

LEE Mingwei

*Prestige,
Shifting Ground*

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SHIFTING GROUND

Art is usually created to last, but what if it's made to be changed, shifted or even disappear? Meet **LEE MINGWEI**, master of impermanence, whose latest work, *Guernica in Sand*, a bold and ephemeral twist on Picasso's anti-war painting, goes on show this month at M+ Museum.

I was travelling in Bolivia when an intense sandstorm hit and I was stuck in our jeep. The sand gradually came up to the windows and I could barely see daylight. At that point I thought this was the end of my life, but luckily the storm stopped and I was able to crawl out. The silence outside was deafening, and I saw beautifully intricate marks on the ground that a snake had made. That was where the inspiration for *Guernica in Sand* came from.

I wanted to translate *Guernica in Sand* into a performance, a visual representation of the storm I experienced and transform the desert into something else. Then, everything clicked: I could use the Tibetan way of creating Mandalas in my work – these Buddhist monks painstakingly create small patterns just to use a broom and brush them into a pile at the very end. It truly is a visual representation of impermanence, and I was fascinated by it.



Guernica in Sand, presented at Gropius Bau, Berlin in 2020

Something beautiful can often come from such a destructive force. *Guernica in Sand* invites the audience to participate in its transformation by enabling them to walk through the piece. The before and after are completely different images; it's like the wind came by and it brings out all sorts of emotions.

The challenge in working with sand would be sourcing it. I've done this piece many times, but the sand you get in, say, Tokyo will be different than the sand in Berlin. I think that's what contributes to the beauty of it: every time we do it, the image is slightly different.

It's a process of a thousand hours; creating *Guernica in Sand* requires a team of eight to nine people and a minimum of two weeks. We begin by creating these metallic "cookie cutter" plates for the outline of the piece. We then fill the negative space with sand and lift the plates to reveal the design. But the magic comes when people start walking on it; just one footprint changes the perception of the entire piece.

The concept of destruction is a difficult one. Many might say I'm destroying my laborious work by letting the audience walk on it. Many spectators watch in disbelief as the piece is slowly transformed by steps and footprints, while many don't dare to disturb the finished work. The discourse of what happens after destruction can be interesting.

You are different from me, and I am different from you. The way you view my artwork is different from the way I may view it, so I don't like projecting my expectations on others. Although many people often feel pensive and solemn after *Guernica in Sand* is destroyed, many also enjoy aggressively kicking the sand to create more impact. It's fascinating the way humans react differently to destruction. ■



Yuki Yasuda