughts on the essence of Dansaekhwa, the focal point dominating discussions on contemporary Korean art?

L: In 1978, I had a conversation with the critic Bang Geun-taek during my solo show at Hankook Gallery in Seoul. He mentioned using the term 'monochrome' in a recent article, referring to a specific artist. I later checked the article.

A few years ago, around the time of the Dansaekhwa exhibition at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, many galleries aimed to promote the unique aesthetics of Korean art globally, making the term widely known overseas.

During a recent seminar at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul, held on the occasion of archival donations from Tokyo Gallery, someone mentioned that 'Dansaekhwa' was coined as a translation of the term 'monochrome.' This term was used in the context of the 'white color exhibition' (Korea: Five Artists, Five Hinsek 'White' (1975)), a group exhibition of Korean artists curated by Japanese critic Nakahara Ryusuke (1931-2011).

A Japanese critic at the event, Minemura Toshiaki (b.1936), expressed his disapproval of the term 'Dansaekhwa' and argued against viewing it as a mere translation of 'monochrome.' I supported his viewpoint. The notion of 'monochrome' seemed to give meaning to a specific context in art history, marked by figures like Malevich, concerned with pure abstraction, Yves Klein, who patented his blue, and Robert Ryman, the master of white prioritizing repetition and materiality.

In the exhibition 'Only the young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s-1970s' (2023-2024), dedicated to Korean experimental art from the 1960s-70s, 'Dansaekhwa' is notably absent. In the latter half of the seventies, some artists gained recognition for works exploring repetitiveness and materiality, influencing many others. In comparison, artists experimenting with various forms receive less attention. It is not uncommon outside Korea for the term 'Dansaekhwa' to be mistakenly considered a synonym for Korean painting.

J: If we set aside the subjective experiences of insiders, Dansaekjo painting emerged in the late seventies, with two main influences: the French art movement

Supports/Surfaces and Henri Focillon's theory on art forms introduced by critic Lee Il. These foreign influences were combined with the concept of 'naturalism' developed by art historian Kim Won-Yong to define the essence of Korean art. The original notion of Dansaekjo, prioritizing the 'generative space' where materiality and spirituality meet, or 'pan-naturalism,' differs significantly from its contemporary usage. What are your thoughts on this issue? Clarifying the distinctions between your body of work and Dansaekjo could help us understand your aesthetic position better.

L: I am not a scholar, making theoretical arguments isn't easy for me. However, 'pan-naturalism' is a concept that resonates with me, as it sounds nature-friendly. The idea of a 'generative space where materiality and spirituality merge into one' is familiar and frequently appears in modern art theory. Postmodern thinking suggests that while any form of art creates its own 'generative space,' whether it's a child's drawing, Kim Jeong-hui's hanji drawing, or van Gogh's thick oil painting, the artwork should not be 'objectified' but should engage in interaction with the subject. This means the nature of the artwork changes based on the viewer or participant. The distinction between 'objectification' and 'togetherness' reflects the difference between modernity and postmodernity.

Once again, it seems that the term 'Dansaekhwa' and its practice were predisposed to be misunderstood from the start. Figures like Robert Ryman, concerned with repetition and materiality, and Cy Twombly, known for repetitive drawings with bold brush strokes, demonstrated Giun comparable to that of a child. Agnes Martin's paintings, influenced by Zen Buddhism, with their repetitive nature, remind me of the power of being transparent and humble. It shouldn't be surprising that these works feel familiar, as we are still immersed at the unconscious level in the long tradition of Confucianism, Buddhism, Zen, and Neo-Confucianism.

I'm content watching other artists create this style of art because I know I could easily lose control by getting involved. It's challenging for an artist to resist delving into what fascinates them. I understand myself well enough to know that such a project would put my sense of reality at risk. However, this doesn't mean I'm drawn to a conceptual approach to Zen.

J : Understanding a painting involves finding similarities between the painting and the viewer's past experiences and knowledge. This means that we can only look at a work through the lens of concepts and ideas, acquired beforehand consciously or not. What do you make of that perspective, especially considering it's quite different from how you see things?

L: Well, a concept is like the generalized knowledge we have about an object or a phenomenon, but it's crucial to realize that it remains abstract and virtual. Think about classical physics – you can predict the movement of an object when force is applied. Then there's the 'double slit experiment' from the 20th century that shed light on the microscopic world. The photon cruising through the slit acts like a wave, but the moment you start observing, it switches to behaving like a particle. This experiment unveiled a structure suggesting that we and the world are interconnected in an organic whole.

Even if we concede the validity of concepts, it's paramount to recognize that the very act of contemplating a concept triggers sensory organ activation at the speed of light, in ways that defy imagination. I'm currently exploring the notion of establishing a formal ground wherein viewers can appreciate images not solely through concepts but by engaging in sensory activation that outpaces conscious thought.

J: Some observers highlight the presence of figures such as ducks, boats, and stags in your work, suggesting that you create entities by situating tangible

elements within the intricate interplay of abstraction and representation. How do you respond to this observation?

