

ArtReview ArtReview Asia

FEATURE

Lee Kit

The feeling of being hit head-on...

By Anthony Yung

ArtReview Asia caught up with Lee Kit in Venice, where he was monitoring the reconstruction of a building – soon to be the site of the Hong Kong Pavilion – opposite the entrance of the Arsenal. His solo exhibition *You (you)*. will open here in less than two months. During the past year, Lee's experiences of participating in art fairs and exhibitions all over the world – from solo shows in Beijing, Hong Kong, Palermo and Taipei, to group shows at the New Museum and MoMA in New York – have transformed his work methods and expanded the dimensions of his creative practice. Oddly enough, shortly before being invited to represent Hong Kong at the Venice Biennale, he moved to Taipei; so we decided, under the circumstances, that the best approach would be to invite one of his old Hong Kong friends to catch up with him on recent events.

Lee's artistic journey began when he started by painting checked patterns onto cloths, then using these 'paintings' in his daily life as tablecloths, curtains or picnic sheets. He washed the cloths, he wiped his mouth with them and in 2004 he used one of them as a 'flag' in Hong Kong's annual 1 July protests (held each year since the 1997 handover, in recent years to symbolise a demand for general freedoms). He collected hand cream, baby lotion and lip balm, and made videos of these items in the karaoke style. For many years he was like a hermit or a wild mushroom growing in his studio: he spent all his time there making works such as pillowcases with lyrics painted onto them. In one videowork he spent an hour smoking cigarettes to fill up an ashtray in memory of an artist friend who lived alone in his own studio where he was discovered by the police days after his death. In one of his most important works, Lee spent more than 800 days using his finger to scratch the surface of his studio desk until there was a wormhole on it. When he felt angry one morning, he found some black painting cloths in the studio, cut them into strips and wove them into a black ball so that he could have something to throw and to accompany his anger. Lee remains a painter – still painting cloths and inventing his own way to paint cardboard – but more often than not he now 'paints' an exhibition hall or art-fair booth by 'setting' everyday objects within the space – or perhaps, more precisely, by setting spaces between everyday objects.



Lee Kit, *Scratching the table surface*, 2006–12, acrylic on plywood, readymade objects, 300 postcards.
Courtesy the artist and Vitamin Creative Space.

ArtReview Asia: *Tell us about the early stages of your career as an artist.*

Lee Kit: After five years in the art department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, I graduated and started working at the Culture Corner Art Academy, which Gaylord Chan had founded. [Chan, b. 1925, worked in telecommunications before teaching himself to paint in middle age; he founded the Culture Corner Art Academy in 1989.] I worked there fulltime for four years. In addition to teaching painting, I also did some administrative and financial work, and I was in charge of planning the weekly parties hosted by Mr Chan. My life changed a lot during that time. I went to work during the day and back to my studio at night, where I painted checks on cloths every evening. I didn't have any time to see friends.

You always rented a studio?

LK: After I graduated, I shared a studio with a few girls. Then, in 2005, because I really couldn't afford the rent, I started working at home. So there are fewer works from that year. In 2006 I joined artist Jeff Leung's studio in Fo Tan [a suburb of Sha Tin District in Hong Kong], working as his studio assistant. There were other artists there, too: Pak Sheung Chuen, Lam Tung Pang, Ma Chi Hang and Gordon Lo. Lam Tung Pang and I were the only ones regularly using the studio. That was when I started *Scratching the Table Surface* [2006–10].

You like to describe your recent installations as 'settings', in which everyday objects – from water glasses, hand cream, baby lotion, a Post-it note left by a friend, table lamps, electronic switches to tablecloths and blankets – are collected and displayed in a certain way to build up a space of special moment and mood... Do you also collect these kinds of objects in your personal life?

LK: Some small items. Most recently I've collected things that were given to me: in Taiwan, electrical sockets have these little plastic things in them to prevent leakage. My girlfriend stole one from the bathroom of a restaurant and gave it to me. It's very beautiful. I also collect erasers and other things. It's haphazard.

What do the things you collect have in common? Are they all small?

LK: Not necessarily. I also collect postcards, playbills, chairs, and tables. What they have in common is that they are all useless and beautiful. Of course, you can sit on a chair, but it's not the function that's important. At night, when I see the chair I collected sitting over there, I get a feeling that I can't describe.

Obviously collecting has been part of your artistic practice. When did you start collecting things?

