

PRESSBOOK

LEE Bae

Whitelies

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WHITELIES

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STORIES

BLACK MATTER

IN CONVERSATION
WITH LEE BAE

- *Artist* -

PHOTOGRAPHY

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Lee Bae & Perrotin

*“In my imagination, charcoal would be
the last material remaining
on the surface of the earth had
the apocalypse occurred.”*

– Lee Bae

Lee Bae, born in 1956, is a South Korean artist who works with great skill and virtuosity in his favorite medium: coal. Two of his solo shows took place in France last spring; ‘Black Mapping’ at Galerie Perrotin in Paris and the other, entitled ‘Plus de lumière’, at the Fondation Maeght in Saint Paul de Vence.

This morning, Lee greets us with a Korean ginseng tea in which he has delicately blended honey. It is in his studio on the Ourcq canal in Paris, France that he welcomes us among his canvases with a smile on his lips.





"Issu du feu"

2000

Charcoal with rubber band

LEE BAE



“Issu du feu”
2000

Charcoal with rubber band



"Landscape"
2014

Burned tree trunks

Hello, glad to meet you Lee Bae! You have been living in Paris since 1990. Today, you are welcoming us in your studio in the 19th arrondissement of Paris. Could you tell us a little more about this space? How long have you been working here?

I've been working here since the building opened in 1999, ten years after I first came to Paris. The day of the inauguration, I was even the first one to arrive. This studio was managed by the City of Paris. Before, I was working in a large squat in Pantin and then moved to a huge warehouse – an abandoned tank factory in Issy-les-Moulineaux – with about fifty other artists.

It has been over twenty-five years since you arrived in France but South Korea remains very important to you, therefore you often return there.

I have always gone back and forth between France and South Korea and I split my time between the two studios I work in. I settled in Paris with the goal of developing my art internationally. When I lived in Korea, there were very few art spaces. When I left however, the country's art scene suddenly started to expand and many galleries opened. If I had worked with charcoal in Korea, nobody would have been interested. It was too common, too banal a material. On the other hand, in France, it allowed me to evolve not as a craftsman but instead, as an artist.

And it is only once in Paris that you started working with coal and the colour black, two elements of importance in South Korean traditions and culture. Was using them a way of keeping in touch with your roots at a time when you were far away?

Indeed, in Asia, black belongs to tradition and to the culture of calligraphy. In Korea, coal is part of daily life. It is used every spring to prepare and filter soy sauce. To build a house, one has to excavate the earth and place salt and coal at its foundations. The house is then protected from insects and humidity, with the coal preventing wild grass from growing all around it. And it's nice to live in, the air is pure. My father, who was a peasant, had told me that it wasn't up to me to master the earth but, on the contrary, that I should be attentive to it. It is similar with charcoal. I observe it, and it is only by looking at it with attention that I discover many things. Its black, for instance, is not simply black, but the black of chaos, of the origins, of age-old traditions. What I smell in it is the fragrance of my own culture. However, these are not the true reasons I started to work with charcoal. There real ones are, as a matter of fact, much more pragmatic. When I left South Korea, I was teaching art in high school. When I arrived in Paris however, I didn't have enough money to buy paint. I was an unknown artist, a foreigner – I didn't have sufficient income to live, to rent a workspace and to buy supplies. When I moved in to my studio, there was a gas station that sold bags of charcoal right across from it. One day I bought a bag and started to draw with it. And then did so every day, all day long. I had found a solution!

And today, do you still buy your coal at gas stations?

Oh no – I go to burn coal in South Korea!

We actually recently read an article saying that most of the coal sold in South Korea was carried though Russia and Japan after being produced in North Korea. Do you know where your charcoal comes from?

What you read is what's happening with coal mines. The charcoal I use comes directly from the wood that I burn and carbonize. I collect it from a forest that I know, close to my hometown. I used to carbonize my charcoal in France between 1990 and 1999, close to Bordeaux, but this carbonization didn't create the shades I was looking for. In Korea, the wood is harder because it has to resist both the freezing winters and great summer heat. The density of the material is therefore different, allowing a whole range of shades and hues to be created.

