

Japan Forward
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CULTURE

STARS at the Mori Art Museum: Five Contemporary Art Superstars Share their Views on a Post-Corona World

Ayako Kurosawa October 15, 2020 12:09 pm

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and Takashi Murakami, Ayako Kurosawa, coronavirus, COVID-19, Editor's Pick, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Lee Ufan, mori art museum, Mori Tower, Roppongi Hills, six contemporary artists, STARS exhibit, Tatsuo Miyajima, Yayoi Kusama, Yoshitomo Nara

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The lineup of six superstars in the world of contemporary art in the Mori Art Museum's "STARS" exhibition (Roppongi, Tokyo) has attracted much attention. The artists are Yayoi Kusama (91), Lee Ufan (84), Hiroshi Sugimoto (72), Tatsuo Miyajima (63), Yoshitomo Nara (60), and Takashi Murakami (58).

Five of the six artists, excepting the elderly Yayoi Kusama, gathered at the museum in late July for a press conference on the day prior to the exhibit's opening. The internationally-active artists discussed the turmoil of the pandemic and the nature of art in the age of COVID-19.

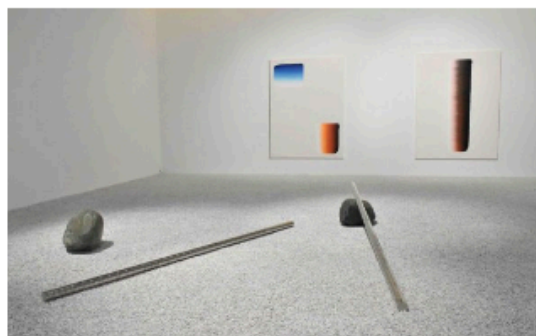


Yayoi Kusama: Pink Boat(1992) (Courtesy of Mori Art Museum)

It is as if the stars have aligned to bring about this unparalleled exhibition of six art legends, originally planned for the same year as the Olympics. "We planned to introduce artists that people coming from all over the world most wanted to see," said Museum Director, Mami Kataoka.

On display are both early works that garnered high praise internationally, as well as more recent works of all six artists. Following the respective trajectories of each artist's career gives viewers a look at both the history of Japanese contemporary art as well as an idea of where it stands today. For anyone in Japan interested in learning more about contemporary art, this exhibit is a great starting point.

The pandemic resulted in postponement of the Olympics, and the opening of the exhibition was also delayed three months in conjunction with Japan's state of emergency. At the press conference, the artists shared their experiences during the stay-at-home period and their views on the post-Corona world, with an astuteness so typical of artists.



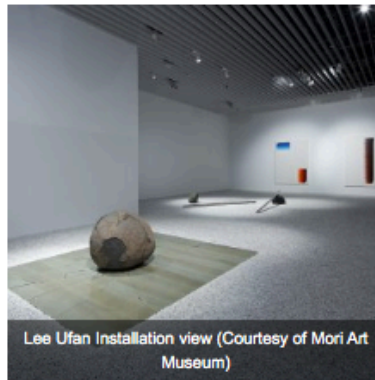
Lee Ufan Installation view (Courtesy of Mori Art Museum)

Lee Ufan's 'Warning from Mother Nature'

"COVID-19 is a very frightful thing, but it's also both a warning and a reminder," remarked Lee Ufan.

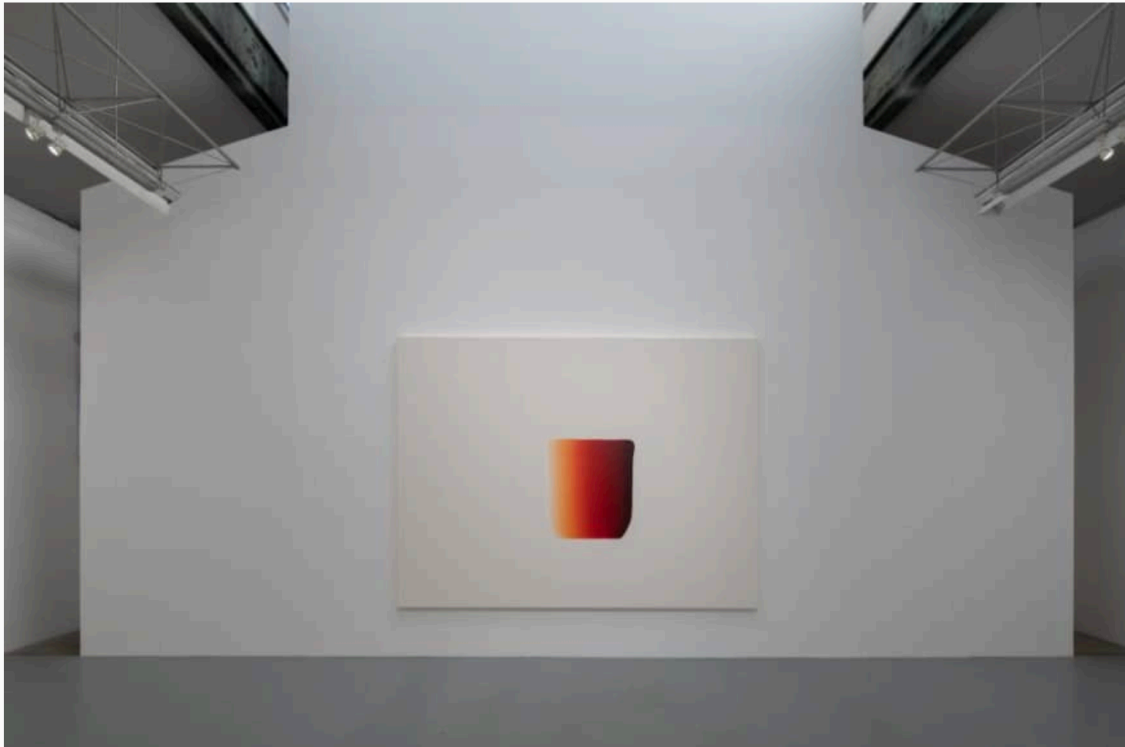
Lee's art typifies the "Mono-ha" movement that has been revisited globally in recent years. As the harmful effects of Japan's period of high economic growth and mass production began to manifest themselves, Lee pursued works based on the idea of "refraining from producing". He frequently used natural objects (like stones and trees) to develop sculptures and installations that embodied an awareness of the reciprocal relationships of things.

"At the time in Europe, these works were criticized as being nothing more than Buddhism or Japonism and were not well received, but I continued to focus on 'creating and not creating', and slowly got some recognition," Lee recollects.



Lee explained that the key to overcoming the COVID-19 disaster lies in the balance between "creating and not creating". To illustrate his point, he added:

I'm sure you all know that as a result of the global halt in development and production over the last few months, our environment has been improved. This could be our last chance to do something, and as artists, it is our obligation to make art that suggests something to our society. It is my intention to set aside myself, focus my efforts and call attention to the relationship between nature and human beings.



Installation view of "paintings" (2020) by Lee Ufan at SCAI The Bathhouse, Tokyo | PHOTO BY NOBUTADA OMOTE, COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND SCAI THE BATHHOUSE

ART

Lee Ufan: The same but different

BY JOHN L. TRAN

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Lee Ufan's new paintings look very different depending on where you are standing. From a distance, when you can take in several of the large canvases at the same time, abstract shapes seem to emphatically announce themselves as existing; however, they are also pointedly ambiguous as to what they are. Shading is used to hint at three-dimensionality in some, resulting in what look like cylinders, or rotund pots, at a distance. If you move in closer, though, this painterly illusion disassembles into featureless gradients of colors or patchworks of overlaid brushstrokes.

Though the SCAI the Bathhouse exhibition is populated with paintings of similar shapes, each of them proclaims, in a different way, that it is not what you thought it was. One seems to be composed of broad brushstrokes that go left to right, but in fact is painted with multiple downward strokes. It also appears to have a limited brown palette, but on closer inspection there are barely visible speckles of bright red and blue around the edges of the central

motif, where a dry brush seems to have caught the surface of the textured watercolor paper. These out-of-place flecks of vivid color are reminiscent of chromatic aberration in photography.

At numerous levels, Lee prompts us to remember the treachery of images. In order to appreciate this, however, the paintings, all of which are entitled “Dialogue,” demand that you spend time with them; delicate hairline brushstrokes and tiny splatters of paint communicate and promote intense concentration. Monochrome works from earlier in Lee’s career, which often featured repeated single strokes, do not play with visual feints in the same way.

As well as the dialogue between the artist and materials and world at large, there is the dialogue between the different works in the space — “The part where nothing is painted makes the viewer aware of space, turning the entire exhibition space into a work of art, not just the part that was painted,” as the gallery’s description puts it. Then, of course, there is the dialogue between the work and us, the viewers. More on that later.

Another dialogue is worth considering: the one between Lee’s current work, and those of his earlier self as manifested in the ideals of Mono-ha, the mid-1960s-’70s avant-garde movement of which Lee was a co-founder. Two key concepts were: first to critique the idea of the permanent art object as a product of the artist’s self-expression, and second that art should be a matter of revealing the “world as it is,” rather than have meaning being imposed on it.

An occupational hazard of Lee’s still-growing reputation as an internationally celebrated artist, with outcomes such as a permanent Lee Ufan Museum at the Benesse Art Site on Naoshima in Kagawa Prefecture, is the increasing likelihood that the artist’s fame will overshadow the work as a medium of encounter. (The idea of art as an encounter between notional dichotomies such as ‘self’ and ‘other,’ ‘civilization’ and ‘nature,’ has been explored at length by Lee in writing and art practice.)

Not that Lee is under any obligation to keep to ideas he proposed half a century ago, or that he is unilaterally responsible for his global reputation, but alongside a contemplation of “being-in-the-world,” there can also be thoughts about “being-in-the-art-world,” and acknowledgment of how our perception of the artist may affect what the work can communicate.



Lee Ufan's 'Dialogue' (2018) | PHOTO BY JOHN L. TRAN, COURTESY OF SCAI THE BATHHOUSE

In a 2015 interview in art collector's magazine Apollo, Lee mentions his fondness for Heraclitus and the idea that "you cannot step into the same river twice and that everything is ever moving, always changing." However, seeing Lee's work during the COVID-19 crisis, which has temporarily closed nearly all the major art venues in Tokyo, feels like stepping out of the constant flow of exhibition scheduling that aims to attract as many visitors as possible by either showing the familiar, or promoting the next big thing.

For one thing, there is the subdued intensity of the work itself, with its mesmeric effect of holding our attention in the present moment. But also it feels like Lee's paintings are both familiar and being pump-primed to be the next big thing at the same time. Though the circumstances are in no way positive, the odd calm of Tokyo on the edge of pandemic disaster suits the frenzy and discombobulation cached in Lee's work, as does the medium-sized space of SCAI the Bathhouse. Sooner or later there's going to be a big Lee Ufan retrospective in Tokyo and that will be a very different dialogue to what the works can offer in an exhibition of this scale.

WSJ. MAGAZINE | FEATURE

Lee Ufan's Quietly Groundbreaking Five-Decade Career

The artist Lee Ufan has pushed the boundaries of painting and sculpture. Now a flurry of major solo exhibitions honor the man of steel



A SINGULAR VISION Artist Lee Ufan at Dia:Beacon in Beacon, New York, next to his work *Relatum* (formerly *Iron Field*), 1969/2019. PHOTO: ADRIAN GAUT FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

By Robert Sullivan

July 22, 2019 8:33 am ET

On a chilly spring morning, Lee Ufan is climbing up and around a quarry on the eastern end of Long Island looking for boulders. The site is a village-size pit of sand and soil, ringed with piles of white stones of varying sizes. Lee, a sculptor, painter and philosopher, has traveled from Manhattan by car. He arrived ready to work, dressed in black jeans, a dark blue jacket and a corduroy shirt of autumnal gold. He is trim and fit—about 5 foot 8 with shaggy silver hair—and he moves quickly through the landscape. He doesn't speak much, mostly keeping to hand gestures. From time to time, he refers to his drawings, sketches of future sculptures. Later, he motions toward a boulder and says, "This is good."

