

**LEE Bae**

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*Lee Bae is wearing LEMAIRE cotton shirt, jacket, and silk pleated pants.*

Words  
SUBIN ANDERSON

Photography  
LAURA STEVENS

Styling  
MANON DEL COLLE





“The methodology should be concise. It should be simple,” says Lee Bae. Lee’s nominal yet intricate paintings are enough to merely look as it is, as each stroke reads almost like a figurative sense containing the artist’s emotion, movement, and history. One might think of these gestures as spontaneous, but every process is the fruit of intense research and countless repetitions of movement, gradually forming like a symphony. Through this, Lee’s body is infused with the gestures until they become unified, where wordless storytelling communicates their complexities.









Lee Bae creates a visual language that speaks directly to the viewer. The marks and textures created with charcoal are like a map of his innermost thoughts and emotions, a window into his very being. The jagged lines and bold strokes that characterize his work evoke a sense of energy and movement, as if the charcoal itself were alive and in motion, pulsating with energy. Meanwhile, the softer, more delicate tones suggest a sense of vulnerability and introspection. As we gaze at his works, we are drawn into a world of sensation that is deeply personal and universally relatable. It is a world that exists in the spaces between the marks on the page, inviting us to explore the infinite possibilities of the monochromatic palette and discover the beauty that lies in the shadows. Lee's work is an enigma, a mystery waiting to be unraveled, and a journey of the senses that promises to captivate and inspire all fortunate enough to behold it.

**Subin Anderson:** Having read about your life and career, I have so much I want to discuss with you. Before we delve into specific works, let's talk about charcoal. In what ways has using this particular material expressed your artistic language, and how has it continued to guide your practice?

**Lee Bae:** I approached charcoal as a way to express my artistic sensibilities. It symbolized the cyclical nature of life and death, breathing new life into my creative practice. As wood transforms into charcoal through the fiery furnace of a kiln, it retains its inherent integrity. Similarly, all things in life exist in a continuous state of transformation while still holding on to their essence.

In Korean culture, charcoal holds a special place as a key element in calligraphy, revered for its deep symbolic significance. Its intricacy and nuance set it apart from more conventional materials like oil paint or pastels. Charcoal's complexity intertwines with my artistic process, evoking a sense of



**SA:** Could you walk me through the making process?

**LB:** I have a kiln in my studio in Cheongdo (a county in North Gyeongsang Province,

## “Charcoal’s complexity intertwines with my artistic process, evoking a sense of spirituality that guides my work as a whole.”

In this interview, we discuss Lee Bae's intimate process and approach to the series of his oeuvres and the desire to embrace and transcend one's identity.



spirituality that guides my work as a whole.

**SA:** And tell me about your choice of charcoal, as it's the base and the starting point for your creative process.

**LB:** In the 90s [during my early days in France], I was walking by a small shop in Paris and found a bag of charcoal for barbecue. I was surprised at the moment as I wasn't fully aware that charcoal was easily accessible in other foreign countries as well. With my work, I typically use charcoal made from pine trees grown mainly in Korea, preferably using *baeksong*, a white-bark pine tree that radiates light gray/blue ash color. Moreover, Korean pine trees have a unique texture due to the vast temperature differences throughout the year. Nonetheless, I also work with other types of trees and sometimes charcoal sourced in France. All around, it's incredibly fascinating to see the complexity of patterns, textures, and colors in each type I work with.

South Korea), which is also a place where I source pine trees too. Typically, these trees have a lifespan of 80-100 years, and just before their time ends, I cut the wood to begin the charcoal-making process. It's usually done during the winter season, and this is the time when I would come back to Korea from Paris. Cold winter days are when the trees hold their fullest depth and color. Once I have the materials ready, the logs will be placed upright, waiting for the kiln to be fired. Once the fire is lit, it takes about two weeks to burn and another two weeks for the charcoal to cool down completely. It's quite a long process.

**SA:** A full month!

**LB:** [Laughs] Yes. As everything is out of my control once I fire the kiln, I always have to keep my patience and hope for the best.

**SA:** One of the earlier series you began with charcoal was *Issu du feu*, which encompasses sculpture, installation, and painting pieces.







Installation view of 'Promenade' by Lee Bae, 2019. Perrotin New York

es. In the two-dimensional painting works, small charcoal pieces are glued onto the canvas creating a mosaic-like pattern that highlights infinite hues and textures of charcoal within the frameworks. In comparison, the installation and sculptures seem to express dialogue within the material itself.

**LB:** My ultimate focus with three-dimensional works was to showcase the physical property of charcoal in the simplest way possible. French painter Paul Cézanne made a series of mountain paintings; if you think about it, the actual mountains and surroundings Cézanne perceived looked not so different from those we can all imagine. But because we encountered it through the eyes of Cézanne and his interpretation, the landscape became something extraordinary. And that's an incredible power. So, whenever I begin sculptural or installation works, I imagine bridging the vivid imagery and energy I connect with the mountain landscapes of my hometown, Cheongdo. I

my world and is still the most significant influence I cherish.

