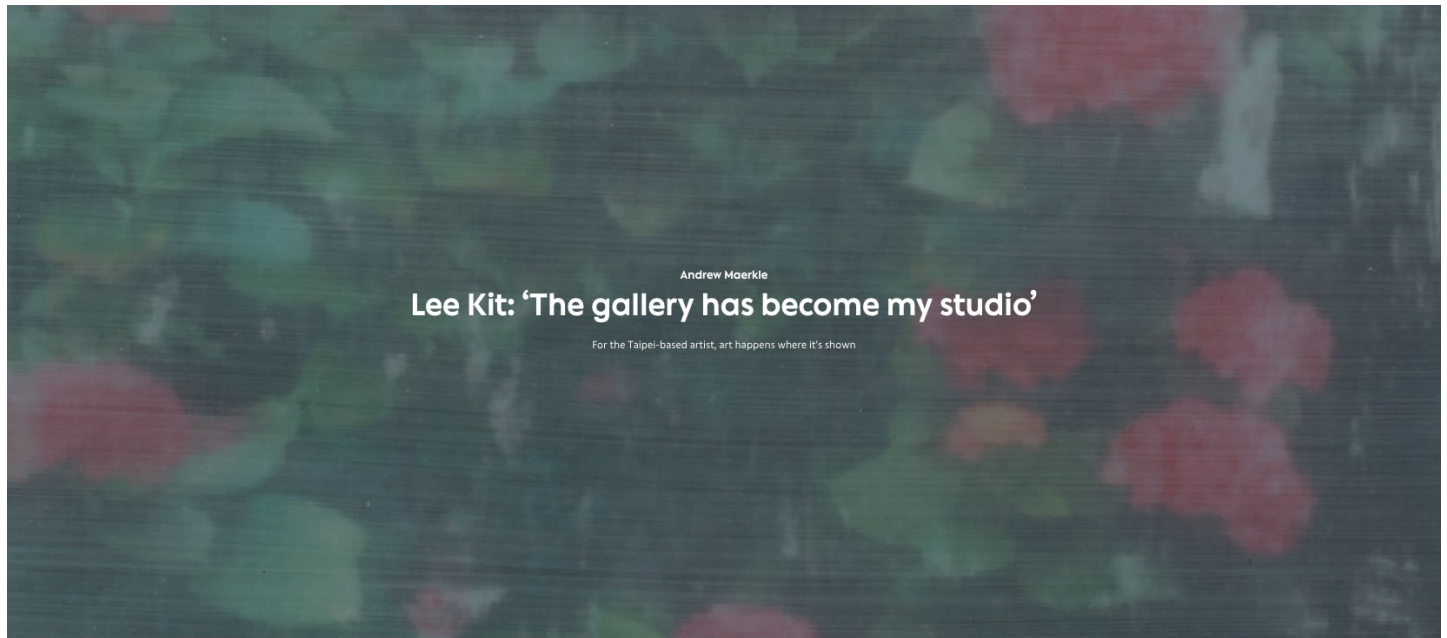


Maerkle, Andrew, 'Lee Kit: *'The gallery has become my studio'*', Art Basel Stories, April 2022



Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, **Lee Kit** was on the move so frequently that, by his own recollection, he was barely home more than a week at a time, sometimes squeezing two trips into a single week. Based in Taipei since 2012, the Hong Kong-born artist has helped shape a generational sensibility in Asia and beyond, is represented by multiple galleries, and maintains a busy slate of institutional solo exhibitions, thematic surveys, and art festivals around the world.

But while Lee, like many other artists, is adapting to the new conditions brought about by the pandemic, he cuts an odd figure at a time when artworks can be transferred from artist to venue or local fabricator at the click of a button. Under ideal circumstances, for each exhibition, he has to be there in person to inhabit the space and draw out its mood. His practice incorporates the architectural features of the site – especially its play of light and shadow, which is to say its emptiness – into immersive, atmospheric installations that are activated by, and in turn activate, their viewers.

Doing a show with Lee is about 'shipping the artist, rather than shipping the art,' says Finola Jones, Director of **mother's tankstation**, which held solo shows for Lee in Dublin in 2015 and 2018. 'With Kit you give him the keys, go away for a spell, cook dinners, check in now and again, leave him be, talk a lot, and you get amazing shows.' Minako Ishii, Gallery Manager of Tokyo's **ShugoArts**, which has worked with Lee since 2010, adds: 'Even when we've done studio visits with him, we never had the sense he was making art there, so it's hard to say exactly where the work begins and ends.'

Indeed, Lee's layered, combinatory approach establishes referential feedback loops that jump across contexts and mediums, creating the impression of a constantly expanding artwork. The building blocks of the installations are his paintings on cardboard supports. These often feature fragments of images, sourced from anything from films to social media feeds (an isolated hand in mid-gesture, for example), set against pastel color fields or juxtaposed with geometric patterns. Whether hanging them on the wall, propping them on the floor, or standing them on some other object, Lee will then put the paintings in dialogue with projection pieces that overlap with them both physically and thematically, echoing their visual motifs or color schemes. Sometimes the projections, which may be of still or moving images, are accompanied by poetic subtitles (taken from song lyrics, literature, or Lee's own writing) that suggest the artist's interior monologue, further opening up the associative scope of the imagery.