Lee, 83, is well aware that boulder hunting might seem odd to people unfamiliar with his work. How would he explain himself if someone asked what he was doing? The Korean-born, Japanese-based artist replies in Korean through a translator: "You can only laugh! The question that naturally follows is, 'Well, what kind of rocks are you looking for?' I would say it's a gradual process of finding the right ones, and a lot of things go into this

process.... There are the concepts that I am thinking of and then there is...the space where I intend to use the rocks.”

Down in the mine, in East Quogue, Lee occasionally asks for assistance from others. Today, the group includes Pace Gallery vice president Joseph Baptista and Anne Reeve, an associate curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. This September, the Hirshhorn will open an exhibition featuring Lee’s paintings and an installation of 10 newly commissioned sculptures from his *Relatum* series. The exhibit will be the largest site-specific outdoor sculpture project Lee has ever undertaken in the U.S., as well as his first exhibition in Washington, D.C., and it will also mark a first for the museum—it has never before offered the entirety of its 4.3-acre outdoor plaza to a single artist.

“This one,” Lee says in English, pointing again. Baptista marks the boulder with tape, at which point it falls under the care of Aidan Boland, a front-end loader operator at the mine and, after Lee, the person most intimate with its topography. He wraps the rock in a yellow nylon construction sling and then, using an excavator, lifts it into a dump truck. Having started out somewhere in New England about 20,000 years ago, then dragged through ice across what is today Long Island Sound, this particular stone is bound for the high ground in the old marsh that is now Washington, D.C.

Lee has been an artist since the late 1950s, and he is widely recognized as a founder and chief spokesman for the Japanese avant-garde group known as Mono-ha, often translated as “the School of Things.” As a sculptor, he constructs what can be called environments using a combination of natural materials—boulders or stones or wood that he finds out in the world—and completely man-made pieces, like forged steel. As a painter, he is known for works of almost maximal minimalism: for instance, a series of large canvases, each painted over the course of several weeks, each consisting of one or two intentionally confined brush strokes. He paints with a long broom-like brush, holding his breath for the duration of the brush’s movement. Think of him as the pen-like instrument that draws out an earthquake’s tremors on a seismograph; each of his concise brush strokes reports on the vibrations of the world.

Lee’s concept for a work always precedes the action. “His studio is a very serene and uncluttered space where he’s probably only thinking about one painting at a time,” says Hirshhorn director Melissa Chiu. “The moment at which he decides to paint or selects the rock, that’s the one brief moment of making, but it’s all the thinking that went into it before that trains and prepares him for the act.” If, with his paintings, Lee is recording an encounter with the world, then with his sculptures, he is orchestrating one for the viewer. He is not sculpting in the classical sense—there is no chisel or mold. He is pointedly not sculpting.



Relatum, 1974/2019 (front), and Relatum (formerly System), 1969 (back). PHOTO: COURTESY OF DIA ART FOUNDATION © ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/ADAGP, PARIS

In many ways, Lee has always resisted categorization. Although he is now revered in Japan, he was, as a Korean-born artist, initially an outsider in the country's cultural scene, caught between the colony and its colonizers. He was attacked in 1978 for being, in the words of one critic, "nothing more than an aspect of Western ways of thinking."

"I do not exist in Japan," he said at the time, "and if I go to Korea I cannot confirm a definite reality."

In the West, meanwhile, he was characterized as almost stereotypically Asian, critics confusing his passion for French phenomenology with Zen Buddhism. But 40 years later, any reluctance to accept Lee's work, especially in the U.S., is turning. "It's really in recent years that people have been able to appreciate his vision," Chiu says.

In May, the Dia Art Foundation honored Lee with a gala at its location in Beacon, New York; the organization concurrently opened its own exhibit, which features five of the artist's works, four purchased by Dia over the past two years, and one on loan. Days before the gala, Lee had flown to New York from Shanghai to install his sculptures—or reinstall them. These works, created in the late '60s and early '70s, were realized anew in Dia's old factory site. In a sense, they functioned like plays newly produced by a theater company, the local cast in this case including boulders from his favorite region on Long Island and small water-smoothed stones collected downhill from Dia on the banks of the Hudson River. Lee is the forever-curious director.

One particular piece—it was originally titled *Iron Field*, though now, like all his sculptures, is called *Relatum*, a term from geometry denoting the relationship between things—required 5,500 pounds of sand and 23,600 thin metal strands, each hand-cut the week of the gala. After the sand was spread out on the floor, the metal strands were arranged like reeds or shoots of sedge. All Dia hands were called in, though Lee finished the job himself, tossing the final strands into what looks like a metallic marsh. Jessica Morgan, Dia's director, was taken by the way the viewer feels drawn by the piece itself, as if it were not magnetic but tidal. When asked about it, Lee references a Paul Valéry poem about the nature of the beach: "That sea forever starting and restarting." "I think of it in terms of the beach signifying change," Lee explains.

Lee was born in what is now South Korea in 1936. His father was a journalist, and his family resisted the Japanese who had ruled Korea as a colony beginning in 1910. Growing up, Lee noticed his grandfather's limp, the result of a knife wound inflicted by a policeman during the March First Movement, the 1919 uprising of Koreans against Japanese rule. Lee's father insisted that he attend primary school, against his grandfather's wishes, where he was forced to speak Japanese and to use a Japanese name, as Japanese demands on its colony grew more severe during World War II. Once enrolled, he studied painting, calligraphy and poetry—a traditional Korean education at the time.

Lee grew up in the southern province of Gyeongsangnam-do, and his first sense memories are of the outdoors. "There was a small stream that was very, very pure and unpolluted," he recalls. "I would swim in it with my friends. I would sometimes just lie on a bed of rocks to look up at the sky. I feel like the experience of rocks was always within me. Even before I learned how to read or write or gained knowledge through books." He'd rather not talk about the Korean War, but briefly recounts an incident that took place on a bridge when he was a teenager—a plane firing, people running and the fear that people behind him did not make it to safety. "That sometimes comes in my dreams to this day," he says, and when he speaks, his hands cover his face. "It's just an experience I try not to dwell on."



ROCK STAR "I feel like the experience of rocks was always within me," Lee says, recalling a childhood spent playing with river rocks. PHOTO: ADRIAN GAUT FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

He enrolled at Seoul National University in South Korea in 1956. But two months later he visited an uncle in Japan and stayed on, studying philosophy at Nihon University in the hopes of becoming a writer, while selling paintings to make money. He was as interested in politics as art, supporting Korean reunification and writing about the military coup in South Korea in 1961 for newspapers and magazines. By 1968, he had been swept up in the avant-garde movement that was in part a reaction to U.S. militarism in Vietnam and to rampant postwar industrialism and consumerism. There were student protests against the renewal in 1970 of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States, as well as continuing unrest over not just the U.S.'s use of nuclear weapons in Japan, but the existence of nuclear weapons at all.

As a founder of Mono-ha, Lee worked with artists focused on “not making.” The artists used found objects to comment on the paralyzing effects of technology. A 1968 piece by the late Nobuo Sekine was a watershed moment in the movement. Sekine’s *Phase—Mother Earth*, at Suma Rikyo Park in Kobe, Japan, was a 9-foot-deep, 7-foot-wide hole dug in the ground, the extracted soil stored alongside, its dimensions matching the hole. It was an object that drew attention to its source as well as to its own demise: Replace the plug and the piece was gone. The world was rearranged to affect your experience of the world. For Lee, Sekine’s directness seemed to speak beyond politics.



Relatum, 1974/2011. PHOTO: COURTESY OF DIA ART FOUNDATION © ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/ADAGP, PARIS

Journalists deemed these artists troublemakers, targeting the anti-colonial Lee in particular. “They would say, ‘These artists don’t know how to paint or sculpt, these artists are just throwing things around,’ ” Lee recalls. He bristled at the name, but as time has passed, he has become more comfortable with Mono-ha, given the expansiveness of the Japanese word for *thing*, which refers not merely to a single object but to substance in general, as distinct from mind and spirit. Rather than the School of Things, it is the school of all things. It is a school that ponders the very substance of things, the materials of the world, pulsing, as they are to Lee, with information and life history.

This is the key to understanding Lee, for whom there is no such thing as an inanimate object. Imagine seeing a field or a city or a room the way a TV meteorologist sees the nation, with high and low pressure systems, with visible winds and colorful storms. “You know Westerners think it is an object, a single object,” Lee says of the word *mono*. “But in Korean and Japanese and maybe in Chinese, the word is not object, but all objects. It’s matter.” For Lee, being in the world means always being in communication, whether you’re speaking or being silent—a communication between people and people, between people and the world.

In those early years, Lee’s work was political, or so he sees it today. “One time I exhibited a canvas on the floor, and it had nothing drawn on it,” he says. “I refused to draw on it—in a sense, using violence.” In other words, he resisted what was expected of him, not a slight move in the art world then or now. If Lee was irritating to the Japanese for his anti-colonialist views, he was gradually welcomed more and more in Europe, invited to the Paris Biennale of 1971. He eventually made a home in Paris, in addition to Japan, where his European success moved the Japanese to appreciate him more.

He showed steadily in Europe and Asia through the ’80s and ’90s, honing his quiet sculptural practice while headlines in the art world focused on work by the likes of Julian Schnabel and Jeff Koons—art that, in one way or another, drew attention to itself. Lee’s first show with Pace Gallery was held in New York in 2008. In 2010, a museum of his work designed by renowned architect Tadao Ando opened on the Japanese island of Naoshima. He was the subject of a major retrospective at New York’s Guggenheim Museum in 2011, and in 2014 the Château de Versailles welcomed the artist to exhibit in its gardens; most recently, he opened a show at Centre Pompidou-Metz, in Metz, France, which is on view through September.

Back on Long Island, boulder hunting stretched well into the afternoon, though eventually Lee took a break for lunch at Topping Rose House in Bridgehampton. Until he did, it wasn’t clear that he would let up on his work. Does he ever relax? “I would say rest for me is when everything goes well,” Lee says. “I may put down my brush, go for a cup of coffee, maybe half a day to a spa...but it is impossible for me to imagine going on a vacation.” When not in Paris or on the road, he lives six months of the year in Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture, just south of Tokyo, with his wife. (They have three daughters.)

After lunch, when the party pulls into Marders, the old Bridgehampton nursery, which stores Lee’s boulders, the artist bounds out of the car, as if animated by his rocks—a little over a dozen—arranged in rows, some from past East Coast exhibits, the new ones preparing for their trip to the Hirshhorn. In an essay from the late 1980s titled “What Can Be Seen in a Moment,” Lee wrote: “The fact of being able to feel or see the world is in itself

mysterious, but there are moments when things and their surroundings suddenly open up....” The meeting with his rocks felt like one such moment for Lee: The stones activate his senses, remind him that we live in a world that is in communication with us, and vice versa.

The next day, at Pace’s 57th Street gallery in Manhattan, he talks about the ways that encountering a boulder are akin to encountering the unknown: “They have this energy that’s very chaotic. It really reminds me of something transcendent, something of the universe. I feel like these rocks really contain multitudes of information and history. And so yes, some of them I come back to like an old friend.”

LISSON GALLERY

Judith Benhamou Huet

07 April 2019

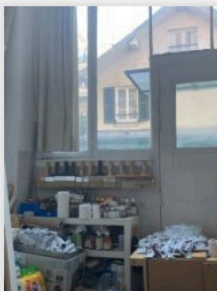
Judith
Benhamou
-Huet reports



Lee Ufan



Lee Ufan



In Lee Ufan studio

Lee Ufan: the disturbance gives rise to the artwork. At the Centre Pompidou-Metz

A certain tension

A slight imbalance. Some kind of disturbance... Great artists don't create unforgettable works by envisaging perfection so much as by establishing anomalies.