LK: I started collecting hand cream more than ten years ago, but it was in the last two years that I collected the various things I just mentioned. For example, I have a used-up lighter, and also a ballpoint pen that I took from a hotel in Vancouver two years ago. There would be a certain moment when these things suddenly became very important. Ever since I was a kid, I've had this weird feeling: even though I am walking down a perfectly orderly, apparently well-planned city street, I suddenly get this angry feeling. I live in Taipei now, and I think life is better and more comfortable here, but I still get this feeling. When I was little, I didn't understand why. After I grew up, I realised that it came from a feeling of powerlessness regarding the unfairness and injustice of reality. I am extremely concerned about politics, and I participate in demonstrations and rallies. That sort of protest is necessary, but I always feel like even though I'm taking action, I'm not able to change anything. So rather than fantasise about ways to solve problems, I prefer to believe in something in front of me, to believe in a very real item in my hand.

You say that these things are beautiful. You display them in an exhibition space or artfair booth as they are, with this unnamable beauty you described. But can you describe what makes them beautiful in your eyes? For example, the outlet plug you just mentioned...

LK: It seems to be a tiny bit luminescent. You take it in your hand, and at first you think that it is very delicate, but in fact it might be stronger than you are. I think it is a projected mood. In fact, most people project moods onto objects, but very few people are as pious as I am about it, really believing in it deeply. This object becomes important not because of its form, and not entirely because of the experiences I associate with it. These experiences were filtered out of my memory a long time ago, so it is not a memento.

This projection of moods is not outward, but inward; it's detritus, not catharsis.

LK: Yes. I think that it is a process of acceptance. It gradually helps you accept. These things are a part of you.

This reminds me of something Gilles Deleuze wrote: '[Consciousness] only takes in effects.' What you find in these objects is not memory, but the things left over after memories have been filtered clean.

LK: If I remember some night, some time I went drinking, then maybe that's because you said something that I thought was memorable. But it's more likely that when you were saying whatever it was you said, I was looking at a certain painting or scene.

But if you maintain this circuitous awareness in which 'unimportant' things are important and 'important' things take a subordinate position – what kind of psychological world does that produce, in the end?

LK: In fact, I'm always using a practical, logical approach. Handling affairs and communicating with people are no problem. For example, when I was very young, I already understood how to get odd jobs and make money. I pay attention when I'm talking to make sure that I'm expressing myself clearly. I think that you can't decouple yourself from the world, and I believe in some basic moral principles for conducting myself: don't make trouble for others, don't cheat or harm people. This is related to my experiences and the environment I grew up in. I always ask myself, how come I still love doing these mindless things when life is full of the pressures of reality? Why do these things continue to stun me? This is my myth. Anyway, it's been a long time since I've had the chance to relax and think about what I really want to do.

Behaving yourself has never been relaxing.

LK: Right. I accepted this fact a long time ago.

Some people prefer reflection to conversation. Through reflection, they resolve their problems, rather than discharging their frustration by talking. You seem to be more like those people who prefer reflection, but your process of reflection and resolution involves objects.

LK: Rather than say it's a process of resolution, better to call it a process of acknowledgment: acknowledging that these [moods, perceptions and feelings] are part of you. And I think that everyone has these suppressed, pathological moods. Instead of ecstasy or despair, I'd rather explore the long-term moods that people bear in their lives. My thinking is: I have these moods in which I am always tangled, so I believe that you do, too!

What's distinctive is that the system of symbols that you use could be said completely to lack symmetry. So you find or create an object, a painting, a sentence or a 'setting', but where do these things really come from, and why have you chosen them to manifest certain moods and feelings? Perhaps the spectator can feel the methods, but it's impossible for him or her to understand them. It can be felt, but not analysed.

LK: What's difficult to analyse is not the form or the method, not the line of the mood projection, but the feeling itself. I think that people, not methods, are impossible to analyse.

On the other hand, a whole variety of methods of analysing your works have emerged: relational aesthetics, antiart and critiques of consumer society... As your work has progressed from abstract painting to 'settings', it has become more and more removed from any specific context. Perhaps it is this decontextualised state that makes it easy for people to apply all sorts of interpretative models to explicating your artwork. But the truth is that your work has become a more and more unadulterated indication of certain abstract feelings. To put it boldly, your artwork is moving in the direction of music, the direction of a form of art in which there's zero separation between form and content.

LK: Perhaps so. There's no separation between form and content in music, but it is structural, and it has logic. Just that such logic cannot be analysed or calculated. Like the intro to Catch the Breeze by Slowdive – why does it hit us all of a sudden? How can you analyse that? Actually, to me, reading a book, looking at a piece of

visual art and listening to a song – we can temporarily adopt these classifications – are all the same. This is the exact thing that I want to capture, the feeling of being hit head-on by a car.

