

**LEE Mingwei**

*Artists in Residence: Lee Mingwei*

*August 2020*

# Artists in Residence

## Lee Mingwei

interview by Adeline Chia



“My projects come from a place similar to dreams. They all existed somewhere in the universe”

Known for his participatory conceptual performances, Taiwanese-born Lee Mingwei was due to open his first solo exhibition in Europe at the Gropius Bau in Berlin on 27 March, before, in his own words, “the sky fell in”. Plans dashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, he created two new “digital activations” that were hosted online prior to the physical opening of the show on 11 May. The first, *Invitation for Dawn*, scheduled an appointment with an opera singer, who sang to you, one-to-one, via video conference, a song chosen by the singer that signals the coming of a new day. The second was *Letter to Oneself*, which invited contributors to write letters to themselves and send them to Gropius Bau, where they were displayed in the exhibition.

Lee’s show, *禮 Li, Gifts and Rituals*, is partly centred around the Confucian idea of *li*, an overarching framework for human behaviour that includes rites ranging from tea-drinking and table etiquette to mourning and proper governance. *Li* is also the Chinese word for ‘gift’, which harks back to a pillar of Lee’s practice that treats art as a transformative gift from one person to another.

The show also features a major new installation, *Our Peaceable Kingdom* (2020), based on American folk-painter (and Quaker minister) Edward Hicks’s 1833 painting *Peaceable Kingdom*. Hicks had made over 60 paintings exploring the idea of peace, featuring animals, Native Americans and white people together in a pastoral idyll. Lee invited 11 artists from around the world to copy Hicks’s painting, as well as riff on the idea of peace portrayed in it. Those artists then invited other artists to copy *their* works. The result is an installation comprising 27 paintings executed in a range of styles, displayed on stands in such a way that they appear to ripple out from the source painting. A sneak peek Lee sent via Skype showed a classically Chinese painting of animal menageries and a work from Afghanistan depicting two men embracing against a gold-leaf sun.

Ahead of the rescheduled exhibition opening, *ArtReview Asia* caught up with Lee in New York, where he currently lives, and chatted with him about his new work, thoughtful gifts and when he last cried (spoiler: it’s during this interview).

ARTREVIEW ASIA *How’s life in New York?*

LEE MINGWEI My husband and I live on the 23rd floor of an apartment in the Financial District. I’m literally looking out of my window at the Stock Exchange on Wall Street. I see only two people on the street. And one dog.

John is an IT engineer for Microsoft. Because of the high volume of internet usage, Microsoft is a bit overwhelmed, so he is working extremely hard. As for me, I’m talking to museums and thinking of different possibilities.

I usually prepare lunch and dinner, going through different recipe books we bought but never really had the chance to try out. Hopefully we don’t get too fat after two to three months of self-quarantine.

Every day we go out and take a walk for about an hour, of course respecting social distancing. Then we come home and have dinner. In the evening, we would watch a virtual opera.

ARA *Are you feeling any anxiety during this time?*

LM Maybe it’s my personality, but I just think, I’m facing this crisis that everyone else is facing. I’m not alone. Which makes me feel wonderful. If I’m facing this alone, or part of a small group of people feeling this, and the rest of the world goes on living, then I’d probably feel a bit anxious.

Hopefully [the pandemic] will jolt all of us out of a sense of normality. We can’t keep doing what we’re doing. What we’re doing for a long time is unacceptable to the environment and the inequalities among people. Hopefully this will give us a different view of how we can live together, share resources and help each other.

ARA *Can you walk us through the concept behind Our Peaceable Kingdom?*

“Maybe it’s my personality, but I just think, I’m facing this crisis that everyone else is facing. I’m not alone. Which makes me feel wonderful”

LM I had an idea about 12, 14 years ago of using Edward Hicks’s painting *Peaceable Kingdom* as a point of departure to address two different issues. What is peace? And how do we, each of us living in different cultures, heritages and social situations, interpret the idea of peace?

I picked Hicks because, when I was living in Berkeley during the early 1990s, I walked into this amazing bookstore called Pegasus Books and encountered this collection of paintings by Hicks, all 63, 64 versions of the same painting, called *Peaceable Kingdom*. It was his idea of what peace was, inspired by a passage in the Bible. I thought, ‘Oh, that’s fascinating’, because at that time I was quite interested in the Quakers’ idea of peace, which advocates nonviolence.

The painting was so amazing, with these animals with big eyes, and children hugging animals, and Indians and white people living

*facing page* *Guernica in Sand*, 2006–20 (installation view, *Lee Mingwei and His Relations*, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2015). Courtesy Taipei Fine Arts Museum

peacefully together. I thought that a way to talk about peace among different people is to take Hicks’s painting and then ask other people to copy, not only in terms of physically copying the painting, but also to learn something about the Quakers’ idea of peace and to interpret it in their own vision of what that could be.

When the show opens, you’ll see the original painting from 1833 in the gallery, surrounded by 32 paintings by different artists. Each artist writes a small statement about the thinking behind their interpretation. They will be all assembled and placed on individual easels. It will be more of an installation, rather than a series of paintings on the wall.

Every artist’s participation is important. How do we make it everyone’s artwork, not just Lee Mingwei’s? So there’s a lot of discourse about ownership, about creativity and about us as a group of artists trying to create a work that expresses a similarity, but which comprises elements that are hugely individual.

One artist asked: what if I want to sell the work? I had to explain to him that that probably would not be ideal. My mission is to try to keep these all together, and then hopefully it would be acquired by an institution and therefore all the money will be divided among the artists. That would be the most egalitarian way of taking care of this work.