L: Ducks, stags, and boats, as depicted in my work, transcend the realm of tangible reality; they exist purely as abstractions. Viewers interpret these forms through the lens of concepts, with each individual's unique experiences influencing their understanding. The assertion that these elements represent something definitively real becomes inherently ambiguous. Moreover, the existence of concepts adds an additional layer of ambiguity to the interpretation. I don't perceive ourselves as concrete 'beings' or 'entities' but rather as phenomena emerging from the mysterious and organic structure of the cosmos.

J: People often expect artworks to convey explicit messages and may feel frustrated when those messages elude them. Can your abstract works exist without conveying messages? Do you intentionally incorporate messages into your art?

L : This question has never been an easy one to answer, so I prefer to tell a story.

There's this collector who has one of my pieces, and he once told me, "The painting on my wall is quite fascinating. I get a different vibe from it every time I look."

I am hugely encouraged by this kind of reaction. When we see and perceive the world, we are in fact interacting with our latent memories as well. The same applies to artworks, so I want my work to generate changing perceptions. I want the viewer to be aware of this phenomenon. My entire body of work including event, installation, and two-dimensional is concerned with this issue. There is not one work that is unrelated to this theme.

J: If artificial intelligence and machines can rival human creativity, what role remains for artists?

L: Several months ago, a relative of mine who specializes in the field guided me in using a newly developed computer software for image generation. My conclusion was that machines, as well as the creations they produce, still lag significantly behind the depth of human ingenuity. The significance of an individual human life resonates on a cosmic scale, and with 8 billion humans on our planet, this cosmic perspective should not be overlooked. As technology advances, let's not lose sight of the vast cosmic structure, acknowledging that human understanding of the cosmos is merely a minuscule drop in the ocean.

J: When selecting titles for your works and exhibitions, do you adhere to a specific principle or follow a particular process? Or do you move freely to the rhythm, waiting for inspiration, similar to your approach to making paintings?

L: In my youth, I held the belief that a title should not interfere with the structural autonomy of the work. Consequently, I often opted for 'Untitled' to avoid imposing specific titles.

Around the year 2000, I started using terms like 'islands' and 'rivers,' not in a geographical sense but as metaphors. By abstaining from proper names, I aimed to convey my experience of them in their raw, unbranded state. Subsequently, I drew inspiration from philosophical concepts such as 'Emptiness' and 'Becoming.'

Last year, when I held the duo exhibition with my friend Kwon Sun-Cheol(b.1944) at ‘Changseong-dong Laboratory’ in Seoul, I came up with the title ‘A Dream -

Enchantment'(2022). As college students, our shared studio was in the neighborhood, so whenever I walk by, I have a sense of enchantment, like being in a dream.

This time I am showcasing my sculptures for the first time in forty years, but I sought a title that didn't carry a heavy tone. Hence, 'The Wind Blows: about the sculpture' (2023), reminiscent of a pop song, was chosen. Without being too pompous, I wished to convey the insight that the cosmos is an organism in perpetual movement.

J : Tell us about the influences that have shaped your artistic journey.

L : An artist doesn't grow in a vacuum. His journey is shaped by a variety of influences. This development involves cultivating a unique perspective and position within the art historical context through a process of learning, emulating, critiquing, and generating new ideas. In my childhood, I was surrounded by family elders passionate about art and school instructors specializing in art education. As an art student in such a poor country, my curiosity for art-related materials was insatiable, driven by a goal to modernize Korean art, along with the dream of becoming an accomplished artist.

My primary focus was gaining access to the latest information from the avant-garde art scenes in advanced countries. Collaborating with friends, we became contemporary art activists in the 1970s, influenced significantly by Western art trends. Recognizing the importance of understanding our intellectual history, I embarked on solitary journeys to explore Korean traditional art. Even today, in my rural studio, I delve into introductory books on neo-Confucianism and modern physics.

Reflecting on my influences, I'm reminded of Confucius's wisdom taught during my middle school years: 'When three men walk together, each man has lessons to learn from the other two.' I continue to learn endlessly from friends, elders, teachers, and prophets of the world who enlighten me with valuable information.

J: Society is in constant flux, with artists often at the forefront of these changes. Modern artists tend to engage with social, political, and environmental issues in their work. What are your perspectives on this trend?

L: In today's democratized society, it's natural for people to express their interests in social, political, or environmental matters through art, but it should be done in a free and moderate manner. Without consideration for others and self-moderation, such expressions can lead to harm. During my college years, I didn't distance myself from activist friends who organized 'Minjung' exhibitions. When I spearheaded the '1st Daegu Contemporary Art Festival,' the first contemporary art festival in Korea in 1974, it involved collaboration with artists from diverse backgrounds. The evolution of art is intertwined with scientific and societal changes, suggesting that over time, it will move towards greater diversity.

J: To what extent is it accurate to assert that artists stand as pioneers at the forefront of significant social changes?