Also, in my hometown, we always celebrated *Jeongwol Daeboreum*. It's a Korean holiday celebrating the first full moon night of the year in the lunar calendar. During this day, we do this ritual called *Daljip Taeugi* or "moon-house burning." Basically, young male members of each household would gather together to make a "moon house" - made from giant piles of branches and sheaf. Once built, people write their wishes on mulberry paper with charcoal ink and tie them to the moon house. When the moon finally rises at night, usually the first man in town getting married that year sets the fire, and the festival begins. The next morning, a massive pile of ashes would be on the ground. These burned ashes are considered precious partly because they symbolize purity, preventing bad energy and bringing good luck. We would take these burnt charcoal ashes for various purposes in the

to bed before 9 p.m. Having this routine is important to me since it allows me to have commitment and control over both my art practice and life. It almost forces you to be inspired at all times.

During the weekends, I enjoy meeting up with my friends to play *Baduk*, or the Go game (a two-player board game). And whenever I get a chance, I try to alleviate my thoughts that are deep inside as I want to practice removing any boundaries of my art-making with my life in general. In order to reach that state of mind, I have to constantly practice simplifying my thoughts so that I can truly focus on the emotion that I want to express. I constantly practice drawing my awareness deeper inwards to see myself clearly and objectively. Forging this deeper connection within me will eventually lead to simplifying my mind and the ways I perceive my life. When things get complicated in life, and you start to overthink, your consciousness will lose its focus, and

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experimented with tying, laying, and placing large carbonized tree trunks in various cuts while constantly challenging myself to embrace charcoal's intrinsic beauty without letting the material lose its original form. I am balancing the harmony that essentially belongs to nature as it's something that humankind can't control. And I want to respect and learn from the material of my choice.

**SA:** While the natural surroundings are undoubtedly a remarkable aspect of Cheongdo, can you share some personal recollections of your hometown?

**LB:** Cheongdo is a mountainous place with only a tiny part of flat land. I grew up in the rural countryside, where technological development was extremely stagnant. I was about eight years old when we first started using electricity. Before then, my day consisted of spending hours out in the woods. My time spent in nature has shaped my life for sure. As a child, this entire landscape was

household. Thinking back, my connection with charcoal started at a very young age.

**SA:** Do you still celebrate this tradition?

**LB:** Yes, I still do. I also filmed the festival footage, and I am in the process of making a series of film works. I hope to share this new video soon at an exhibition.

**SA:** And I heard you have a profound daily routine. I am curious about how you spend your time outside of studio hours.

**LB:** I did develop a strong work ethic over time - to make the best out of my days. My morning starts at about 4 a.m. then I will first head to church to do my daily service. Having this time allows me to clear my mind and have a fresh start to the day. Usually, I would work in the studio from 6:30 a.m. till about 4 p.m. You would then find me taking a long walk, and I have an early dinner afterward. In between the day, I take time to plan ahead for the next day, and I will head

it'll eventually translate into my practice. Simplicity in life is one of the things I'd like to pursue.

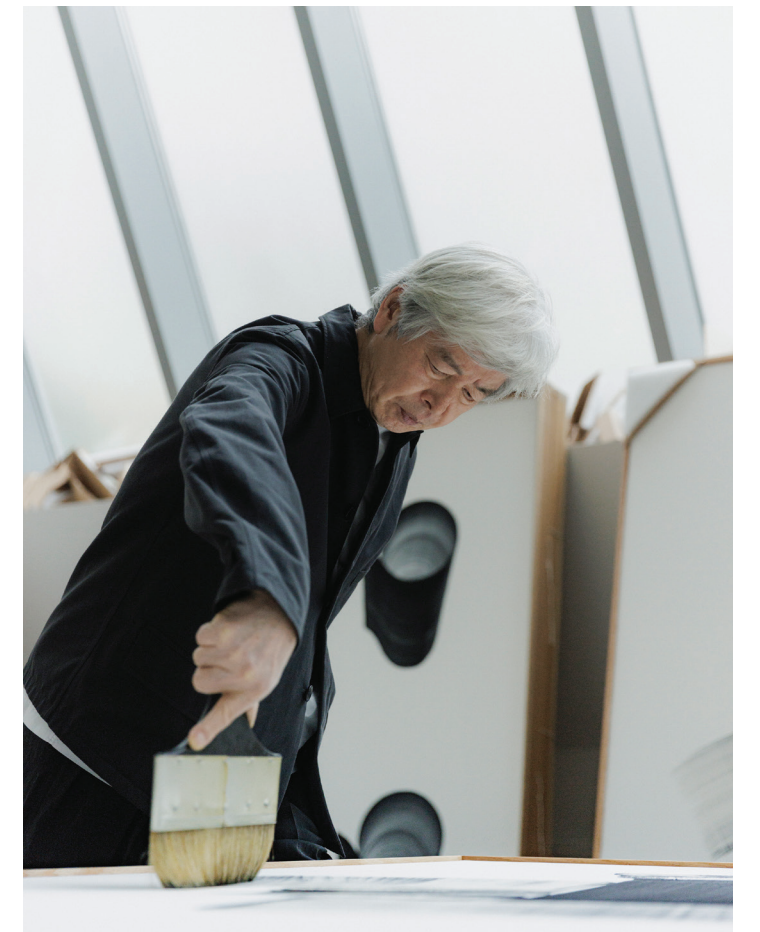
**SA:** We had a photoshoot in your Paris studio for this interview. More than 30 years have passed since you first came to Paris, and I can only imagine a lot has changed since then.

