

**LEE Bae**

*A Conversation with Lee Bae*

*November 2019*



Installation view of "Lee Bae: Promenade," Perrotin, New York, 2019. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli, Courtesy the artist and Perrotin

# A Conversation with Lee Bae

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Lee Bae is a significant figure in the trajectory of Korean Modernism. Born in Korea, Bae studied under Park Seo-Bo, one of the founders of Dansaekhwa, an art movement born in South Korea in the 1970s. (The pioneers of Dansaekhwa avoided any reference to Western realism in their works, creating primarily monochrome and Minimalist paintings.) Lee Bae then moved to Paris at the behest of his mentor Lee Ufan. For his current show, "Promenade," at Perrotin in New York (on view through December 21), the artist created 24 new 4-foot charcoal sculptures. The artist then covered the gallery floor with a traditional mulberry paper, asking visitors to remove their shoes in order to circumnavigate the space.



*Issu du feu*, 2018. Charcoal and rubber band, 130 x 90 x 90 cm. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Perrotin

***Sculpture* magazine: Why did you move to Paris in 1990?**

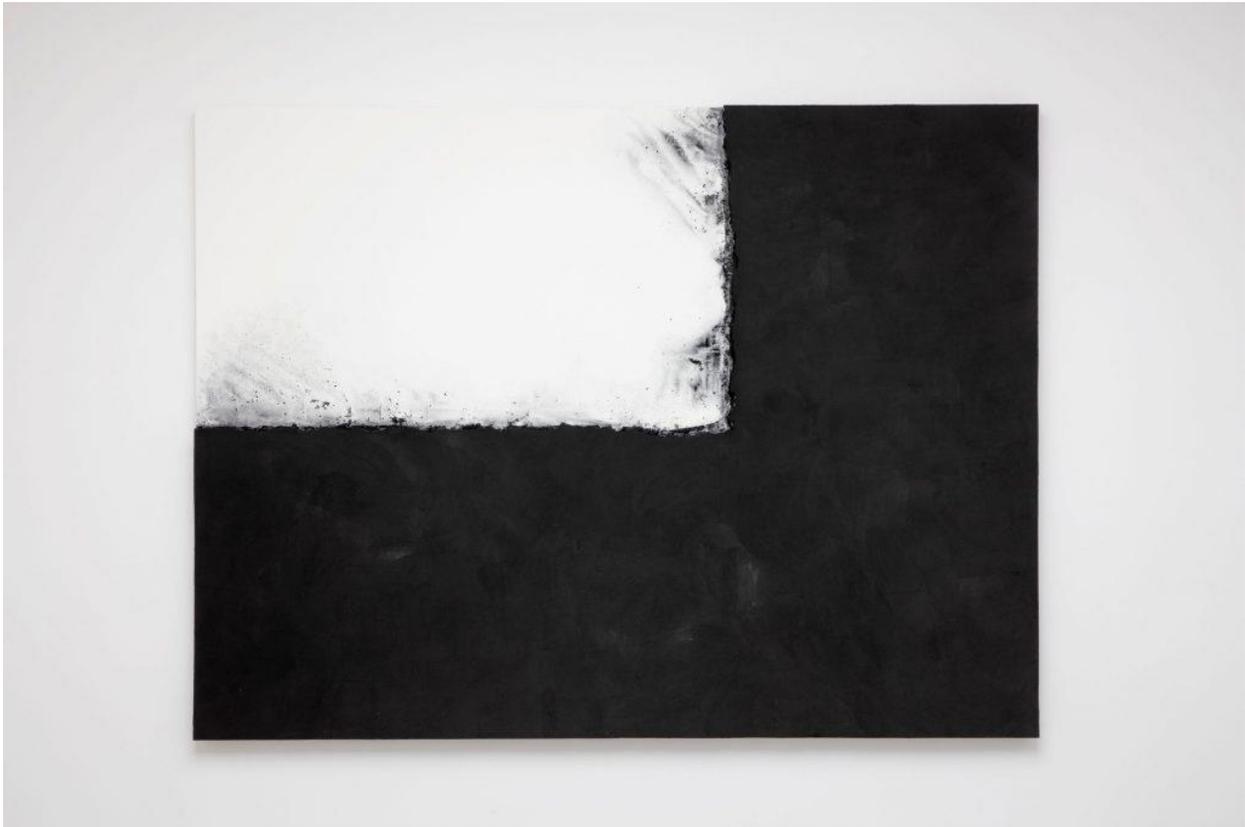
**Lee Bae:** Before settling in Paris, I travelled to many cities across the world: New York, Los Angeles, London, Berlin, and cities in Italy. The first day I arrived in Paris, I had a coffee at the Café Le Dome, in Montparnasse, where you can see Rodin's sculpture of Balzac. I was overwhelmed by an ineffable sensation at the sight of this sculpture through the café's window. Inside the museum, it was a mere sculpture, but seen from the café, it was enveloped by the density of the air and the colors of the light of Paris. The work looked so much more elegant and refined due to its specific location. Paris has the ability to arouse people's imagination in many ways—it makes you think, it sparks your creativity, and it can also make you feel melancholic. I thought it was a good place for an artist to live.