Along with the exceptional jazz pianist Thelonious Monk, who wore large rings on all his fingers to create discordant sounds, just look at the still lifes of Cézanne: table askew, apples off-kilter, complete lack of symmetry... This deliberate pursuit of imperfection in a sophisticated image is what will stir feelings in the viewer. The Korean artist Lee Ufan (born in 1936) has lived in Japan since he was 20 years old, and these days he also spends a lot of his time in Paris.

He is part of a long lineage of artists who, each in their own way, create some kind of disturbance. All of his work, which is abstract, consists of creating a certain tension that addresses subjects like mankind, time, beauty, repetition, the search for harmony, images containing other images...

Korea and Japan

I asked myself and I asked him whether his obsession with tension expressed through art has its roots in his personal history: the fact that as a Korean he's totally embraced the culture of a country – Lee Ufan speaks Japanese perfectly – viewed by a number of his compatriots as a former invader.

As he explains: "It's not that simple. You have to look at the global Asian situation," but he also adds later on: "I don't deny it, but it isn't something deliberate."





Lee Ufan



Lee Ufan



Lee Ufan



Lee Ufan

At Centre Pompidou Metz

Lee Ufan's universe is born out of a set of principles that he applies in painting and sculpture using a vocabulary that we encounter in the beautiful exhibition dedicated to him at the Centre Pompidou in Metz. It's been fairly well organized by the curator, Jean-Marie Gallais, so that each room has its own concept.

Shigeru Ban

In his studio, Lee Ufan reveals his objective for this exhibition which, if it isn't a retrospective, sums up his universe well. He claims to practice an art that is stoical and pure. He also explains how he interacted with the very distinctive architecture of the Centre Pompidou-Metz, designed by the Japanese architect Shigeru Ban



Contrasts of material

Lee Ufan takes, for example, materials which he arranges in such a way as to reveal contrasts. He places a steel sheet in opposition with an enormous rock. The first material is the pure product of contemporary human technology. The second, collected from the mountain and serving as a symbol of nature, has been moulded by the weather since time immemorial. The rock is placed on the steel sheet, and that's it. Sometimes he positions a rock on a gravel floor and illuminates it.

Fake shadow

The mischievous Lee Ufan even designs a fake shadow for the large stone on the floor. He's also created a gigantic ball of cotton that seems to be in dialogue with a large stone. He explains how "the cotton is soft, supple, gentle, floating: it doesn't follow the trend of current civilization."

Calligraphy

When he was a child in Korea, Lee took lessons in calligraphy. This training has left him with a good sense for the right gesture. Some of his works were made using the broad touch of a large paintbrush on the canvas. He reworks the gesture several times over the same area and the accumulations of paint create gradients, as well as accumulations of material, which resemble landscapes.

Fragments of myself

The artist explains: "these are all fragments of myself. I think visitors will feel first disturbance, followed by a certain peace". A wave of sound is also played in some of the rooms. It was created by the composer Ryuichi Sakamoto to invite "a new form of attention".

An entire universe.

Until 30 September.

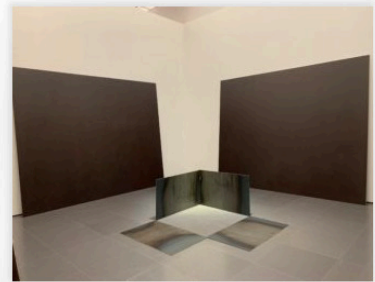
www.centrepompidou-metz.fr



Lee Ufan



Lee Ufan



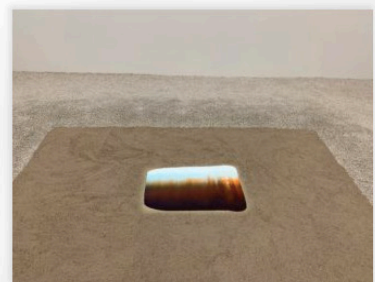
Lee Ufan



Lee Ufan



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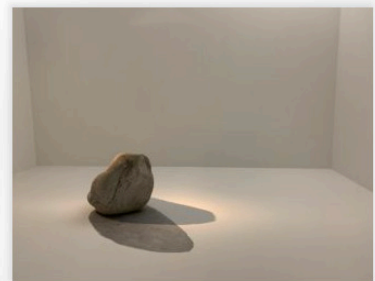
Lee Ufan



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Lee Ufan

ArtReview Asia
Spring 2019

ArtReview Asia

Minimalism: Space. Light. Object.

National Gallery Singapore 16 November – 14 April
ArtScience Museum Singapore 16 November – 14 April

By the time I left this enormous, double-venue exhibition featuring over 150 works, I no longer had the faintest clue as to what 'Minimalism' means. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Art can be at its most powerful when it unsettles rather than affirms. Particularly in the context of the current fetish for retelling art's histories and reexamining old tales from different points of view, a trend of which this – billed as the first survey of minimalist art to be staged in Southeast Asia, and the first exhibition on the subject to incorporate art from the region under the Minimalism brand – is self-consciously a part.

The exhibition at the National Gallery (where around 120 works are housed) begins traditionally enough, with some of the precursors to the heyday of New York Minimalism during the 1960s, albeit paintings (variations on the theme of black, largely from the late 1950s) by Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko and Frank Stella are grouped together in the opening corridor of the show in such a cramped way that the ultimate sensation is that the curators simply wanted to dispense with art-historical givens as quickly as possible. Further in we come across works by the stars of the gang – Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris – but by then the territory has been expanded, both geographically and temporally. We start to encounter works by Tang Da Wu, Lee Seung-taek, Lee Ufan (and a section on Mono-ha), Roberto Chabet, Rasheed Araeen, Ai Weiwei, Anish Kapoor, Richard Long, Mona Hatoum and Olafur Eliasson. Some, such as three works from Haegue Yang's *Sol LeWitt Upside Down* series (2017), made up of white mass-produced Venetian blinds and riffing off LeWitt's concerns with linearity, seriality and modularity, make self-conscious reference to precedents from the Western canon. (Although the fact that the South Korean's works are supported by walls or ceilings, rather than freestanding as are LeWitt's structures, and hung upside down might be seen as an oblique insistence on some form of contextual difference.) Others, such

as self-taught Myanmar artist Po Po's *Red Cube* (1986), come from somewhere else altogether.

The work comprises a red oil painting that might, given its tonal variations, suggest two faces of a cube, the one face with a hole in it, hung at an angle above a pile of gneiss rocks. It's informed by an interest in subverting the traditional viewing of paintings as portrait or landscape as well as Zen and Theravada Buddhism (Buddhist monks are known to retire to the jungle and build stone pagodas to focus the attention). In the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, the artist asserts that he had never even heard of Minimalism when he created the work (until late 1988 the country was relatively isolated). At moments like this (and there are several), you wonder whether the New York version of Minimalism needed to be addressed at all. But other works in the exhibition build on and complicate such ambiguities.

A selection from Simryn Gill's photographic series *My Own Private Angkor* (2007–09) documents a compound of abandoned houses, built during the 1980s, in Port Dickson on Malaysia's west coast. Each image features rectangular panes of glass, bright when the sun shines on or through them, dark when it does not, that have been removed from their window settings so that they could be stripped of their valuable aluminium frames. Apparently without value, they are carefully rested against walls or balconies. To a degree, the panes of glass and their bare architectural setting offer a formal echo of the opening hang of Newmans and Reinhardts, but the situation Gill documents is found, rather than constructed (albeit the photographs are), and speaks to the passage of time, economics, recycling and ruination in an equatorial context: the kind of factors that Minimalism of the hardcore 1960s variety would see as external to the artwork. While the exhibition might be arguing for Minimalism as a global movement, Gill's work insists that regional specificity has a role to play. If New York Minimalism was about pulling down the blinds on anything external to the work of art, this kind of Minimalism is open to the world.

Within the context of both parts of the exhibition, but in the display in the ArtScience museum in particular, that notion is further pursued by the staging of Minimalism as something grounded in Asian spirituality and religion. The Rig Veda is quoted in wall texts, the teachings of the Buddha more openly evoked. Again, the fact that such philosophies have a much deeper history than Minimalism itself somewhat begs the question of why Minimalism (rather than, say, Asian mysticism, which also had an influence on many minimalists in the US and Europe) provides the framework for the show. More successful is a direct attempt to document the historic contribution of women artists (among them Simone Forti, Mary Miss, Carmen Herrera) into the expanded narrative of what is largely a male preserve. As is an expansive mini-exhibition of sound-works: an important reminder that Minimalism, as displayed here, was operative across disciplines (dance and performance are included in the National Gallery) as well as across time and space.

There's a sense, given the expanded chronology, geography and substance of the works in both institutions, that this show fits into a wider theme of destabilising the past (in terms of its accepted narratives and geography) in order better to understand our unstable present. On the other hand, its sheer inclusivity can at times mean that Minimalism seems to mean nothing because it seems to mean everything. To the extent that you wonder if all this 'blockbuster exhibition' really demonstrates is Minimalism's brand value. No more so than in an iteration of Martin Creed's *Work no. 1343* (2012) installed in the National Gallery café. The work incorporates a mishmash of furniture, utensils and receptacles ('visitors are invited to contribute their own wares to the artwork as long as they are in good condition') within the framework of the existing refectory. On the menu: a Pu'er Mousse Cake inspired by Ai Weiwei's *Ton of Tea* (2008) and the Infinity Drink – 'an invigorating blend of ginger flower, lemon, mint and soda'. *Mark Rappolt*

facing page, top Po Po, *Red Cube*, 1986,
oil on canvas, paper collage and gneiss, 218 × 154 × 50 cm.
© Hla Oo and Po Po. Courtesy the artist and Yavuz Gallery, Singapore

facing page, bottom Olafur Eliasson, *Room for one colour*, 1997
(installation view, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2015), monochromatic light,
dimensions variable. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. © the artist. Courtesy the artist;
Neugerriemschneider, Berlin; and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York & Los Angeles

Le Figaro

1 March 2019

Lee Ufan: «Mes œuvres aident à regarder le temps autrement»

Par Valérie Duponchelle | Mis à jour le 01/03/2019 à 16:59 / Publié le 01/03/2019 à 15:53



INTERVIEW - En douze chapitres, l'artiste coréen recompose sa vie au Centre Pompidou-Metz. Il donne les clefs de sa philosophie qui prend forme sous vos yeux.

Voici au Centre Pompidou-Metz, sous le chapiteau de son ami l'architecte Shigeru Ban, dans la mélodie sombre qu'a composée pour lui le musicien Ryuichi Sakamoto (*Furyo*, *Le Dernier Empereur*, *The Revenant*), l'univers étrangement paisible de Lee Ufan. Cet artiste né à Busan (Corée) en 1936, a émigré au Japon dès 1956, y a étudié la philosophie et rêvé d'écriture. Il est devenu l'un des porte-parole du mouvement du Mono-ha («l'école des choses») et une figure de la scène japonaise (à ce titre dans **l'exposition «Fukami», l'été dernier à Paris**). En douze salles, il pose ici une pierre, une tige de métal, là un nuage de coton, une large touche de pigments ou un rose aveuglant sur la toile, dresse une salle de papier que traverse la lumière... On y perd aussitôt hâte, réflexes, habitudes.

LE FIGARO. - Pourquoi cette irruption du blanc après la plongée dans le noir au CCC-OD de Tours à l'été 2017?

Lee UFAN. - C'est en moi. Le président du Centre Pompidou et le commissaire ont étudié mes œuvres et m'ont proposé ce thème. Je suis alors retourné en arrière. Le blanc est arrivé. Depuis toujours, le blanc représente ce que je n'ai pas touché. Ce contact entre ce qui est fait et pas fait est une rencontre entre mon monde intérieur et le monde extérieur. Je ne sais pas si dans le blanc, il y a de l'innocence. Ce n'est pas l'inaccompli du monde arabe où le blanc représente le divin, le sacré. Pour moi, le blanc précède l'idée de couleur, renvoie à ce qui n'est pas fabriqué. C'est donc la rencontre du monde avant la couleur et du monde fait par l'homme.