L: In the 16-17th century, Galileo Galilei, a scientist of his time, solidified Copernican heliocentrism and played a pivotal role in transitioning from the Renaissance to modernity through his astronomical observations on the telescope. Descartes, a philosopher, mathematician, and scientist of the 17th century, initiated modern philosophy by asserting that the existence of the self as the thinking subject is beyond doubt, famously encapsulated in his proposition "I think, therefore I am." Isaac Newton in the 17-18th century discovered the 'law of

universal gravitation' and developed 'Newtonian mechanics,' significantly contributing to modern science.

Moving to the 19-20th century, Albert Einstein's publication of the special theory of relativity in 1905 revolutionized physics, establishing the equivalence of mass and energy and challenging the absoluteness of fundamental concepts like mass, length, and time. His work became the theoretical foundation for nuclear physics. In 1916, his general theory of relativity, explaining how light warps under strong gravitational pull, became crucial for understanding the formation and evolution of the entire universe.

In 1913, Niels Bohr proposed the 'Bohr model' of the atom, followed by Werner Karl Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle' in 1927, unveiling the basic principle of quantum physics. These scientific advancements, occurring at the forefront of their respective eras, have propelled human civilization from the classical age to modernity and the present. Philosophers, writers, and artists then develop corresponding logic or artistic forms in response to these epistemological shifts.

J : How much do you invest in preparing and planning?

L: Artists vary in their approaches, and personally, when my mind is sparked with the desire to embark on a daring venture using materials I'm intimately familiar with, I dive into executing the idea without delay. Occasionally, depending on the context, I may find it necessary to prepare rather than rely solely on improvisation. However, my primary goal is for images to emanate at the speed of light, engaging with the viewer and offering an opportunity to appreciate the rhythm of life.

J: Your artworks, particularly the sculptures, appear to possess a certain autonomy. While you initiate the initial throw, the final form of the work isn't

dictated by you, but rather by the work itself. In this context, what role do you assign to the artist, and can the artist take credit for the entire process?

L: I make a conscious effort to steer clear of the contemporary art paradigm where the subject takes center stage, fostering subjective identification. The act of throwing clay is influenced by numerous variables such as the clay's properties, humidity, the studio's environment, the artist's mental and physical state, and even the studio's situation. Additionally, in the case of terra cotta and ceramics, the significance of the firing process cannot be overlooked. I don't assert this art-making process as my subjective creation; rather, it is a process where one can revel in the rhythm of poiesis while avoiding discordance with the structure of nature.

J: When creating a painting or sculpture, a significant portion of the process involves an element of chance. The artist's responsibility for the resulting work exists in a realm of ambiguity, balancing between risk and compensation. For you, what does it mean to consider an artwork finished? Is it a sense of total completion, a gradual release, or a recognition that there's nothing more to be done?

L: Achieving completion becomes an inconceivable concept when one comprehends the interconnectedness of everything—from the intricate functioning of sensory organs and the cerebrum to individual experiences and the interactions within the universe—a grand organism on a cosmic scale. If art serves as the chosen form for improved communication, the content I employ revolves around images and events that, despite their simplicity, rarely unfold as intended and often rely heavily on chance. I encourage viewers to engage with the ever-changing relationships and the currently popular discussions surrounding 'entropic' interactions. I strive to utilize this virtual 'dialogue' to foster

more profound communication. The next progression involves reaching for a higher form of Giun, aiming to communicate in a truly impactful manner.

J: Do you often revisit a completed work to make additional changes, or do you consider it final once completed?

L : Retouching doesn’t seem to be my thing. My storage space is consistently filled with works that I can't seem to salvage. I have to make time to ‘dispose of’ them.

J: Modern art and modern physics, particularly quantum physics, which posits that 'thoughts create reality,' share a common trait of rejecting conventions and universally valid truths. Instead, they prioritize relativity, where new relationships with objects form based on changing contexts. The paradox of modern art lies in its reliance on iconographic description for expression, despite the awareness that such description may fall short of delivering content. While you often acknowledge the limitations of painting and sculpture, you continue to engage in painterly practice. Could you please elaborate on your stance regarding this paradox?

L: When we delve into art history, the interplay between expression and appreciation is intricately tied to the prevailing mentality of the times, shaped by the way people think. I strive to embrace the 'paradox' you've highlighted and find creative opportunities within it.

J : The so-called ‘trans-scientific’ questions are questions that are scientifically relevant but cannot be answered by science. Science cannot be practiced without resorting to language, as its explanation, consumption, and understanding rely upon it. Art shares this reliance on language, and despite efforts to attain purity and start anew, the result remains impure. This parallels thinking, inseparable

from language, something not created from scratch but given to us. To conclude our discussion today, it seems you are an artist who transcends the confines of language, generating art that goes beyond the boundaries of philosophy and language. Is there anything you would like to add?

L: In classical physics, the external world is deemed independent of us, enabling observations, measurements, and predictions. Contrastingly, quantum physics posits that the act of observation alters the observed, challenging the concept of objectivity. We must acknowledge that nature is studying itself when we study it, as we are embedded in nature. Consequently, I strive to live 'together with nature,' holding onto humility, honesty, and a belief in dialogues.

Interviewer : Jeong Joon-mo, curator, former head of Curatorial Office at MMCA