***Sculpture*: What is a typical studio day like for you?**

**LB:** I arrive at my studio every morning at 9 a.m. and work regularly until 7 p.m. From 9 a.m. to 12 p.m., I usually draw designs. I try not to work at night. I think the most important things for an artist are attitude and process.

**Sculpture:** Are there any artists, living or dead, whom you continue to look to for inspiration?

**LB:** Among contemporary artists, I am very inspired by Bruce Nauman. I am impressed by the breadth of his artistic world: some of his works are as detailed, emotional, and elegant as a violin, but others are very ordinary. I am also inspired by the Korean artists of the Dansaekhwa movement (Lee Ufan, Park Seo-Bo, Ha Chong-Hyun, Chung Sang-Hwa).



*Landscape, ch-37, 2002. Charcoal on canvas, 218 x 291 cm. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Perrotin*

**Sculpture:** When did you begin making sculptures?

**LB:** I began making sculptures in charcoal in 1991. For my first sculpture, I shaped a log of charcoal into a round form, made a hole in it, and carved out its inside to create a birdhouse. I hung it on a tree so that birds could come and live in it. At that time, there was a big issue with viruses transmitted by birds, so I made this sculpture hoping that it could help solve this problem to a certain extent. Charcoal as a lump of mineral is effective in killing bacteria and viruses.

***Sculpture:* What led you to use charcoal? What does it provide you as a sculptural material?**

**LB:** When I arrived in Paris in 1990, I wanted to make works of art, but paintings were too expensive for me at the time. So I bought a pack of charcoal for barbecue at the supermarket in order to make charcoal drawings. By drawing with and assembling pieces of charcoal together, I started to discover, in France, the Korean culture in which I had been brought up. In Korea, we use charcoal when we make soy sauce, and when we build houses, we bury a lot of charcoal in the ground and build the house on top of it. The ink used in calligraphy is also made of charcoal. I realized that I came from an important culture of black charcoal ink. Coal is the pure mineral that is left after having burnt out ordinary materials. For me, it represented the final form of all matter in the world. I wanted to show the properties of this pure and infinite material through my sculptures.



*Issu du feu* (detail), 2018. Charcoal and rubber band, 130 x 90 x 90 cm. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Perrotin

***Sculpture:* You make your own charcoal. How do you do it and why?**

**LB:** The color of charcoal varies according to the type of wood you burn. Coal is black but there are infinite hues to it: cold black, warm black, clear black, cloudy/dense black, deep black, shallow black, transparent black, etc. Black absorbs all colors and lights, but charcoal reflects light. It is a black material that produces light. I choose and burn the trees myself in order to better reveal the properties of this material. The furnace in which the coal is baked is made out of ochre soil in the shape of an igloo, three meters in height and three meters in diameter. I burn the wood in it for about 15 days, and then let it cool for another 15 days. It is like baking pottery. At the end of this process, only carbonized wood is left.

***Sculpture:* Could you tell us about the new charcoal sculptures you are showing at Perrotin?**

**LB:** The charcoal installation consists of 24 pieces of pine wood (140 centimeters in height by 90 centimeters in diameter) that were baked in the traditional Korean way. I installed this charcoal across the entire gallery space. My inspiration for this installation comes from the prehistoric dolmens that are found in my hometown in Korea, Cheong Do. They are similar to the Carnac stones in Brittany, France. These pieces of coal imply death, but they also contain a certain energy within them. As a mineral material, they symbolize the earth and the chaos of nature. The concept of this exhibition, therefore, was to make people walk through these pieces of charcoal scattered in the gallery space: to experience a promenade along pieces of the chaos of nature placed in a manmade architectural structure. The work *Landscape* expresses a territory or the surface of continents by fixing charcoal on top of a flat surface. I wanted to create a space where charcoal, the chaos created by fire, and human sensibility could meet.



Installation view of "Lee Bae: Promenade," Perrotin, New York, 2019. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli, Courtesy the artist and Perrotin

***Sculpture:* Why is the gallery floor covered in mulberry paper?**

**LB:** Mulberry paper is a traditional paper made in Korea. In Korean houses, we take off our shoes before stepping inside, so traditionally, we applied mulberry paper on the walls and on the floor, polishing it with soybean oil. By covering the gallery floor with mulberry paper, I wanted to evoke the interior of a traditional Korean house and convey to the viewers the fact that the pieces of coal placed in the space have come a long way from Korea. I also wanted to create a neutral Korean space. Mulberry paper has the property of absorbing light, so it expands the sense of space for people inside.