

LEE Bae

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Dimensions of Black: Lee Bae's "Paradigm of Charcoal"

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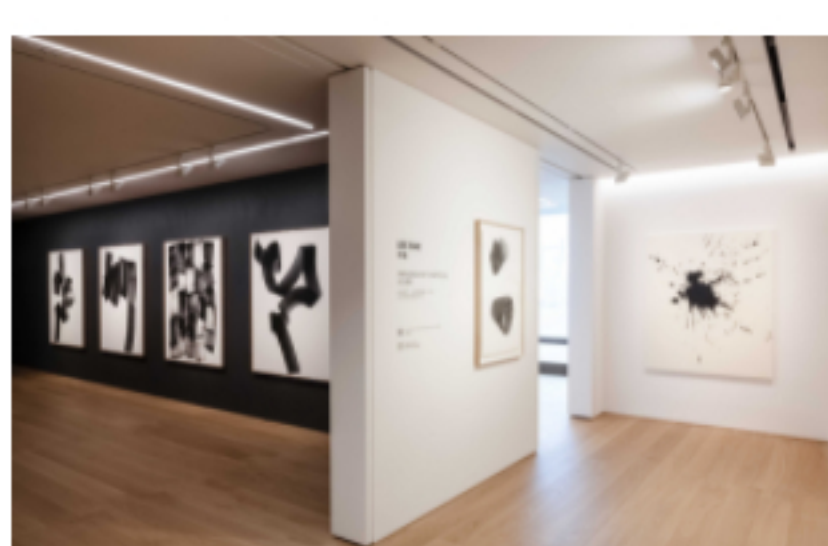


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Dimensions of Black: Lee Bae's "Paradigm of Charcoal"

BY OPHELIA LAI



Installation view of LEE BAE's solo exhibition "Paradigm of Charcoal" at Perrotin, Hong Kong, 2021. All photos by Ringo Cheung; courtesy the artist and Perrotin, Hong Kong / Seoul / Tokyo / Shanghai / Paris / New York.

It is a testament to Lee Bae's ingenuity and artistic prowess that despite a singular focus on charcoal as a medium since 1989, he has unceasingly created uniquely spellbinding works. From imposing older canvases composed of carbon blocks to recent paintings rendered in dissolved charcoal powder, the works on view at "Paradigm of Charcoal," Lee's fourth solo show at Perrotin, were as visually arresting as ever, illustrating the breadth of material possibilities in his practice.

The slate-gray walls of the first room in Perrotin's Hong Kong space set off the contrast between ink and paper in Lee's calligraphic paintings (2020–21), a dualism of movement and quiescence, substance and void. The dynamic brushstrokes have a sheerness to them, evoking black chiffon ribbons or curls of tissue paper against eggshell grounds. In some, the brushwork appears uninterrupted, a cascading line that seems to unfurl beyond the plane and toward the viewer.



Installation view of LEE BAE's (left to right) Issu du feu F04, F01, and F03, all 2003, charcoal on canvas, 162 × 130 cm, at "Paradigm of Charcoal," Perrotin, Hong Kong, 2021.

The show's triumph was the display in the second room, where the three large Issu du feu canvases (all 2003) facing the floor-to-ceiling windows came aglow in the ample light. True to their title, "from fire," these seamless compositions of burnished charcoal shards seem to flicker, as if in a perpetual state of alchemical change. As one approaches Issu du feu F01 straight on, for example, what resembles lustrous raven feathers begins to lose the suggestion of windswept lightness, becoming hard and metallic like cooling ore. Carefully polished flat, the surfaces in this series nevertheless achieve stunning illusions of three-dimensionality depending on the way the shards reflect light, with sections that seem to emerge or recede as the viewing angle or light source changes. Moving to the right, one may see a gnarled line of charcoal pieces in Issu du feu F03 enlarge and extend like tree roots; these recede if one shifts one's focus to the bottom left of the canvas, where a band of charcoal catches the light just so and transforms into a stream of mercury. Only the knots and grains in the burned hunks of wood betray the apparently transmutable works' true material origins.



LEE BAE, Landscape F20, 2003, charcoal on canvas, 162 × 130 cm.

The trio was bookended by a pair of Landscapes (both 2003) on the two adjacent walls. Each Landscape consists of a matte block of sanded-down charcoal on top of a blank canvas. In Landscape F20, the black stratum is broken along a jagged vertical edge, with flecks of charcoal dust on the white sublayer subtly registering its fracture—the tonal inverse of a collapsed chalk cliff.

"Paradigm of Charcoal" showcased Lee's mastery of his material. In his hands, charcoal can be mutable and brittle, fluid and dense. The well-curated selection offered a glimpse of what the artist perhaps sees in the humble material—how the carbon transmogrifies, how no piece is the same—and it was hard to look away.

Ophelia Lai is ArtAsiaPacific's associate editor.

Lee Bae's "Paradigm of Charcoal" was on view at Perrotin, Hong Kong, from August 7 to September 11, 2021.