We just saw a Netflix documentary called "Jiro Dreams of Sushi", about a culinary maestro in Japan who makes the world's best sushi. He dries, burns, and handles his seaweed following very precise methods, transforming this rough material into something delicate and malleable. Do you also have a secret recipe with the charcoal? What is your working process with it? Which steps do you go through to transform and use this substance?

First I pick the wood. It is then cut and carbonized at a very high temperature, in a huge traditional ceramic oven, in my hometown. It looks like a 10-foot long kind of igloo. This process takes a lot of time, about a month altogether, with 15 days for carbonization and 15 days where we let the wood cool down. Once the material is dense and compact, I cut the charcoal with a jigsaw and I sand it with gum arabic, a very natural material, in order to paste it.

All this process takes place in South Korea? Is it also there that you assemble your work or do you do it in France?

Yes, everything takes place over there, because it requires a lot of space, which I don't have here in Paris. Here, in my studio, I mostly work the acrylic medium that I mix with charcoal powder from Korea. It is what I use to paint these canvases you can see on the walls.

And when we observe at some of your framed work, the ones resembling mosaic or charcoal tile layouts, we get the impression of seeing mappings or fields, as if looked at from the window of a plane. You often talk about abstraction, but isn't there also a real relationship to landscape in your paintings?

It might indeed be the result, but depicting a landscape is not my first intention. My idea of a charcoal collage, piece by piece, is more of a spiritual landscape. It is also a symbolic representation of my creation process. I have this image of a tree that grows on the top of a hill that I cut. The tree represents what really exists, before the carbonization process. In my picture, I recompose and regenerate

the tree. I lay it down on the canvas. I like this aspect of my work. I destroy the tree, I reconstruct it, and at the end, the essence of the tree is still there. And I don't control the shape it will take, I am not looking to create a symmetrical mosaic. Everything is arbitrary.

Speaking of arbitrary – it seems like chance has played an important role in your artistic path. It is by chance that you came across this bag of charcoal at the gas station, the shapes that you create also seem to emerge from chance, in a spontaneous way. On that matter, we read that you involved your body in your creation process by actually repeating your movements a great number of times before laying the material on the canvas? Is this corporeal discipline a way of mastering the unplanned?

No, on the contrary actually. Everything I paint is spontaneous. I don't develop my work in a logical or scientific way. I do go through dozens of sketches before moving to the canvas, but I never think about what I will paint or represent prior to the moment I start painting. It is only after that can I realize that a shape drawn from a random gesture looks like the fruit from a tree that I know. Take this painting, for instance. Once it was finished, I looked at it while listening to classical music on the radio and it is only then that it made me think of the movements of a conductor. Blind chance is a sensation. And everything comes from this blind chance. Even our identity. We all have completely different DNAs, memories, cultures – I am the son of a peasant. I learnt to walk on clay. Maybe you learnt how to walk on concrete – others, on sand. All of this makes me I continually ask myself: who am I? I am an artist, but it doesn't mean I know art. I ask myself questions about art and ask questions to art. This is precisely the purpose of my work.

Do you mean you wish to access to a feeling that represents art?

I would rather access the world. When it comes to art, it is impossible to understand everything. The particular work of a particular artist can't say something universal about art. Regarding my own practice, I only work with one method. Every morning, I do the same exercises, the same specific gestures. By doing that, I discovered that my own body had memorized these movements. Our body is a memory of life!

We have been talking a lot about Korea, but how did your Parisian or international anchoring also impact your work? Especially since black and charcoal also have powerful symbolic meanings in modern Western culture. Charcoal usually refers to the early industrial era, to mine workers. In your interviews, you also tend to associate black with purity. However, in the French language, it is always evoked by white while black is more often related to darkness, menace, opacity.

I also go back and forth between those ideas. I do not work solely with black. On the contrary, I actually focus on light through my use of the colour black. Additionally, for me, charcoal is a material that evokes chaos – an idea that is not that far from what black is associated with French. However, this chaos is also extremely pure. There are not set against one another. In my imagination, charcoal would be the last material remaining on the surface of the earth had the apocalypse occurred.

This idea is particularly interesting when thinking of the context we are living in. Wood and coal are respectively a raw material and a fossil fuel. These materials you use in your artistic practice have reached new scopes and meanings with the ecological crisis. They are a core element of the debate on resource depletion and the concerns it triggers.