When I was first painting cloths, I was trying to dispose of the frame problem, the picture frame problem. But I quickly realised that, for a painter, the important thing is not what paintings he has painted, but his entire practice. Since this is the case, the frame of the picture is not as important as the frame of the thinking. So more and more I think anything goes, even doing karaoke is fine. Each person sees different things in every situation. Some people think this glass sitting here expresses everything, and some people think you have to have ten glasses in some complicated arrangement. But both ways are fine as long as it is sincere. Saying this sounds like not having an opinion, but that's just how it is. But at the last I can say the frame shouldn't be intentionally destroyed. Instead, the frame should be allowed to dissolve naturally. That's more beautiful. Like Slowdive. They only use the C and G chords, so what can you say about that? I oppose the professionalisation of art, and a lot of this talk about destroying or not destroying only exists because of the professionalisation. There's a lot of unnecessary discussion. Recently friends have been saying to me that they think my recent work is related to perception. I agree, but I don't completely agree. Of course, these works are related to perception, but they aren't entirely related to perception. It's more like they emit a frequency. I believe in a simple truth: if an artist creates something very sincerely, then only a small part of the audience will feel it. This is very reasonable.

Isn't that very strange? Since a lot of people like your art, isn't it because they share the same frequency as you?

LK: Of course not, and you know it, too.

Then why?

LK: Heaven knows.

And your art is also quite inspired by what you read. Texts from books and songs play a very important role in your works. What books were you reading in your studio days?

LK: During the time that I was working at the Fo Tan studio, I would sometimes go drinking with [artist] Kwan Sheung Chi. He had a lot of books, and a lot of them were books I didn't have. He lent me some novels, and that was really when I started reading fiction. I read André Gide and Milan Kundera during that time. There's a book that I've been reading ever since university, which is Liu Xiaofeng's *The Unbearable Body: Delivering and Dallying* [1988]. I always keep it by my pillow, and when I finish reading it, I start again at the beginning. I've already gone through several copies.

What makes this book so special?

LK: I don't know, but I seem to find some inspiration every time I read it. I like [theorist] Thierry de Duve, particularly *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade* [1984] and *Kant after Duchamp* [1996]. De Duve is extremely meticulous in his research, like he's a detective investigating a crime. His conclusions are brilliant not because his deductions are so persuasive, but because he adds in personalised things. For example, when he was studying Duchamp, he suggests that readymades originated in paintings, and their advent was related to the transformation of paints into industrial products. In *Kant After Duchamp*, he says that from modern art to contemporary art, we understand less and less, but we want to explore it and investigate it. Usually people attribute this to curiosity, but he attributes it to love. I had never heard an art theorist use the word 'love'. He uses this analogy: when a man falls in love with a woman, he loves a particular woman, and not the concept of woman. When someone falls in love with art, he falls in love with art with a lowercase 'a', not Art with a capital 'A'. So it's not at all tenable to have people using their status as art professionals to go around commenting on or criticising art. You first of all have to be an art lover, or else you can't comment, nor is there any need for you to comment. This idea has profoundly influenced me.

Please, keep talking about the books you read!

LK: *Girl, Interrupted* [1993] – I saw the movie before I read the book. It's a memoir by an American writer, Susanna Kaysen, about her mental illness and the mentally ill

people she met. There's a line in the book that I really like: 'It's one of the reasons I became a writer, to be able to smoke in peace.'

Testaments Betrayed [Milan Kundera, 1993] is basically about how fictional narratives influence individuals and how narratives achieve many things that reality cannot. The reason this book is important to me is that there is a chapter with the title 'You're Not in Your Own House Here, My Dear Fellow'. The contents of this chapter aligned perfectly with my creative approach at the time. In modern life, curtains are extremely important, because it seems that it is only when you pull open a curtain that you become aware of your own existence, you can find complete selfawareness, you are finally in 'your own house'.

So when I like a book or a song, it is always because of the associations triggered by a certain line or lyric.

So what have you been reading recently?

LK: I recently read a lot of books by Raymond Carver. In a short period of time I read all of the short stories he wrote – although he did not write very many. His characters always seem to be unable to leave a certain space, a certain environment. They are always trapped in some cycle... He understands how to capture things in an extremely authentic, extremely detailed way. His imagination is wild, but you never feel that he goes overboard.

Talk about music. So many of your artworks get their titles from titles or lyrics of songs that you listen to.

LK: I have read a lot about Joy Division, because I'm really crazy about them. My sister, who is more than ten years older than me, left a bunch of records at home when she moved out. Naturally, I grew to love that music. At the time, I was only eleven or twelve. It was a little unusual – Joy Division isn't really for kids. But it became my bedside music. Of course, it was not until later that I gradually began to understand what the songs were about. Also, I found out later that Ian Curtis died on my birthday. When I went to England, I made a special trip to Macclesfield to see his grave. I really just wanted to see it and that's all. There's just a small gravestone with his name carved into it. There's nothing special about it. It seems that he was in love with two women at the same time. He couldn't endure it, so he hanged himself. But this doesn't at all conform to my principles!

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