

## Mountain Armatures

By Bruce Adams

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In the new paintings Hyunmee Lee has produced for this exhibition, the artist shows her continuing respect for modernist conventions of abstract painting. Each composition is a well-considered articulation of forms and gestures upon the picture plane. Yet Korean-born Lee is a robust painter who is not content to politely acknowledge modernism's history of hybridisation with her own Eastern traditions. Her quiet but emphatic compositions are real in the most subtle and difficult of ways, since the gestures that mark each surface are like the trails of the artist's own biography. In essence, Lee's calligraphic lines are intuitively felt traces. Resembling old forms of language that have been written, obscured and re-inscribed many times over, they tap into our collective memories and experiences, evoking recent displacements and losses as much as distant traditions.

On a stylistic level, each of these paintings is deeply indebted to Lee's Korean heritage. Her cultural background has given her a color range and a set of gestures that Lee has refined into a seemingly effortless personal "signature." The resulting energy or *ch'i* of her distinctive calligraphy has sustained her art practice across three continents and two decades, during a period when Lee has undertaken a complex life journey straddling several different social and geographic divides.

As one would expect of works that mark a new point of arrival in her extended journey, this exhibition is Lee's response to the forms that have impacted upon her consciousness in her present North American environment. Since 2001, while she has been living and working in Orem, Utah, the most potent element that has emerged in Lee's compositions is the mountain (*san* in Korean). Indeed it is tempting

to seek in the mountain's symbolic power the key to this new collection of work.

Is there, in the pictorial shapes and multi-layered meanings of her Utah compositions, evidence of an encounter between the mythologised iconography of the American West and Lee's own, different type of cultural gaze?

Utah's mountainous horizons may offer the main point of access into these paintings, but these works are not landscapes in any obvious or literal sense. In several of her latest paintings, Lee's imagination transforms her mountains into open armatures of dark lines. These structures suggest more than naturally formed rocks or trees, for their textured surfaces and stick-like shapes also seem to evoke the charred remains of towering human habitations. For some viewers, the recurring outlines may recall the fragmented architecture now universally imprinted on our consciousness in the wake of September 11. This is not to say that Lee herself would be aware of or admit to such immediate interpretations. Various degrees of self-effacement and ambiguity have been the necessary accompaniment to an internalised method of working that requires the artist to move beyond her other levels of discourse and social engagement to reach a more iconic level of human communication.

In one of Lee's other recent mountain paintings, ravines of paint cut vertically down the middle of the composition. In this sheer alpine chasm, the viewer is confronted by the void. Reminiscent of the Western romantic tradition, in which solitary observers ponder the infinity of nature's expanse, this composition also draws us back to one of the prevalent themes in Lee's paintings since the 1980s, when she first left Korea. Lee has said that by moving outside her national culture, she became more aware of the traditions of thought that formed the basis of her life and work. While living for five years in Australia, on the underside of her former world, she reflected on Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism: "I started to see myself differently. I felt I was at the bottom in the earth ... as if I had lost myself."

It was during her time in Australia that Lee started to explore the idea of self as the most fundamental element of her human nature. In her painting she tried to apply principles of natural energy as directly as possible, through unconscious gestures. She developed a technical facility that belied the silent intensity of her method. As can be seen in the style of painting that she continues to pursue today, Lee's use of a wet, malleable medium has helped her to achieve a fluid and spontaneous gestural quality. But each line is just the latest overlay in a process that has had much prior gestation and development. Beneath it is the vestige of an earlier line, another reality now hidden in the material of the work. This activation of the artwork's surface is coupled with a fascination for space, a quality of the sublime as applicable to the art of the East as the modern history of landscape and abstract painting in the West.

Lee is an artist for whom painting is a process akin to meditation. She has talked of her type of vision as an “abstract gaze,” a certain way of looking and thinking that prioritizes states of formlessness and energy. For her, *ch'i* is the life force that animates and connects things: “Without *ch'i* I cannot breathe. Without *ch'i*, my painting cannot live.” As an artist, she has tried to convey such concepts poetically, through the subjective means of paint on canvas. Again, at the time of her studio research in Sydney, she found a quotation that stimulated her to call the body of work she was making there First Face:

When your mind is not dwelling on good or evil,

What is your original face before you were born?

(Christmas Humphreys, *Zen Buddhism*, London: Unwin Books, 1949, p. 95)

Feeling herself quite separate from the world, Lee wrote in her studio notebook in 1990 that “Everything becomes nothing. I know that is impossible to achieve.” Twelve years on, what has become of her Zen-like quest for a return to “origins (blankness or purity)”? Back in Korea during the 1990s and now, in the art made after her move six years ago to the United States, Lee has eschewed modernism’s end-game strategies of ever-accelerating minimalism and formal evacuation. She has preferred to reactivate her compositions with an oblique but personal iconography of signs and markers, and is more aware of the links between her individuality and the society around her. And yet she has not forgotten the primacy of the abstract image over other contextual considerations. For her, painting has a logic that is more concrete than anything to do with anecdote or social meaning.

As Lee noted in a talk at Utah Valley State College in 2001, “I am more interested in the substance of the brush stroke than its symbolism. I enjoy the moment when the gesture finds its own power.” That statement implies a belief in art as a transcending human activity. At a time when the world is once again preoccupied by its conflicting constructions of good and evil, is it not a worthy thing to be contemplating the delicate, intangible power that may be contained in a single, hand-made mark—the essence of all human representation?