«Dans le monde, tout va trop vite. En regardant une pierre qui ne bouge pas à nos yeux, nous changeons en silence de notion du temps»

Est-ce aussi quelque chose resté intact en vous après une vie d'artiste?

J'ai dû réfléchir à comment composer ce retour en arrière. Ce que j'ai ressenti en regardant ces fragments de ma carrière, c'est que j'ai créé des expressions vivantes. À chaque fois, j'ai pris des contradictions et je n'ai pas cherché à les résoudre. Je les ai juste présentées telles quelles. Pour moi, une œuvre doit avoir une énergie. Je suis allé dans ce sens-là pour que mes œuvres aient et dégagent une énergie. Dans toutes mes œuvres, la tension existe. C'est un moyen de faire

ressentir cette énergie au spectateur. Le coton est léger comme un nuage, fragile, difficile à manier, ambigu, très peu utilisé car vulnérable. Alors que notre monde actuel cherche toujours du solide, du dur, du précis. Mettre le coton en correspondance avec le métal ou la pierre, c'est créer cette tension, cette résistance. Cela permet au public d'avoir une imagination inhabituelle, d'être stimulé et d'entrer en respiration avec les œuvres.

Cherchez-vous à sortir le public de la notion habituelle du temps?

De sortir du temps, non. Plutôt de le regarder différemment. J'utilise la pierre, concentration du temps très lointain. Dans le monde, tout va trop vite. En regardant une pierre qui ne bouge pas à nos yeux, nous changeons en silence de notion du temps. Travailler sur le temps est une caractéristique de mes œuvres. Dans *From Point*, 1976, il y a une succession de points bleus que j'ai peints une première fois, qui ont disparu, que j'ai fait réapparaître. C'est une expression visuelle, mais aussi l'expression infime de milliers et milliers d'années.

D'où vient ce rapport au temps? Êtes-vous né comme cela? Est-ce d'avoir vécu la guerre, d'avoir quitté la Corée pour le Japon, d'avoir étudié la philosophie, d'être asiatique?

Tout ça! (Il sourit). J'ai grandi à la campagne, j'ai étudié la philosophie à la ville, du coup je n'ai pas de port d'attache. J'ai fini par avoir une notion du temps qui me dépasse, de quelque chose de trop grand que je ne peux calculer. J'ai voulu créer des contradictions dans mes œuvres. Elles confrontent des vitesses très différentes, voire opposées. Elles sont éphémères, comme les sculptures, les peintures, comme tout ce que fait l'homme. L'art permet à l'homme de réfléchir ainsi à l'infini, à l'immortalité. On veut regarder le temps d'une manière précise, mais il est beaucoup plus complexe, chaotique.

Votre art veut-il mettre à distance la violence du monde?

Tout au début de mon travail, je faisais des œuvres violentes mais poétiques. Je cherchais déjà une ambivalence. J'accrochais une toile pas du tout peinte, j'utilisais des élastiques pour tordre la notion de l'espace, je mettais des roses fluos au mur pour que l'on ne voie pas l'objet nettement, je cassais les plaques de verre avec des pierres. Si l'on regarde la violence autrement, on peut la relier de façon inattendue à l'ordre. **Richard Serra** dit que dans mes œuvres «cohabitent la violence et l'amour». Je suis tout à fait d'accord.

«Lee Ufan, habiter le temps», au Centre Pompidou-Metz (57), jusqu'au 30 septembre, commissariat Jean-Marie Gallais.

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

Hyperallergic
4 October 2018

HYPERALLERGIC

The Quiet Chaos in Lee Ufan's New Paintings

A master of meditative minimalism, the Korean artist's new paintings are more frenetically energized than ever before.



Zachary Small October 4, 2018



Lee Ufan, "Dialogue" (2017), acrylic on canvas, 89-1/2" x 71-1/2" (Image courtesy Pace Gallery, © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris)

Painter [Lee Ufan](#) coats an aesthetic of applied philosophy onto his highly conceptual, abstract paintings. That's probably obvious to anyone who's seen the master of meditative minimalism's work, which easily encompasses the metaphysics of everyone from Socrates to Plato, Buddha to Confucius, Descartes to Hegel. The artist's new work, most of which is [debuting for the first time at Pace Gallery](#), is something of a departure for Lee. Here, the artist paradoxically imbues his patent stoicism with an underlying, frenetic energy. It suggests chaos, bubbling to the surface of an otherwise calm canvas.



Installation view of Lee Ufan's exhibition (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

As a Korean student of philosophy and aesthetics at Tokyo's Nihon University in the late-fifties and early-sixties, Lee began his artistic career from an anti-authoritarian, anti-colonialist angle. He applied Asian metaphysics to the dialects of European minimalist and Art Povera practices. (He even indexed some elements of the Land art movement into his "Relatum" [1968–present] stone sculptures.) Almost a decade older than his peers, Lee became a pioneer of [Mono-Ha](#) (School of Things), a Japanese movement that grew out of these political-philosophical epistemes and the tumultuous postwar period.

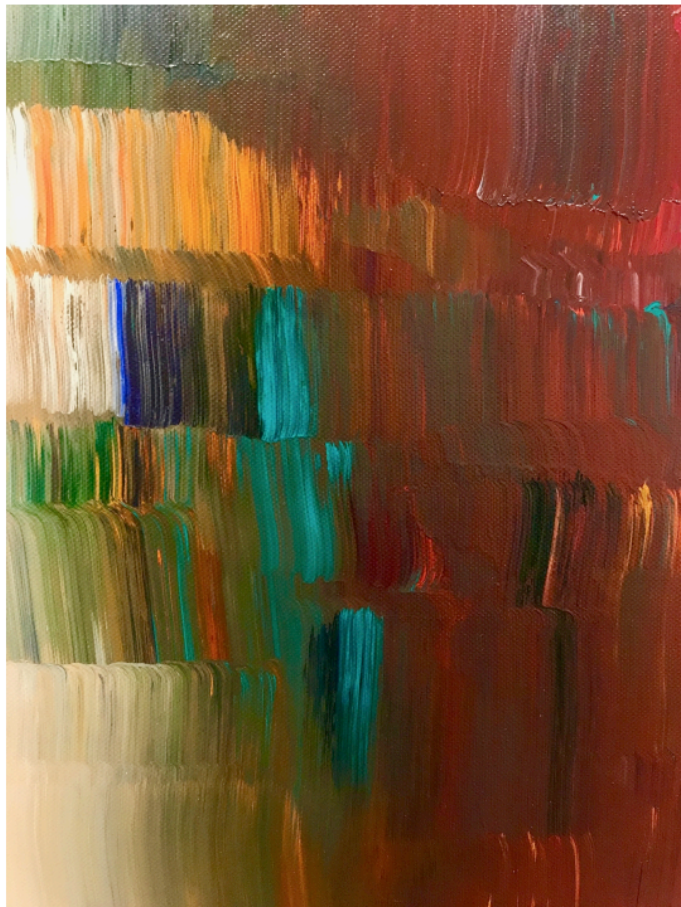


Installation view of Lee Ufan exhibition (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Choosing to focus on the relationships between materials and perceptions — particularly that of industrial and nature objects — Mono-Ha gained attention in the 1970s as a fresh approach to abstraction. Lee's work, in particular, gravitated toward the connection between the artwork and the artist's interior world. This is best exemplified in his ongoing series, "Dialogue," which he has been creating for nearly a decade. Each brushstroke in this series is said to relate to the artist's breath, and although small, each work is said to have taken the artist up to a month to complete. Look closely and you will see why: Lee's paintings are composed of a range of pigments loaded onto a wide brush that allows for large strokes with a range of hues. The artist's patience is a virtue, layering innumerable different shades of the same color until his finished product has the appearance of seamlessly transitioning from dark to light. The surrounding blank canvas helps blur these colors into relief, touching on notions of color theory and phenomenology that naturally manipulate the eye's ability to perceive distinct brushstrokes.



Lee Ufan, "Dialogue" (2016), acrylic on canvas, 86" x 9' 6-3/4" (image courtesy Pace Gallery, photo by Mark Waldhauser, © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris)



Detail of Lee Ufan, "Dialogue" (2016), (photo by the author for *Hyperallergic*)

Previously, Lee has described his practice as the vibration of mental energy onto the canvas. “A work of art is a site where places of making and not making, painting and not painting, are linked so that they reverberate with each other,” quotes the Pace Gallery’s press release. This feels especially true in the artist’s new work, which seems to record the hairline fractures of an unstable political world in a polychromatic flurry of exchanges. For an artist like Lee, the presence of so many colors feels revolutionary, opening his genre of minimalist art to a new treatise on planned chaos.



Lee Ufan, "Dialogue" (2018), acrylic on canvas, 89-3/8" x 71-5/8" (image courtesy Pace Gallery, photo by Mark Waldhauser, © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris)



Detail view of Lee Ufan, "Dialogue" (2018), (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

That's not to say that Lee succumbs to the offhand improvisation of some abstract expressionists or Japan's antecedent [Gutai](#) movement. Even the paint drops across a few of his canvases look meticulously planned with little residual splatter surrounding their impacts. Still, the seething tension implicit in Lee's work is remarkable — a truly arresting visual sight that begs one to ask how the artist will continue to slowly evolve the "Dialogue" series.

[Lee Ufan](#) continues through October 13 at [Pace Gallery](#) (510 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan).

LISSON GALLERY

Mousse

9 September 2016

<http://moussemagazine.it/lee-ufan-chateau-la-coste-2016/>



Lee Ufan at Château La Coste, Le Puy Ste Réparate

September 9~2016



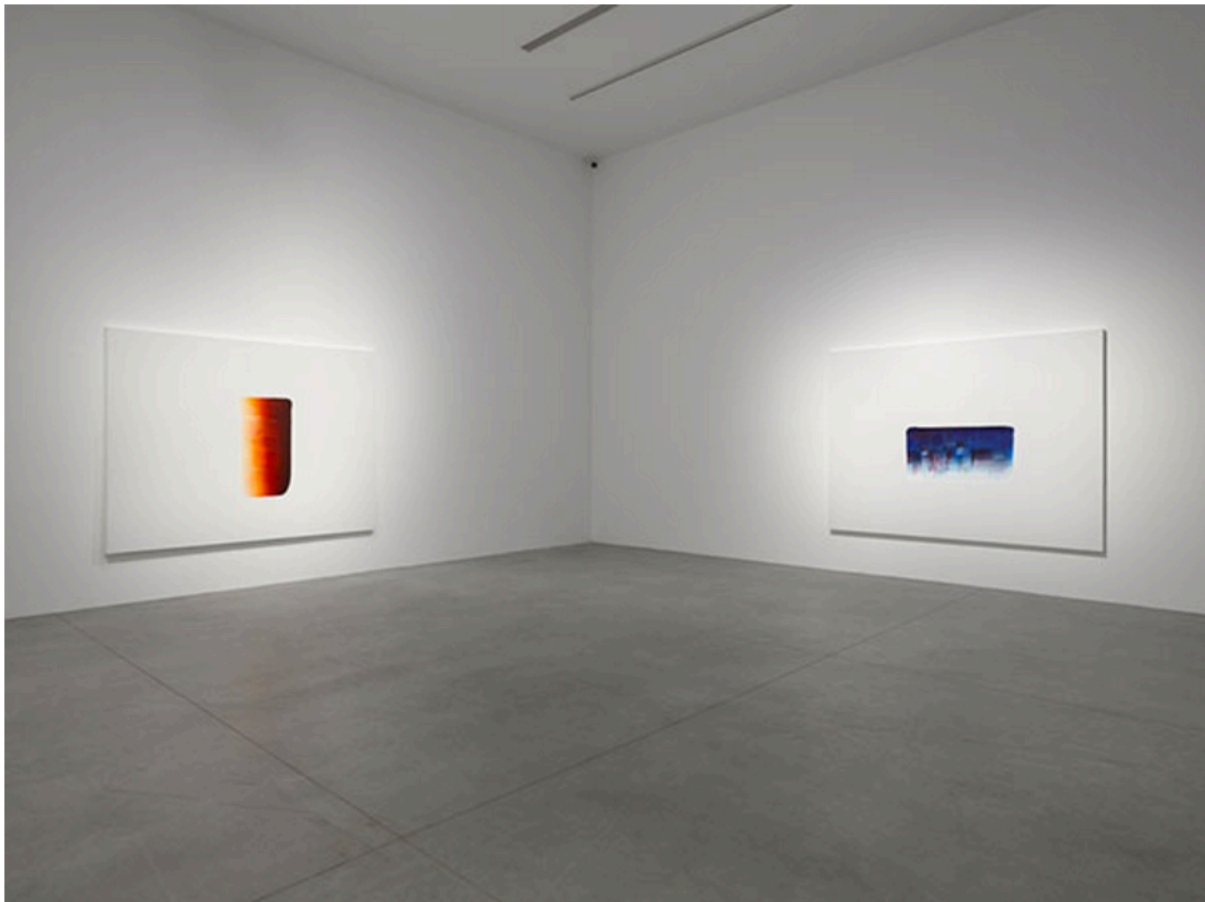
"I do not want to make immortal works that boast of the power of man. That is because I am interested in the fate of painting. The surface of my paintings will probably fade before ten thousand years pass, and the canvas will unravel... Nature always and everywhere tries to bring the works of man back to earth. There is great beauty in the fierce conflict between the forces that try to bring things into existence and the forces that try to nullify them... I want to make paintings with a tenuous balance where both sides of this game are visible."
—Lee Ufan, *The Art of Encounter*, 2004