ARA *You got the idea for this artwork 12, 14 years ago. Is it fair to say your ideas take their time? Can you share more about your conceptualisation process?*

LM I often do not look for ideas. They find me. It’s almost like, tonight you go to bed, you wake up tomorrow morning, and you had a dream. You didn’t go out to look for the dream. The dream came to you because you’re ready to receive these images and emotions, and in a way they change you slightly. That’s how I see all of my projects. They come from a place similar to dreams. They all existed somewhere in the universe.

ARA *Your output is slow, about one or two works a year. Do you feel any pressure to create more quickly?*

LM I know a lot of my dear friends have pressure from galleries to create works so that they can help them place a work at exhibition. That’s perfectly brave. Luckily the gallery I’m working with, Perrotin, they say, “Have fun, do whatever you want”. That allows a lot of freedom and creativity.

ARA *Is there anything that makes you angry? Or frustrates you?*

[Long silence]

LM I’m thinking when I last got... flustered.

ARA *Mine was this morning.*



Iceable Kingdom, 2020 (installation view, 禮 Li, Gifts and Rituals, Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2020). Photo: Laura Fiorio



above Guernica in Sand, 2006/20 (installation view, 禮 Li, Gifts and Rituals, Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2020). Photo: Laura Fiorio

LM Oh, OK. When I was installing in Gropius, this was three weeks ago, before the sky fell in. My team, they were all installing. So how it works is that, at around four, I'd say, "You guys take your time, I'm going home to cook for everyone". When I went home, I started preparing and realised that I was out of rice. I haphazardly started creating this semi-Taiwanese, semi-German, semi-Italian dinner. It was horrendous. Terrible. It was just really horrible. They asked, "Mingwei, what happened?"

ARA What did you cook?

LM It was a blob of grey stuff. That has been the most frustrating and unforgiving moment.

ARA Are you a thoughtful gifter in your personal life?

LM I hope I am. Our apartment in Paris is in the Marais, and we have this wonderful older gay couple living on the second floor. Our apartment is on the third floor. The gift I gave them the last time, I brought a small Taiwanese tea for them because they never tasted Taiwanese tea and they always gave us chocolate and homemade croissants. I also brought them Taiwanese wuyuzi [mullet roe].

ARA What's the best gift you've been given?

LM I was doing *Sonic Blossom* in Beijing, a piece where an opera singer comes up to a stranger and gifts him or her a song. It was the last day of *Sonic Blossom* and I was watching the last song. Surprisingly, the singer came walking toward me, and said, "Lee laoshi [Mandarin for 'teacher'], may I give you the last song?" I thought, I don't want to do this. Because I know I would be in a terrible condition to receive the gift. But OK. So when I sat down, and the singer started singing, I start to tear up. Suddenly, all six other singers started appearing from different corners and, in unison, continued singing the song. And that was the last straw.

I could not stop crying. In the end, we all came together and started hugging in a circle. No one could finish the song and it was terrible.

ARA Are you someone who cries easily?

LM Yes, unfortunately. Especially when I get older. I'm fifty-six now, as I get older, I get a lot more emotional, and it will be worse when I get to sixty and seventy. Maybe that's because I never remember crying when I was young and it all got piled up. So it started coming out.

ARA When was the last time you cried?

LM When I was going through the last few rounds of the installation at Gropius Bau, two weeks ago, and saying goodbye to all the artists...

ARA Hello?

LM Hello, sorry.

ARA Wait, are you crying right now?

LM Yeah. Because the sky is falling outside, but they insisted that they would finish installing and told me to leave. There were 30-plus local artists helping to create *Guernica in Sand*, installing the work... [trails off]



ARA You had to leave the Gropius Bau in a hurry. They had to take over the installation.

LM I only had 12 hours to prepare and to leave. It was all very sudden. When Trump said we're going to close the borders, and Merkel said we can't travel, we already had 90 percent installed. We had been working for about two weeks. What I had to do with the curator was to share how I envisioned the installation, but of course it was really up to them. I trusted their intuition and

*Sonic Blossom*, 2013/20 (installation view, 禮 Li, Gifts and Rituals, Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2020). Photo: Laura Fiorio

judgement, and if they had any questions they could just give me a call. And they did an absolutely beautiful job.

ARA How do you spend your time in a year?

LM My parents, one of my siblings and her family still live in Taipei, and I go back four or five times a year, each time I stay two to three weeks. I love being back in Taiwan. My parents are in their late eighties, and also still very healthy. They just came back from playing golf. My dad is a physician, he is eighty-nine and still has his own clinic. He starts at seven in the morning and finishes at 12 and goes to play golf with my mum. It's very beautiful the way he handles his old age.

The rest of the time I'm in New York or Paris or on the airplane flying somewhere.

ARA What are you reading now?

LM I'm reading *Dong Jing Meng Hua Lu* (*The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendour*), written in tenth-century China. During the Song Dynasty, there's the Northern Song period and the Southern Song period. The Southern Song period happened after the northern China area was taken over by barbarians (well, they were called barbarians, but they were nomads). So the court went to the south. This book was written by someone who had a very vivid memory of what the Northern Song capital was like. This book includes not only the official layout of the city, the names of the streets, the palaces, the rituals, but also the most important things – the professions, the artists, the singers. Who were the best singers at that time? What were the most interesting restaurants? What food did they sell, on what street – it's fascinating. It's almost like having a tour guide of the capital of Northern Song.

ARA Like a Song Dynasty Lonely Planet?

LM Exactly, it's a thousand-year-old *Lonely Planet*. You should get ahold of this book. He even talks about the most famous geisha at that time. It's like a thousand years from now someone says the most famous singer in New York was Beyoncé. He's talking about a civilisation that is no longer there. The book is kind of eerie for me to read, because it could be something that could happen to us in the not too far future.

Lee Mingwei: 禮 Li, Gifts and Rituals is on view at Gropius Bau, Berlin, to 12 July