**LB:** Paris is a home of opportunity and a place that drives me to motivate and think outside of my box. It is a second home for me since Korea is my root, a safe place where I feel a greater sense of belonging. Even after all these years, I still feel like an outcast and a foreigner in France. And, don't get me wrong, it's only for a good reason: I am constantly on edge to push myself to improve my art practice since I have the privilege to create incredible opportunities here.

**SA:** Can you elaborate?

**LB:** Living overseas has allowed me to









stay humble and live with a positive mindset and attitude. In order to fit in and adapt to a new culture, you must remain open-minded and leave room for the environment to accept you instead of waiting for the world to change. Being in France has always awakened me with new ideas, inspirations, and motivations. Somehow, I can express the nostalgic memories of Korea clearly, and feel a great attachment to my identity when I'm in France. It's incredibly exciting for me to sense this feeling, even to this day.

**SA:** There's an interesting study of the re-interpretation of surfaces in *Landscape*. Thick layers of charcoal are layered on top of a flat canvas, creating various dimensions and depths.

**LB:** I consider myself a painter, though others perceive me as a sculptor. And the canvas, or any surface [even the three-dimensional works] I use, is viewed as an empty screen to my artistic world. The

screen is a flat, two-dimensional surface that can be transformed or evolved into anything I desire. *Landscape* is about giving an empty screen a new life by applying layers and depths with charcoal.

And the initial idea was sparked by the cycle of farming. When you plow the land, plant seeds and water, and allow the crops or plants to grow, you create different levels onto the surface, a new landscape scenery — the beginning of life. The same idea is reflected in *Landscape* — by adding thick layers of charcoal in abstract forms, you can view numerous dimensions within a piece of work.

**SA:** Interestingly, at Frieze Seoul last year, you presented new sculptural series in white using a completely different material: bronze. Tell me more about this new approach.

**LB:** I titled them *Brushstroke Sculpture*, and this is a sculptural form of the *Brushstroke* works. And with no hesitation, I chose to work with white to best present

the movement, composition, and balance from the original series. Though the ones shown at Frieze Seoul were in bronze, I am currently working with white marble for the new body of work. The property of marble translates the motif of *Brushstroke* finely in terms of details, and it delivers the movements of the body clearly and precisely.

**SA:** When you mention the “movements of the body,” I think about the flow in your work, especially gestures found in the *Brushstroke* series.

**LB:** This collection of works began in 2018 with inspiration from Seoye, a term for Korean Calligraphy. For centuries, calligraphy reflected more than writing and drawing but also a process of the mind-body connection. To master calligraphy, one must train consistently with intense concentration, integrity, and a clear mind.

I translate these intermediate principles of ethics and traditions through the *Brush-*

*Untitled* developed the *Brushstroke* works. However, in acrylic medium pieces, I perceived the gestures as a form of stillness and time. Each of these movements was later coated with an acrylic medium to express the notion of preservation. It is almost like preserving historical artifacts, remembering the state of existence, as each has its own stories to tell and is often used to find new discoveries. It helps us to reflect on changes over time; through this series, I'm trying to express fragments of time.

**SA:** You have unique ways of complimenting each work within the given space, intending to suggest a way to experiment with your works, which can be seen in your previous exhibitions: “Carte blanche à Lee Bae” at Musée National des Arts Asiatiques, Guimet, Paris (2017), “PLUS DE LUMIÈRE” at Fondation Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence, (2018), and “Promenade,” at Perrotin, New York (2019). This exemplifies how exhibi-

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tion space becomes an extension of your practice.

**LB:** You are right, and I prefer to show my work in a neutral setting. The general “white cube” space might be a better explanation, and knowing exactly how to transfer the space to complement your work. I also enjoy and appreciate presenting my works in a *Hanok* (traditional Korean housing). I consider *Hanok* as a neutral setting because it uses *hanji* (mulberry paper) throughout its ceiling, walls, windows, and doors, complementing structural elements built from solid wood, stones, Giwa tiles, etc. As fragile as paper might seem, these mulberry papers are incredibly durable. And growing up in these *Hanok* homes, I remember being intrigued by its gentle and subtle beauty when the sun poured through the window. It immediately shifts the ambiance, putting you at ease. I would love to exhibit in a space that would offer this similar experience of *Hanok* to create intimate dialogues.

**SA:** Is there any relation between the early series using acrylic mediums, *Untitled*, and *Brushstroke* works?

**LB:** In a way, the acrylic medium series