Château La Coste, in collaboration with Lisson Gallery and kamel mennour, is delighted to present an exhibition of new and recent work by Lee Ufan. Housed within a custom-built gallery space designed by French architect Jean Michel Wilmotte, this is the second exhibition in Château La Coste's art programme, which launched in 2015 with a solo show by Sean Scully. Based in Le Puy-Sainte-Réparate, a few kilometres away from Aix-en-Provence in France, Château La Coste is home to a number of site-specific commissions by artists including Louise Bourgeois, Andy Goldsworthy, Tatsuo Miyajima, Richard Serra and Lee Ufan, placed alongside 125 hectares of vineyards and Villa La Coste, a new luxury hotel that will open to the public in summer 2016.

Lee Ufan's solo exhibition at Château La Coste, the artist's first in France following his presentation at the Palace of Versailles in 2014, is in many ways an extension of *House of Air*, a permanent commission unveiled at the château in 2014. Located within an intimate, chapel-like space, where the walls served as a canvas to which Lee applied his distinctive brush strokes, the work is marked by a large stone near the entrance to the building. The finely crushed stone that Lee mixes with his paints physically connects his two-dimensional works with his three-dimensional sculptures. In contrast to the artist's carefully wrought paintings, the sculptures consist of objects to which, pointedly, no artistic action has been applied, offering instead a space for the contemplation of non-productivity and a rare moment of silent, solo interaction with a work of art. Ultimately, whether at a monumental or domestic scale, it is Lee's hope that his work might "lead people's eyes to emptiness and turn their eyes to silence."

The house itself, designed specifically by Lee, offers visitors both a physical refuge and a place of reflection; a site of meditation and a pause for thought, where the views of the surrounding hills are framed by rows of vines. The immersion of Lee Ufan's work within the landscape is a powerful illustration of his inner beliefs in the role of art and its ultimate evolution and dissolution into air – a theme further explored in Lee's solo exhibition at Château La Coste through new paintings and sculptures.

at Château La Coste, Le Puy Ste Réparate
until 24 September 2016





Lee Ufan installation views at Château La Coste, Le Puy Ste Réparate, 2016
Courtesy: Lisson Gallery and Château La Coste. Photo: Jack Hems

Solitary Soul

Lee Ufan's contemplative work includes minimalist paintings and sculptural interventions. The itinerant artist talks to *Apollo* about philosophy, stones, and why he prefers being on his own

By Martin Gayford

For over 40 years I have been a kind of *déraciné*, says Lee Ufan (b. 1936), 'and I'm really still continuing on a pilgrimage around the world.' We are sitting in the artist's Paris studio on a brilliant early autumn day. A few minutes away is rue Victor Massé, where Degas lived in his later years, and a short walk uphill towards Montmartre is rue Lepic, where Vincent van Gogh shared an apartment with his brother Theo. This is the heart of painters' Paris, and Lee is now, I suppose, a member of the École de Paris, the eclectic group of artists from far and wide who once made the city their home. Certainly, he is an eminent member of what you might call the École du Monde: that is, the global art world. He has exhibited in New York, London – where recent solo shows include Lisson Gallery and Pace Gallery – and at the Venice Biennale, and the Palace of Versailles has been surrounded by his works. On the Japanese island of Naoshima, there is a museum dedicated to his art.

Lee's journey here began 79 years ago in Haman County, South Korea, where he was born in 1936. When he appears at the door of his work room to greet me and my interpreter, Kyoko, however, that date is hard to believe. His face is unlined and he looks, moves, and sounds like a much younger man. Although he has an assistant, who lets us in at the main door, you get the impression that his work is a solitary affair. As soon as we arrive, a pot of green tea is made for us, and it is Lee himself who makes it. For such a famous artist, his work place is surprisingly modest: a smallish room in an old building, with big canvases stacked around the walls. Only one of these is turned outwards, so the paint surface is visible – a work in progress. It seems to consist of a single, large brushstroke; a rounded, tapering oblong of pigment in the centre. This coloured area, however, is not solid, but delicately shaded from dense pink to pale. And it is the result not of one brushstroke, but many. 'Do you see this picture?', he asks (via Kyoko, since his English is limited and my Japanese and Korean nonexistent). 'It seems very simple, but I start work on it at nine o'clock in the morn-

ing and carry on until three or four in the afternoon. And not only for one day; I repeat the same process for three, four, five times. If even then it doesn't please me I start it again. After all these years, it is very difficult for me to say when a particular work of art is finished. Even Leonardo da Vinci struggled to finish the *Mona Lisa*; it is very difficult for artists to put down their brushes.'

When he paints, the canvas is laid on the floor while he lies on a wooden board, set up like a bridge, above it. Since childhood, he has preferred to work like this, with the picture horizontal on the ground. 'One reason is because in that way I can really feel I am inside the canvas. I throw myself into it, so as to concentrate.' Absolute concentration is essential to what Lee does (Fig. 1). One of his most celebrated series of works, *From Line*, dating from the 1970s and early '80s, consists of single strokes, amazingly long and even, descending from the top to the bottom of a white or yellow canvas (Fig. 4). This looks, in painting terms, like a high-wire act: one slip and everything would be spoilt. Though subtly different, each mark has to be essentially the same – perpendicular, utterly confident. It is, you might say, painting as performance. He prefers to use a sporting analogy: 'Artists train themselves in the same way as athletes do. Let's take tennis as an example. When you play you are facing your opponent, so you have always to think about how the adversary is going to respond to you. My painting is a game, with the canvas as my opponent. There is a tension between myself and the canvas, and the brushstroke is the product of that tension. So I am not entirely in control.'

In one way, as Lee describes it, what he does sounds very much like performance art. 'The body is crucial, our body does not belong just to us. It creates a relationship with the world. And this relationship is the most interesting thing of all.' His way of working, with the canvas on the floor so the artist is immersed within it, sounds rather like Jackson Pollock's method. The results have more of the elegant austerity of Barnett Newman: one of the works dating to 1980 in his *From Line* series, comprises a single

vertical stroke. In a way, this looks like Lee's version of Newman's celebrated 'zip', but unlike the American master's paintings, his is not a piece of clean geometry. Lee's stroke is visibly the result of an action. You can see how the paint is denser and darker at the top, becoming fainter as the line continues and the pigment runs out. It is a trace in time.

Lee, however, does not accept this – or any – connection to other painters, eastern or western. 'It may be true that some of my paintings look similar to the paintings of certain artists, although they are not really related. I admit that in the beginning of my career, I was a bit stimulated by Pollock or Newman. On the other hand, there are people who tend to associate my paintings with traditional Asian painting because I was born in Asia. However, my paintings are just Lee Ufan's paintings.' He adds: 'I have always asked myself about how a painting comes into existence.' It is indeed an interesting and elusive question. His remark reminds me of a recent comment made by a very different artist, David Hockney: 'How would you know what a picture means? How would I know what my pictures mean?'

Lee and Hockney are near contemporaries. He was part of an international generation of artists who reconfigured the boundaries of art in the 1960s and '70s. This incorporated not only art as action, but also, in the west, such movements as conceptual art, land art, *arte povera*, and minimalism. Lee was a leading member of a parallel group in Japan, which was given the name Mono-ha, or 'School of Things'. Works from this school certainly have a family resemblance to their occidental avant-garde counterparts. The work that first attracted Lee to Mono-ha was *Phase – Mother Earth* (1968) by Sekine Nobuo. This outdoor sculpture consists of a deep hole in the ground of a park in Kobe, beside which is a perfect cylinder formed from the soil extracted from that hole – so, you might say, an exercise in minimalist land art. After he saw this, Lee wrote an essay about it, entitled *Beyond Being and Nothingness – A Thesis on Sekine Nobuo*. Subsequently, he became not only one of the leading artists of Mono-ha, but also its theoretician. It is not coincidental that Lee's piece on Sekine Nobuo makes reference to Jean-Paul Sartre's essay *L'Être et le néant*. He had started out as much a writer and philosopher as an artist.

As a boy, Lee learned to paint, but with no intention of becoming a professional artist. 'At that time in Korea, and also in Japan, there was a tradition, especially in old fashioned families, in which boys were given personal education at home. This included painting, calligraphy and the reading of Chinese classics. But this was part of the general culture of a civilised man. By doing calligraphy, you learnt how to write, by drawing and reading literature we gained our culture.' Lee's route into the art world was an indirect one. 'When I was a high-school student I was interested in literature; I really wanted to be a poet or a novelist. But my marks at school were not good enough for me to get into university to study literature.'

A school master encouraged him to apply to do art instead, since he was very good at painting. He began a course at the College of Fine Arts at Seoul National University, but after a couple of months his father asked him to travel to Japan to take some medicine to his uncle, who was unwell. Once there, this uncle suggested that he stay and study literature and philosophy at a Japanese university, which he did, thus beginning his life as a wanderer. Though he insists philosophy has no direct relationship to his art, he retains an enthusiasm for a number of philosophers, both eastern and western, among them the Taoist sage, Lao Tzu, and the pre-Socratic Greek thinker, Heraclitus.

'I love Heraclitus!' he exclaims, when I mention the latter, 'Especially his sayings that you cannot step into the same river twice and that everything is ever moving, always changing. I totally agree – the idea of everything being in flux really attracts me.' He does not accept the suggestion that his study of philosophy has affected his painting and sculpture. 'In my everyday life, I use logical ways of thinking that I learnt. So in some sense it has been useful; but having said that, I don't want to turn philosophy into art. Philosophy is based on reflection, thinking. Art is an action, based on our emotion or perception.'

On the other hand, there is a distinctly metaphysical, even cosmological aspect to his work. This emerges when we turn to the subject of stones, which feature very frequently in his sculptural installations. Lee is meticulous in the choice of these. He outlined his requirements to curator Alfred Pacquement, when discussing his extraordinary series of works which were shown in the grounds of Versailles in 2014. He wanted his stones, Lee explains, 'to be massive, hard, characterless, with a squat shape'. 'I need stones that have been polished by earth and water, wind and rain over a long period; they should not evoke any particular image, they must have a force of abstraction.' At Versailles his installations included a monumental but simple steel arch framing the facade of the palace, anchored on each side by a natural boulder, with a metal mirror beneath (Fig. 2). This managed to be at once minimal, grand, eastern and western – in conversation with, but quite different to the baroque classicism of Versailles' architecture and the formal fountains, parterres, topiary, and hedges designed by Le Nôtre. Its title was *Relatum – The Arch of Versailles*. Other works were placed around the site, each with titles beginning with *Relatum* ('Refer') – as all his sculptures have begun since the late 1960s (Figs. 3 & 5). For the last five years, most of these works comprise steel plates in juxtaposition with rocks that look as large and smooth as they did when the artist first found them.