Yes, this is true. Last September, when I was at the Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul de Vence, an American woman who came to me and started talking about that. She told me: "You have to do a show in Los Angeles – Californians are so scared of coal with all the wildfires! They fear everything will perish because of them!". She came back three times to tell me this: "When are you going to do an exhibition in Los Angeles? Californians will be delighted with your work, because your charcoal is positive! You don't portray it as dangerous or threatening. Your coal has a sense of rebirth! This message needs to be spread."

So, from your point of view, this medium refers to a strong, pure and restful natural environment. Earlier on, you mentioned these freezing winters and suffocating summers thanks to Korean wood, which once carbonized, provides a wide range of shades. Could you tell us a little bit more about your colour palette?

Wooden charcoal is, as far as I know, the only material providing such an exceptional black. In it, one can observe a range of colours going from gray to blue. It absorbs light to reflect it with even more radiance and intensity. Charcoal preserves and contrast. It stands between light and shade, opacity and brightness. This common and "poor" material is actually extremely rich!

This recalls a very famous verse from Baudelaire "You gave me your mud and I turned it into gold". What you do with charcoal is, in a sense, quite similar, traveling from shadow to light. Also literally: you value this material. And you gave it a market value! You precisely chose this material because it was inexpensive and created very valuable art from it – a very good business model!

Ah, it is not my business, it's the gallery's.

The gallery you mention is the Galerie Perrotin in Paris, where you just completed a solo show last Spring. At that same moment, you were having an exhibition at the Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul de Vence. Could

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"Landscape"
2011

Charcoal on canvas

“My idea of a charcoal collage, piece by piece, is more of a spiritual landscape.”

– Lee Bae

you tell us a bit more about the way those exhibitions contrasted or communicated with one another? Were they thought and planned together?

No, the fact that my two big shows were held at the same time was – once again – a pure coincidence. We had been thinking about the Fondation Maeght exhibition for three years already. On the other hand, the exhibition at the gallery was only scheduled a year ago, just after my encounter with Emmanuel Perrotin in South Korea in January 2017. At the end of the day however, the two exhibitions echoed one another. By displaying two different aspects of my production – with installations at the Fondation Maeght for example – they created some sort of dialogue. And these two spaces are so different. They cannot show art in the same way. The first time I went to the Fondation Maeght, it was about three years ago. There was this sculpture by Alberto Giacometti: “The Walking Man”.

A few months later, I saw that same piece at MoMa. There, “The Walking Man” was a frazzled and strained New-York hurrying in the city’s streets. He was a gaunt person and a tortured soul. When I came back to the Fondation, I observed it once again. It was the exact same sculpture, but this time, “The Walking Man” was a slender and peaceful monk out on a promenade – it then appeared to me that this place is more a monastery than it is a museum. There, I could not simply display my work. On the contrary, I wished to create a true dialogue with the space, to adapt to it and let it find its relationship to my work.

The process was completely different for the exhibition at the Galerie Perrotin. This was my first solo show in a worldwide well-known gallery – which has an instantaneous impact. If I displayed one of my paintings there, people would immediately call me. It’s a beautiful and powerful showcase for any artist. Everyone has its eyes on it. There is no need for speeches or conversation, the gallery has already prepared everything. It is a window on the art world. What mattered most was then to display my work in an accurate and meaningful way rather than trying to build a particular relationship with the space. It’s quite an intimidating thing. There was a lot of pressure. I kept on telling myself: if my exhibition is a failure, I will be done as an artist!

Overall, 2018 has been a very busy year for you! And a turning point in your career, with these two major shows in two renowned art institutions. How does one reinvent oneself after that? What is the next step?

There are a lot of things I still need to achieve! As an artist, I haven’t reached a certain level yet. This whole system is a long and complex conversation between the artist and the gallery, the collectors and the museums – and truly taking part in it requires quite some time. I am still at a point where I need to practice!

And will you continue practicing with black and charcoal?

He nods.

STORIES



“Issu du feu”
2002

Charcoal on canvas

LEE BAE



"Issu du feu"
2002

Charcoal on canvas

“Suspens”
2016

Charcoal with
rubber band





"Issu du feu"

2002

by Lee Bac