

Misa Jefferies, 'In the Studio with Lee Kit'

Untitled (Blog), Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 22 December 2015

WALKER ART CENTER

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In the Studio with Lee Kit

BY MISA JEFFEREIS



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On May 12, 2016 the Walker Art Center will open the first solo museum exhibition in the US by Lee Kit, a Hong Kong artist based in Taipei. Lee (b. 1978) creates subtle object-based installations that are fashioned from quotidian forms/materials (soap, towels, cardboard boxes, plastic containers, and other domestic wares and products associated with personal hygiene) that he transforms through subtle gestures of painting, drawing, video, as well as placement. Lee frequently imparts political commentary in his work. His repetitive use of foreign products and English words makes reference to the presence of market capitalism and Hong Kong's sociopolitical history. Conceived as a site-specific installation, the Walker's exhibition will feature a selection of paintings, drawings, objects, and video drawn from the last five years of the artist's production, including an ambitious 13-channel video installation acquired by the Walker, *I can't help falling in love* (2012).



Lee Kit's studio is also his home. It's spare but warm and personal. The rooms are filled with Danish furniture, and surfaces are mostly bare save a few travel-sized hygiene products (lotion, toothpaste, matchbooks) collected during his travels. His art is tacked up casually on the wall, as well as images that inspire him: classical sculpture, found imagery, and hand gestures. The apartment is in the Xinyi neighborhood of Taipei, where the Hong Kong artist has lived since 2012. I just returned from a visit there, where Lee and I spoke about his upcoming exhibition, his interest in hands, and his attachment to hygiene products. He and I concluded an interview that will appear in the exhibition catalogue for his presentation at Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst Gent (SMAK) in May 2016. Here are some excerpts from the conversation.



Misa Jeffereis: When you were in Minneapolis earlier in the year we talked about depictions of hands in art. We were at the Minneapolis Institute of Art looking at religious paintings and you said you always pay attention to the hands. In your work there's a specific recurring image of hands, and you also made that piece called *Scratching the table surface* (2006–2009), in which you scratch a table with your fingers until a hole forms, and the installation *Something in My Hands* (2012). What's the fascination?

Lee Kit: In paintings from the Renaissance or even earlier religious Italian and Flemish paintings, the artists all paint these hand gestures that are very symbolic, and everybody understands their meaning. They don't question the gesture or why they understand it. And now we've lost this feeling or sensation or sensibility—somehow we lost it. I don't want to bring it back, but I'm curious about it.



Lee: And also, hands do things and touch things. I think hands are the most honest language. I don't mean sign language. For example, when people feel nervous, it's a pure feeling and your hands shake. It's something you cannot control. So it is a super honest language, but it can be very intimate as well. For example, when you love someone, you hold each other's hand, and you are the only one who can feel it. You cannot explain it to someone else, and even the person whose hand you're holding will have a different experience than you. On the other hand, if you hate somebody and you want to kill them, you also use your hands.

I just cannot get rid of this fascination. When I look back on my art practice, since day one when I started making art, there were hands: the picnic photographs and scratching video. It's about hands, I realized.

Jeffereis: In your earlier work you were making hand-painted cloths that you then washed by hand and infused wear and use into the fabric before incorporating the picnic blankets, tablecloths, and curtains in your daily activities.

Lee: Yes, exactly. When I touch things, I experience something I cannot describe. And even if I could describe it, you won't get it. And going back to my belief is that if I can understand something clearly, then I don't need to make work.



Jeffereis: In the movie *Chungking Express*, by Wong Kar-wai, there's a scene in which Tony Leung is moving around his apartment and speaking to his belongings, giving pep talks to his hungry soap bar, crying dish cloth, lonely shirt, and hopeless stuffed animal. The intimate moment in the film reminds me of your works that incorporate personal hygiene products like Nivea and Vichy lotions, and domestic wares like worn tablecloths and sheer curtains. There's an intimacy and softness to these works. Wong Kar-wai is also from Hong Kong—a very populated city with small, isolated living spaces. Do you think that there is a desire to connect more deeply to things and people, rather than just buy and consume products? Maybe it's a rejection of the hyper-capitalist nature of the city.

Lee: When I was younger, I did tend to talk to objects. It's simple if you think of it like this: Who is seeing me naked, and who is in the bathroom with me? Johnson & Johnson. Nivea. And while taking a shower, a lot of people talk to themselves, or are deep in thought. That moment is very intimate, and some of these conversations you just don't want to share with other people. It's so intimate and you're naked, and you're cleaning yourself like animals. No one's around but all these bottles—I mean, they are looking at me. Since you don't have enough physical space, you are forced farther into your mental space. You talk to yourself, you talk to objects. You have no privacy; the only privacy you have is the moment you talk to yourself.



Lee: When *Chungking Express* first came out in theaters, I went to see it. The audience didn't understand this artistic side of Wong Kar-wai—they wanted his gangster action movies. They threw things at the screen; they "booed." But I felt a connection to the film, because, like him, I talk to bottles. I project my thoughts onto these objects. I think we all have this kind of projection. You see a cup and you might associate something with it, and that's part of our nature.

Jeffereis: We're constantly evaluating things around us and gauging our relationship to

them. Your art-making process begins with a curiosity for the things that you don't know or understand, and you seem to work toward expressing inexpressible feelings.

Lee: Yes.

Jeffereis: Thank you for speaking with me, Kit. We're looking forward to your show at the Walker next May.



Over the last several years, Lee Kit's work has received increasing attention in Asia and in

Europe. In 2013 he was shortlisted for the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award, awarded by the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai (2013), and represented Hong Kong in the 2013 Venice Biennale. He has exhibited his work at the Sharjah Biennial (2015), Staatliche Kunsthalle in Baden Baden (2014), the Liverpool Biennial (2012), and Museum of Modern Art (2012), and has held solo exhibitions at Mother's Tankstation in Dublin (2015), Minsheng Art Museum in Shanghai (2012), Western Front in Vancouver (2011), and Para/Site in Hong Kong (2007). Lee's work is held in the collections of the Walker Art Center, M+ in Hong Kong, S.M.A.K. in Ghent, and The Hong Kong Museum of Art. He is represented by Vitamin Creative Space in Guangzhou, Aike-Dellarco in Shanghai, Jane Lombard Gallery in New York, and ShugoArts in Tokyo.