There have been plenty of stones in the art of the last half century, but they are not used by other artists in quite the same manner as Lee. Richard Long's stones, for example, arranged in lines and circles, speak of place, as suggested by their titles: *Norfolk Flint Circle*, for example, or *Georgia Granite Circle*. They are concerned with the differing geology and topography the artist encounters in his walks across the world. Lee, in contrast, is preoccupied

by time. 'Stones are the oldest thing we ever encounter in our world. There is an unimaginably long time inside them: a kind of concentration of several hundred million years. And within a stone there are elements we can use to forge a metal such as steel.' He goes on: 'I really value what does need to be made, the uncreated, the *not* made. My aim is to make the not-manmade *speak*. I really want you to hear the voice of these things: to put the manmade and non-manmade in juxtaposition. This combination is fundamental for me.'

There is a meditative quality in Lee's art, a depth to its apparent simplicities. His installations are confrontations between human culture and nature, the present moment and eternity. In the museum dedicated to his work on Naoshima, the small island in the Inland Sea of Japan known for its displays of contemporary art, there is a room containing four works painted directly onto the walls. The idea is that you remove your shoes on entering, then just sit on the floor and contemplate. This museum is a close collaboration between Lee Ufan and the architect Tadao Ando (Fig. 6). When the idea was first suggested, however, by Soichiro Fukutake, the billionaire who has funded and masterminded Naoshima's transformation into a sort of modern art lover's shangri-la, Lee was not enthusiastic. 'Frankly speaking, at the beginning I was not at all interested in creating a museum of my work. When Mr Fukutake contacted me, I just replied "Let me see."' It was Tadao Ando who talked him into it, arguing that it would be an ideal way to realise various projects. 'What I really wanted to make was a space like a cave. Something that would be like entering and leaving a tomb, or a human body. The final result is not a space conceived by an architect, with the artwork installed in it afterwards. Not at all. Ando couldn't have done it on his

own, nor could I. Our two sets of ideas were juxtaposed to create what you see. Fortunately, Ando is an old friend of mine, so there were no quarrels or disagreements. Our discussions went mysteriously smoothly.'

On the day I visited Naoshima, I had just been to Kyoto, where I had seen the 'dry' gardens of the Zen monasteries. The most celebrated of these, the Ryōan-ji, consists of 15 natural stones in a field of immaculately raked white gravel. Was there a connection – I couldn't help asking – between this and his own work? Again, he rejected the association, just as he had with Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman's abstraction. 'No connection at all. Although you know I was born in Asia so even if I say "No, not at all in a direct way", maybe the atmosphere or the zeitgeist impregnated this feeling for stones into me. But as far as my work is concerned, it's totally distinct. It is the result of my questioning how artists should express themselves in a contemporary world – nothing to do with Zen gardens.'

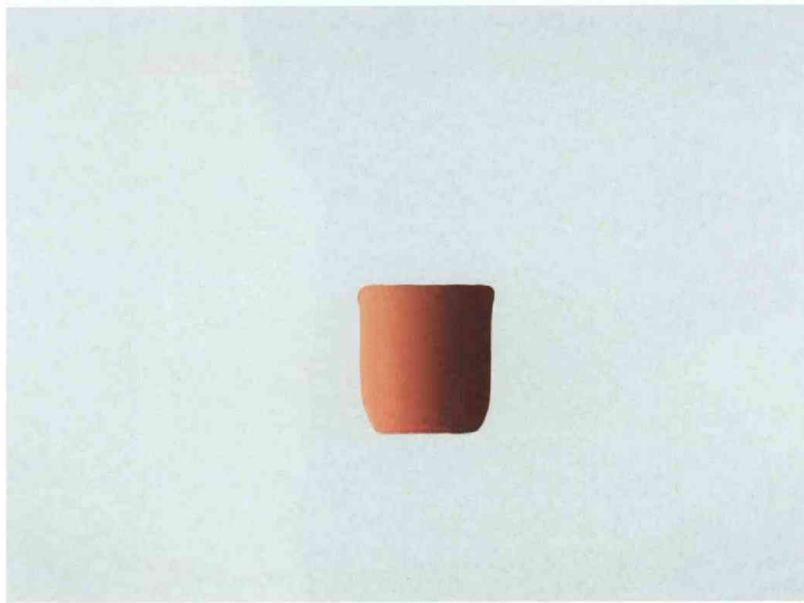
In an idiosyncratic way Lee Ufan is a truly global figure. Is there anywhere, I ask, among the various places where he has lived and worked, that he feels more at home? 'At the very beginning I had difficulty because I didn't speak certain languages or felt isolated, but now I don't distinguish between good places and bad. Everywhere is similar – and anyway, I love to be alone.' 

Martin Gayford's latest book is *Rendez-vous with Art* (Thames & Hudson), written with Philippe de Montebello.

For more information on the Lee Ufan Museum in Naoshima, visit www.benesse-artsite.jp.



1. *Dialogue*, 2014, Lee Ufan, oil on canvas,
218 x 291 x 6cm



**‘My painting
is a game, with
the canvas as
my opponent’**

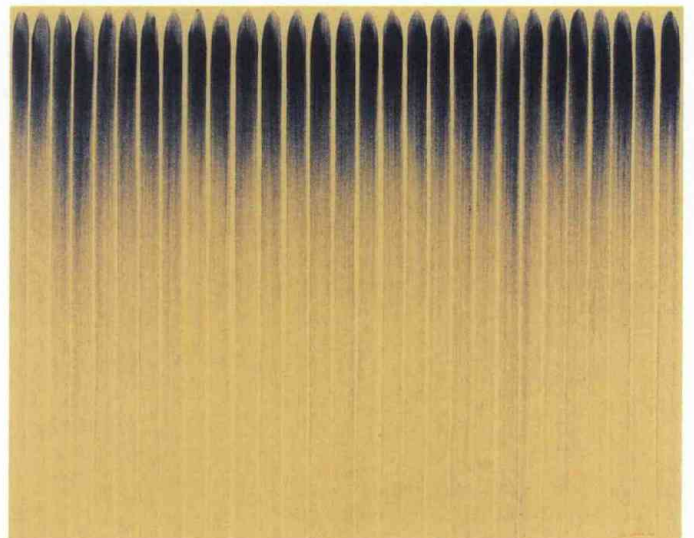


2. *Relatum – The Arch of Versailles*, installation view from the 2014 exhibition 'Lee Ufan Versailles' at the Chateau de Versailles

3. *Relatum – Le Baton du Géant*, installation view from the 2014 exhibition 'Lee Ufan Versailles' at the Chateau de Versailles



4. *From Line*, 1982, Lee Ufan, glue and mineral pigment on canvas, 112.4 x 145.4cm



5. *Relatum – Rest*, 2013, Lee Ufan, gravel, glass, steel, and stone, various dimensions



6. Lee Ufan's works are permanently installed in the gardens of the Lee Ufan Museum, Naoshima, designed by Tadao Ando



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Art in America



Lee Ufan Rocks Versailles

Only in France, perhaps, could a Sunday outing entail an exercise in visual philosophy—one combining formal rigor with a whiff of historical decadence. But that's exactly what's on offer now at the royal palace of Versailles outside Paris. There Lee Ufan, the Korean-born cofounder and theorist of Japan's late-1960s and early-'70s Mono-ha (School of Things) movement, has temporarily installed 10 new sculptures from his long-running "Relatum" series (through Nov. 2). The enigmatic works—nine of them sited in the chateau's immense formal gardens—feature Lee's signature counterbalancing of stone, steel and other materials.

Shadow of the Stars, for example, comprises a segmented fence of upright steel plates surrounding a circle of crushed-marble gravel and seven boulders arranged like the heavenly bodies of a constellation. *The Giant's Club*, a long steel rod leaning across an enormous stone, serves as a metaphor for the standoff between wild nature and the human impulse to impose order.

Conversely, a pervasive, almost Romantic natural sympathy is suggested by *Wind Blades*, a sequence of wavelike metal plates laid out sequentially on the central lawn to recall the wind-on-the-grass ripples that Lee, 78, observed on one of his numerous preparatory visits to Versailles. (The artist has for many years kept a studio in Paris.)

In *The Tomb: Homage to André Le Nôtre*, a severe rectangular pit containing a boulder confronts the phantasmagoric Baths of Apollo fountain, with its three mythical figure groups set in an artificial grotto. The landscape architect Le Nôtre (1613-1700) is famed for transforming, at the behest of Louis XIV, some 16,000 acres of swampland into Versailles's rigorously geometric gardens and park, only occasionally punctuated by such frothy statuary outbreaks.

Lee's *The Arch of Versailles*, very much in Le Nôtre's spirit, is a simple, vaulting steel arc some 100 feet high and wide, that—depending on one's angle of view—reframes the palace, the long central lawn and/or the sky itself. Seemingly held in bent tension by two bracketing rocks, it was inspired, Lee says, by a rainbow that he saw as a young man while living in Japan.

This project's sole interior piece—erected in an ornate, two-story palace atrium—harks back materially (though on a grander scale) to work Lee made around 1970. A freestanding wall covered with a fluffy coat of white long-strand cotton, topped by a boulder and immersed at its base in more cloudlike billows of cotton, it simultaneously evokes the surging form of Rodin's monument to

Such binary relationships have long been at the heart of Lee's art. Born in Korea in 1936, he grew up in the remote countryside under the contrasting influences of a grandfather who was a farmer, a father who was an international journalist and a mother who lived as a provincial housewife while maintaining a personal elegance and a love of the classics. At the age of 20, Lee, whose first intellectual passions were literature and philosophy, went to study in Tokyo.

At the time, animosity ran deep between Japan, which took a culturally superior stance toward its neighbor, and Korea, still resentful over 35 years of Japanese occupation (1910-45). Emerging as an artist and essayist steeped in Eastern thought but equally responsive to Heidegger and other Western thinkers, Lee was often in a state of cultural suspension—too foreign to be included in many Japanese shows, too transnational to be considered a truly Korean artist back home.

While fully aware of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Arte Povera and Land art in the West, the artist resolutely committed himself to an Eastern artistic practice based on contemplation, restraint and thoughtful pacing. For him, the control of breath, brush, energy and formal rhythm are intimately interrelated.

