

SEUNG-TAEK LEE

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SEUNG-TAEK LEE (b.1932)

Seung-taek Lee's practice is innovative, diverse and questions political, social and artistic values. Lee's art investigates the real and the traditional in Korean culture, which has been transformed by the influx of information about Western art during the adoption of Western civilization of the Orient in 20th century. Much of Lee's paintings, sculptures, and environmental interventions share a kinship with both American land art and Korean shamanic traditions. Lee's practice embraces chance and ephemerality in its attempt to form a collaborative partnership with natural phenomena such as fire, water, wind, and smoke; these non materializations are also referred to as 'Non-Sculpture' and 'Anti-Concept'.

Lee enjoys abnormality more than normality, what exists beyond common sense, and the freedom of anti-art. Therefore dealing with objects that are grotesque, unpleasant, ugly, and sexually provocative, regardless of their shapes or forms because they stimulate and invigorate him. Through embracing of the alternative, Lee's practice is all the more remarkable, especially given the complicated social and political context experienced in Korea during the 60s and 70s.

Lee has reflected the Korean realities of the post-war era, the creative act is not to produce modern iconic values but 'work' that suggests and assembles by bringing various codes to a medium in a unique way. For him, the creation of the artwork is a reconstructive concept using various levels of cultural codes that are distinct from the creative concepts of modern art. The concept of 'non-materialisation' is key here, distinguishing his work from modern concept and placing Lee in the vanguard of contemporary art.

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Seung-taek Lee MOTINTERNATIONAL London installation view

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Seung-taek Lee MOTINTERNATIONAL London installation view

Paper Tree and Wind-Folk Amusement

Since the mid-sixties, Seung-taek Lee has been creating his 'Wind' series. Its common character is flux and the process of existence and disappearance in a specific place and time. This has been of course, the particularity from other currents.

Lee's 'Wind' turns the invisible existence of the wind into a visible phenomenon. Turning the invisible into the visible first occurs through visual confusion; but its true meaning is to make us see the other side by transcending a visual that is normally limited to the surface. Second, it occurs when the artist, by limiting our eyesight, opens the eyes in our hearts, naturally, in Lee's oeuvre, there is no room for plasticity. His work doesn't remain on the surface of the image, but floats continuously in our hearts. By experimenting with different existences in nature, it confirms our existence, reacting to and being provoked by nature. The repeated echoes of a wind beating against the soft, streaming pieces of fabric supported by thin tree branches are living entities that touch my ears, then disappear. I can feel the power and beauty of the fabric's provocative red colour and surface tension in my breathing, which surely stops for a moment, before continuing and becoming, little by little, more violent. The power and beauty of Lee's art is transmitted neither by idolatry, nor by system, nor by rules, nor by ideas. His art is direct and all the more powerful since we feel it in our bodies and react with our hearts. Its concrete composition brings together, momentarily and violently, through a verification of our existence and of nature, non-abstract existences.

from an essay "The World That Opens While Emptying Itself and Passing by Itself, Without Meeting Itself: Lee Seungtaek's Wind and Fire" by Sa Hae-jeung

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Seung-Taek Lee
Paper Tree, 1970

Korean Paper, 13 Branches
Dimensions variable

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Seung-Taek Lee *Paper Tree*, 1970
installation view



1970



1971

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Seung-taek Lee
Wind-Folk Amusement, 1971

120 x 246 cm
Photograph, cloth performance

Godret Stone and Soft Rock

“I used to visit museums with the belief that Korean traditional things are the best in the world. One of the very objects that captured my attention was Godret stone. Once a decorative item in a household, Godret stones experienced unusual changes in material properties, becoming softer looking objects and inspired me to express this change in my earlier work. The important matter here is an individual dimension that the process of creation and development represents.”

Interviewed by Kim Won-bang, Effort for Negative Boundaries, 50 years of Experimental Art: Lee Seung-taek Sculpture, Cat. (The Korean Culture & Arts Foundation, 1997)

A Godret stone is a stone historically used in tying knots when plaiting handcraft mats. The first inspiration that Lee received was from a scene where a number of stones, tied to threads, were dangling from a wooden bar. The stones appeared to lose their firmness, appearing soft and supple which captivated Lee. Malleability is one of standard measures that we normally use to evaluate and differentiate materials. Unlike a hard material, an outside force, such as tying, can change a soft medium's form. The transformation of the form by tying is possible because of the force applied. Based on the Godret stones, Lee attempted various types of art with a 'tying' concept. Lee has tied the female body, rocks, books, and fabrics. Tying can often change the form of the object being tied. Lee often manually hollows out a groove on the surfaces of solid materials in order to express naturally the chafes shown in form by tying. The secret of Lee's tying work lies on the relationship between the tying force and the consequential change of form rather than the relationship between the tying material and the tied materials. Moreover, one can see a trace of the force applied in tying by examining the new shape of the object. In fact, an object's inner power and an invisible, outside force. All the visible things, be it the tied object or a rain drop, are created by these forces.

from an essay "Following Godret Stone: Entangled Energy / Spiritual World with Modernity" by Kim Yung-hee

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Seung-Taek Lee
Soft Rock, 1964

Rock
80 x 80 x 23 cm

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Seung-taek Lee
Soft Rock and Godret Stone installation view

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Seung-Taek Lee
Godret Stone, 1957

Small stones, cords, wood
51 x 144 cm



Seung-taek Lee *Godret Stone* detail view

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Seung-Taek Lee
Untitled, 1968

Coal tar, cloth, hardboard
110 x 80 x 7 cm

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