Even when filtered through transparent plastic storage bins that diffuse their brightness, the projections simultaneously illuminate and obscure the paintings. Furthermore, viewers going in for a closer look will find themselves distracted by their own shadows, as well as those of others moving around the space. Quietly political in nature, the installations scramble the received hierarchies between work, context, and viewer. Rather than effacing everything else to highlight the work, they deploy the work as a disarmingly homely pendant that makes viewers aware of their own embeddedness in a broader situation.

'The exhibition comes together as one big artwork,' says Claudia Albertini, Senior Director at the Hong Kong branch of **Massimo De Carlo**, the gallery that held solo shows for him in London in 2016 and in Hong Kong in 2017 and 2020. 'Kit's technique of filtering the projections through clear plastic boxes is as simple as can be, and the resolution of the videos is the lowest possible,' she explains. 'Yet his use of color and language in his paintings is so sophisticated that even the roughness of the cardboard surfaces becomes delicate. He's showing he can make great works of art out of humble material.' That ability has earned Lee accolades and a steady stream of invitations for solo projects at respected institutions – from cutting-edge facilities, such as the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and S.M.A.K. in Ghent, to historic properties, such as the Renaissance-era Casa Masaccio in Tuscany and the 1930s Bauhaus-style mansion of the former Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo. But Lee also defies current trends in eschewing the use of assistants, even for administrative tasks. 'Why would I hire a boss?' he quips.



Lee Kit, *It's not a beautiful day*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Massimo De Carlo, Milan, London, Paris, and Hong Kong.

Although he arrived at this practice gradually, Lee credits his collaboration with his galleries for fostering its emergence. 'If I didn't work with so many galleries, I might not have become an artist who works with space,' he reflects. Being able to produce multiple shows in the same venue with familiar support staff allows him to know the space intimately, which is important for an artist who typically works right up to the opening, making a new painting for an overlooked corner or changing the entire installation around at the last minute. 'The gallery has become my studio,' he says.

Rather than seeking to scale up his output, Lee stays grounded in his commitment to his galleries, which he compares to a serious relationship or marriage. 'It sounds crazy – how can you have so many serious partners? But it's about understanding and trust.' He has been through enough bad breakups to acknowledge 'we shouldn't control each other,' and he has turned down offers from blue-chip galleries that felt like a bad match. 'It's not about the size of the gallery, but about how we talk to each other.' With characteristic humility, he worries that his in situ working method puts a strain on the galleries' business. 'There's nothing to promote in advance, and instead of discussing how to sell works, we have to talk about practice, like why to make a show.'

Yet that focus on communication and process also enables his respective gallerists to establish a one-to-one relationship with Lee, easing any strain that might come from potential competition. 'He's a very generous artist, and he's fair,' says Albertini. 'No one toe-steps,' adds Jones. 'Ultimately we are all working for the same goal of supporting his beautiful practice.' These relationships also enable sensitive spatial interventions despite Kit's lack of physical presence, with the artist likening the experience of putting together '(Screenshot)', his late-2020

show produced remotely at ShugoArts, to catching up with an old friend: 'You don't have to say too much. I remember all the different corners of the space.'

Each gallery has also been able to build its own context for Lee. According to Lisa Carlson of New York's Jane Lombard Gallery, upon encountering him for the first time at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2010, the gallery wanted to bring Lee onboard because 'his practice fits with the program's focus on socially political work from Asia and the Middle East.' For ShugoArts, which started out showing Lee's painted fabrics used as picnic cloths, tablecloths, and even protest banners before being brought back into the exhibition space, the paintings are as important as the installations. 'His art and practice are major contributions to the history of painting,' says Ishii.'



Left: Lee Kit, A4, 2018. Right: Lee Kit, It is what it is, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and mother's tankstation, Dublin and London.

With borders opening up, Jane Lombard Gallery is planning to have Lee in New York for his first exhibition at the gallery's new Tribeca space later this year, and Albertini is convinced that in-person art viewing is as important as ever despite the rise of NFTs and other digital content. Meanwhile, mother's tankstation is considering changing the timescale of the commercial gallery exhibition itself by hosting a program of yearlong shows in Dublin. 'Kit is the obvious and primary choice for this,' Jones says, adept as Lee is at transforming the quirks of a space into expressive material. 'His works evolve over seasons and echo temporal changes in sociopolitical landscapes.'

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Lee Kit is represented by **Massimo De Carlo**, Milan, London, Paris, and Hong Kong; **mother's tankstation limited**, Dublin and London; **ShugoArts**, Tokyo; and **Jane Lombard Gallery**, New York City.