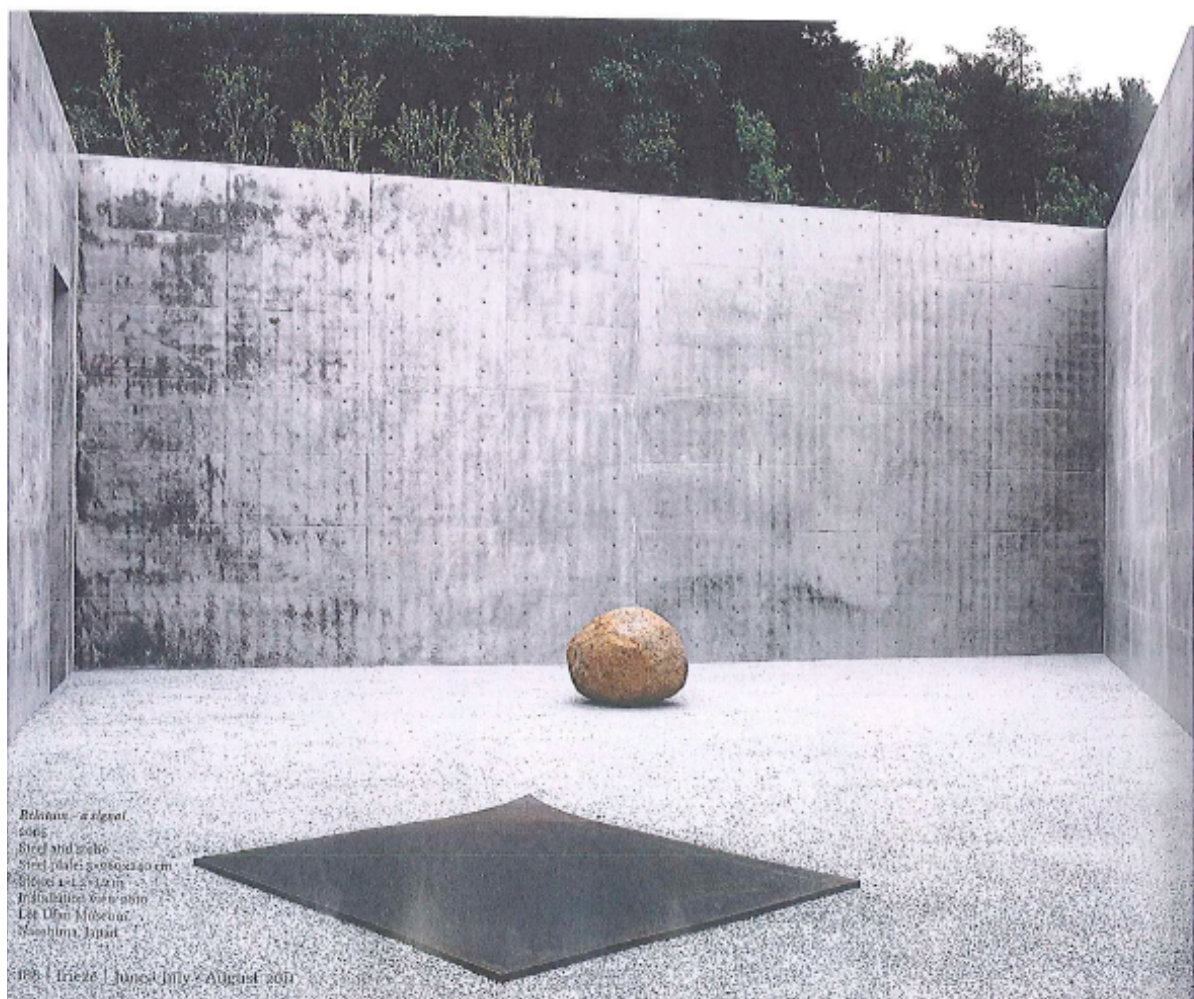
Over the years, Lee also turned lingering cultural dichotomies to his advantage, creating a body of abstract work reflecting, in both painting and sculpture, a quiet rapport between manmade and natural materials, form and emptiness, visual velocity and stasis. He became not only a leader of Mono-ha but, thereafter, a globally exhibited independent artist. Most recently, he has enjoyed international blue-chip gallery representation (Blum & Poe, Pace, Kamel Menour), the 2010 establishment of a private museum designed by Tadao Ando on the island of Naoshima, Japan, and a 2011 retrospective at New York's Guggenheim Museum.

All of this makes Lee a particularly intriguing choice for the Versailles commission. Several predecessors in the annual project have produced works in keeping with the ornate frivolity of the palace's interior (Jeff Koons, 2008; Takashi Murakami, 2010; Joana Vasconcelos, 2012), while last year Giuseppe Penone (chosen by Alfred Pacquement, director of the Centre Pompidou, who also selected Lee) presented blasted, split, misshapen trees representing a darker subtext of Le Nôtre's vision: the fierce imposition of human will on a disorderly world.

Lee, however, seeks to disclose a transcendent order that he believes is already there. The Cartesian *cogito* ("I think; therefore, I am"), which lies at the heart of the French rationalist tradition, is linked in his artwork and writings to the isolate, all-discovering meditation of the Eastern sage.

On Reflection

After the opening last year of the Lee Ufan Museum – a collaboration with the architect Tadao Ando on Naoshima Island, Japan – and ahead of his largest retrospective to date, at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, **Lee Ufan** talks to *Melissa Chiu* about his five decades as an artist, writer and philosopher



Relaxant - a signet
2006
Steel and stone
Steel plate: 200x240 cm
Stone: 4-12 x 12 cm
Installation 6/11/2010
Lee Ufan Museum
Naoshima, Japan



Lee Ufan photographed
at his studio in
Kamakura, Japan
2000

*I ended up in Japan by sheer
chance. My uncle was not
well, so I went to visit him
there and he told me I should
stay and study, so I did.*

Since the late 1960s, Korean-born artist Lee Ufan – who lives and works in Paris, France, and Kamakura, Japan – has been an influential painter, sculptor, writer, art critic, teacher and philosopher. He was a key figure in the Mono-ha movement (from the two Japanese words *mono*, meaning thing, and *ha*, school) in the late 1960s and early '70s in Japan, where he moved in 1956. Originating from Mono-ha's interest in highlighting the relationships between artistic elements and the spaces around them, Ufan's sculptures are created from simple juxtapositions of natural and industrial materials, while his paintings and watercolours involve quiet confrontations between pigment and surface. Parallel to his sustained artistic process, he has continued to write critical essays and short texts about subjects ranging from philosophy and art to cooking, flower arranging and poetry. Before the opening of his first US retrospective, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York this summer, art historian Melissa Chiu spoke to Lee Ufan about his life and work.

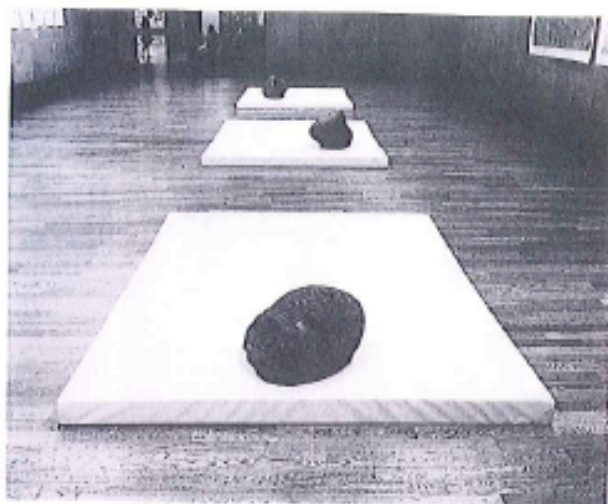
MELISSA CHIU You've been a seminal figure for international art, particularly the development of Modernism in East Asia. Although you were born in Korea and lived there until you were 20, your work as an artist and critic is perhaps better known in Japan, largely because of the role you played with the Mono-ha movement of the late 1960s and '70s. What do you think led to the development of Mono-ha in Japan?

LEE UFAN (VIA TRANSLATOR SUMIKO TAKEDA) The Mono-ha movement began around 1967 and lasted until about '74. At the time, there were major social changes occurring in the US – the hippie movement, for example – as well as Earthworks and Minimalism in art. In Italy there was

Arte Povera and in the UK, Anti-Form. Modernism was being criticized and new values were being explored. In France there was the May '68 revolution, and in Japan the Anpo movement arose as a resistance toward the Japanese-US Security Treaty. The existing structures were being turned upside-down, and this had an impact on literature, art and music. Modernism in these contexts was about expressing what one was about, but the Mono-ha movement was not about identity. It had to do with what to make and what not to make, and the clash of the two. The art work we created was criticized for its lack of skill. We used manufactured materials, such as glass, sheet metal or electricity, combined with natural materials, such as dirt, rocks and water. I use the Japanese word *chutohkanpa* to describe it, which means unresolved, incomplete or not polished. So you're neither here nor there; it's the meeting of the two – oneself and one's interaction with these materials, both industrial and natural.

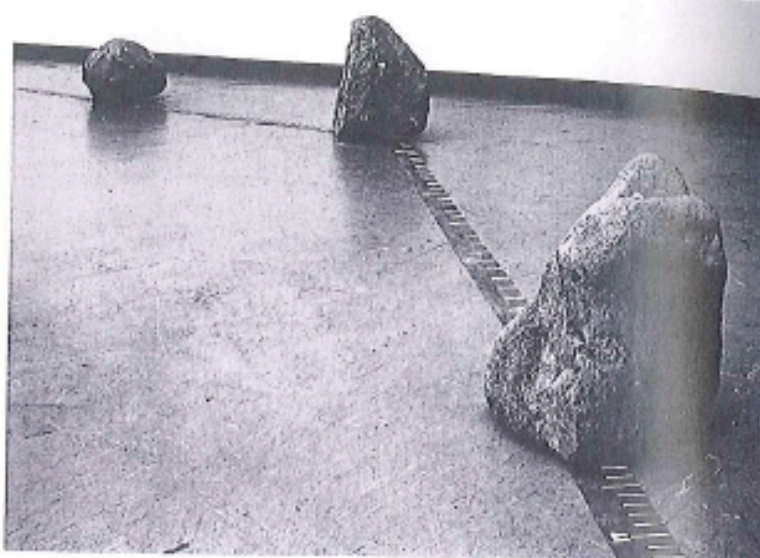
MC In an essay you wrote, you described Mono-ha as a movement that 'disturbed ordinary perceptions and preconceived ideas about what is real or not real'. That brings to my mind an approach towards materials that was probably very new in Japan, and certainly internationally, at that time. Can you talk a little bit more about this approach to materials, which I think is the essence of the Mono-ha movement?

LUF Right before Mono-ha emerged there was a breakdown in the identity of Japanese artists. Rather than using things and space as materials for realizing their ideas, artists tried to bring out the mutual relationships of their materials and the spaces surrounding them. Step-by-step they became more conscious of the media they were using.

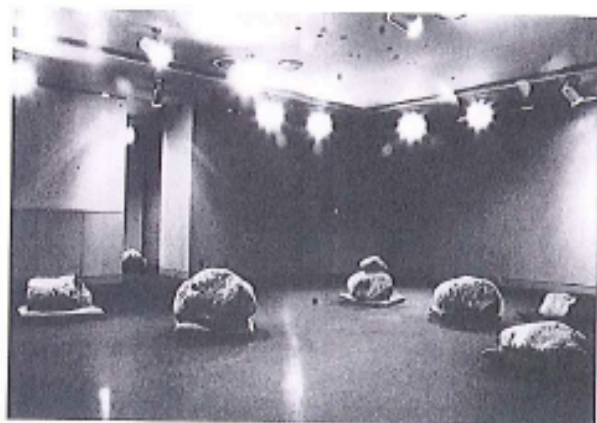


Relation
1971
Canvas and stones
Installation view
Tokyo Metropolitan Art
Museum
*The Mono-ha movement
was not about identity.
It had to do with what
to make and what not to
make, and the clash of
the two.*

Mono-ha was not about new ideas; rather, it looked at what to do with this broken identity in Japan in the postwar period.



Relation
1969
Stones
Installation view
National Museum of
Modern Art, Kyoto
*My work was very simple
— there's a small amount
of sculpture, a little bit of
painting. Culture should not
be about making the great
national product.*



Relation
1970
Stones, cushions and lights
Installation view
Pinar Gallery, Tokyo
*There are things about Korea
that I both love and dread. I
grew up in a home that was
very multilingual. We had a lot
of art works and furniture, so
I have a certain nostalgia for
the things that were around me
as I was growing up.*

e In accounts of Japanese art, Mono-ha always comes on the heels of the Gutai movement that emerged in the late 1950s, and whose manifesto pressed their interest in the beauty of destruction, ruins or decay. What relationship, if any, did Mono-ha have to Gutai?

PF There is no direct relationship: Gutai was more orientated toward experimentation, whereas Mono-ha was a protest against Modernism. Gutai gave us the courage to experiment, but within the context of the breakdown identity, Gutai had nothing to teach.

o But if Gutai had less to teach, then why do you think — in the West at least — it has received a lot more critical attention than Mono-ha? Does it have something to do with the performative nature of Gutai?

PF That's a very good point. There are links between Gutai and Mono-ha when it comes to performance. I don't mean to deny Gutai's relevance.

It was driven by new ideas, and doing things that were dynamic and attractive. The Gutai group was a community, and they worked with other groups, such as the Zero Group. They were better funded and had the support of influential critics. Mono-ha wasn't recognized by the critics — our recognition came from Europe. It was not about new ideas; rather, it looked at what to do with this broken identity in Japan in the postwar period. And so Mono-ha began with a very clear concept in that respect. Compared with Gutai, we had far less financing, and there were fewer people involved. It was not a group that would pull its forces together to do something dynamic. It was very different in nature, and that's reflective of the times. It consisted of individuals who did their own thing, and in fact, if we did get together at all, we had arguments and fights. That's the way it was.

MC Much of my work as an art historian and curator, especially in the past few years, has been to look at art history with a global emphasis. Mono-ha, like Gutai, was not a movement that existed in a vacuum, but rather one that was linked to other movements across the world. How connected did you feel to other art movements that were going on outside of Japan?

LUF In 1967 or '68 Japan was not very open. It was a period of economic growth in the country, but there was still poverty, and therefore it was not an information-rich society. It was difficult to get information. Outside of the art world, there was a movement against neo-colonialism. The Anpo movement reacted against American imperialism. Because the information wasn't so readily available, we often misunderstood what was going on in the rest of the world. It wasn't until I went to Europe for the first time for the Paris Biennale in 1971 that I was able to get more information and find out about what was going on both in the US and Europe.

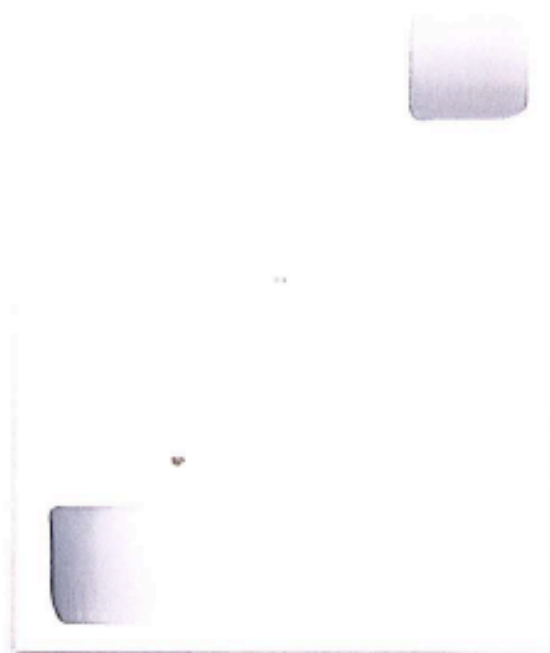
MC Your writings have played such an important role, not just within Mono-ha, but also throughout your career. Why did you choose to take on this role of writer and artist, or critic and artist?

LUF When I moved to Japan from Korea, I was a foreigner, an outsider. No critics supported my work. Out of desperation, I wrote about myself. I gave

lectures and did whatever was necessary. That's one reason. The second reason was that I had studied philosophy, so I was theoretical in my thinking, and when I began working with other people with similar thoughts there were no critics to support this larger group, and so I had to explain what it all meant – it really was an act of desperation. Somehow these essays piled up, and resulted in a number of books. Amongst my friends in Mono-ha, there was a need for these texts. I still don't believe myself to be an art critic, but writing does help me clarify my ideas. There may not be a tight correlation between what I write and my work, but it gives me better context, which I believe makes my art work that much richer.

MC You've lived outside of your home country, Korea, for much of your life, both in Japan and in now in Paris. Can you tell me about your experiences of living abroad?

LUF I ended up in Japan by sheer chance. My uncle was not well, so I went to visit him there and he told me I should stay and study, so I did. But I met with discrimination there. They called me *Chosenjin*, which is a derogatory term for a Korean. Because I was not Japanese, and because my art and ideas had to do with the breakdown of the status quo, people believed that I was a bad influence on Japanese culture. The Japanese felt that it was not a role for an outsider. I was told that if I fought with critics I would certainly



Dialogue
2010
Oil and mineral
pigment on canvas
9.2 x 1.8 cm

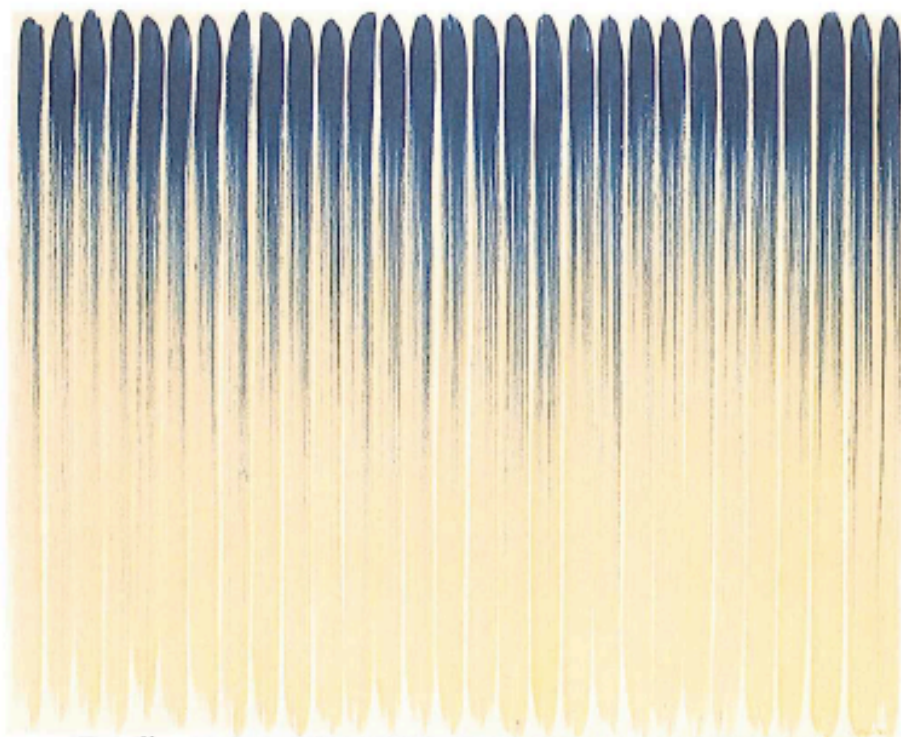
*There were similar looking art
works that occurred in Europe
and America. Interesting things
occurred in Japan because of the
lack of information, and we
were groping in the dark with
local concepts.*



*Lee Ufan painting
in his studio in
Kamakura, Japan
2010*

*I only spend three or four
months a year in Japan.
I spend the remaining
time in Europe, and, more
recently, in America.*

Writing helps me clarify my ideas. It gives me a better context, which makes my art work that much richer.



From Line
1994
Oil on canvas
1.8x2.3 m
I've been wandering around
Europe for 40 years, and -
fortunately or unfortunately -
I've never had a
retrospective in Japan

be thrown out, so I had to be careful. When I had the opportunity to be part of the Paris Biennale, I met artists from outside of Japan and realized that I could be more active in Europe, and in fact, I originally gained a following in Germany. I had shows there, and was provided with a place to live, but I never ended up living there because I was considered Oriental, a derogatory word. So again I was criticized, and there I was, alone once more. I have never had any support from a country or a nation. I feel like I've had to fight by myself, to this day. But being lonely I think has given me inspiration and courage. I have a lot of friends in these countries now, so it doesn't seem so important anymore whether I'm 'Oriental' or 'Asian'.

MC You've had a long-standing interest in Korean antiquities, and you were generous enough to donate a number of them to the Musée Guimet in Paris. When we spoke a number of years ago, after the exhibition of your donated works, you said that living in Paris helped you understand that it was good for Korean culture artefacts to be displayed outside of the country, so that people could learn more about the history and traditions of Korea.

LUF There are things about Korea that I both love and detest. I grew up in a home that was very traditional. We had a lot of art works and furniture, so I have a certain nostalgia for the things that were around me as I was growing up. At that time, they weren't recognized as being important as art objects. I began to collect them in the 1960s and '70s. At the time these things were practically free and readily available. So even with very little money, I was able to collect them. I really wanted this collection to go to a place where many people would see it. The Musée Guimet is an Asian museum, and I thought that was a good place for them. Paradoxically,

when I made the donation, the Korean newspapers criticized me because they believed that these items were taken from Korea, where they should belong; they thought I was selling out my country.

MC When I last visited your studio in Kamakura in Japan, about 50 kilometres southwest of Tokyo, I was struck by what a beautiful, serene environment you've created there. Can you describe your daily practice?

LUF I only spend three or four months a year in Japan; I spend the remaining time in Europe, and, more recently, in America. I also go to Korea a few times a year. When I return to Japan from these short stays, I want it to be a time for me to sort things out in my mind, to have some quiet time, but that can't always be. Whether I'm in Paris, Germany or New York, my lifestyle is not so different. I wake up in the morning. I go for a walk. I might get some bread, I check my schedule. I may not make drawings while I'm on the road *per se*, but I do explore ideas. At home, I try to make art every day. It's important to keep my hands working so that I can continue to work in an uninterrupted manner; I think psychologically it's good for me to always take that action toward making work.

MC You described some of the complexities of being an Asian artist in Europe. I'm aware that in recent years though, you and your work have been increasingly recognized outside of Asia. I saw your exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Saint-Etienne Métropole in 2005, and it's now the eve of the opening of your retrospective 'Marking Infinity' at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Can you tell us a little bit more of what we might expect at the Guggenheim exhibition? Are there some key themes or issues that you felt very pertinent for audiences here in America to recognize?

LUF I've been wandering around Europe for 40 years, and – fortunately or unfortunately, as the situation may be – I've never had a retrospective in Japan, though I've had opportunities to have gallery shows. This is my biggest retrospective to date. My work has to do with myself, but also with my relationship to the other. It has to do with making, but not making. My work may seem simplistic – there's a small amount of sculpture, a little bit of painting. Culture should not be about raising the gross national product. I am critical of corporations and the endless types of manufacturing and production that occur, and humans wanting to aggressively realize whatever it is that comes to their minds. It's okay to lower the GNP and think about nature. If we had done that, perhaps the Fukushima nuclear reactor accident would never have occurred. It's important to think about holding back and stopping to think, to be quiet, and to think of ourselves as part of the universe. Humans shouldn't be at the centre of it. And we should be more reflective about who we are and what we do.

MC Do you have a message that you would like to convey to those who may or may not know your work?

LUF I would like people to see in my work a statement about what's happened with the earthquake, the tsunami and the nuclear reactor. It's not that I can help in the recovery effort, but I want to say that what occurred in Japan recently should never happen again. My work is simple, but there is energy and power that one feels through my sculpture and paintings, and it's physicality that I'm dealing with. In this day of computers, it's

about information and the processing of information, but that alone is not enough. People are part of nature, and there are environmental issues we need to consider. I would like Americans and Europeans to set their eyes toward this aspect of physicality. By physicality I don't mean just the body itself, but with the body and the relationship between the space and air and so forth. In my exhibition, whether you like it or not, one should feel the air and the vibration within. I want there to be a feeling of healing, and I hope that people will receive some hints of that, through seeing my work. ●

Dr. Melissa Chiu is Museum Director and Vice President, Global Art Programs at Asia Society in New York, USA. She has organized nearly 30 exhibitions of artists from across Asia; her books include Breakout: Chinese Art Outside China (2007), Chinese Contemporary Art: 7 Things You Should Know (2008), Asian Art Now (Mouacelli Press, 2010, co-authored with Benjamin Genocchio) and the anthology Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader (MIT Press, 2011, co-edited with Benjamin Genocchio).

Lee Ufan's first US retrospective, 'Marking Infinity', opens at the Guggenheim Museum in New York on 24 June and runs until 28 September. A solo exhibition of his recent paintings and sculptures is on view at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, Austria, until 18 June; his work can also be seen in the exhibition 'The World Belongs to You' at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy, until 31 December. A selection of English translations of his writings from 1967 until 2007 are compiled in the book The Art of Encounter, which was published by Liaison Gallery in 2007.



Return-Point, Live, Place
2010

Concrete, iron and stone

Installation view

Lee Ufan Museum, Naoshima, Japan

I would like people to see in my work a statement about what's happened with the earthquake, the tsunami and the nuclear reactor. I want to say that what occurred in Japan recently should never happen again.