

# ArtReview Asia



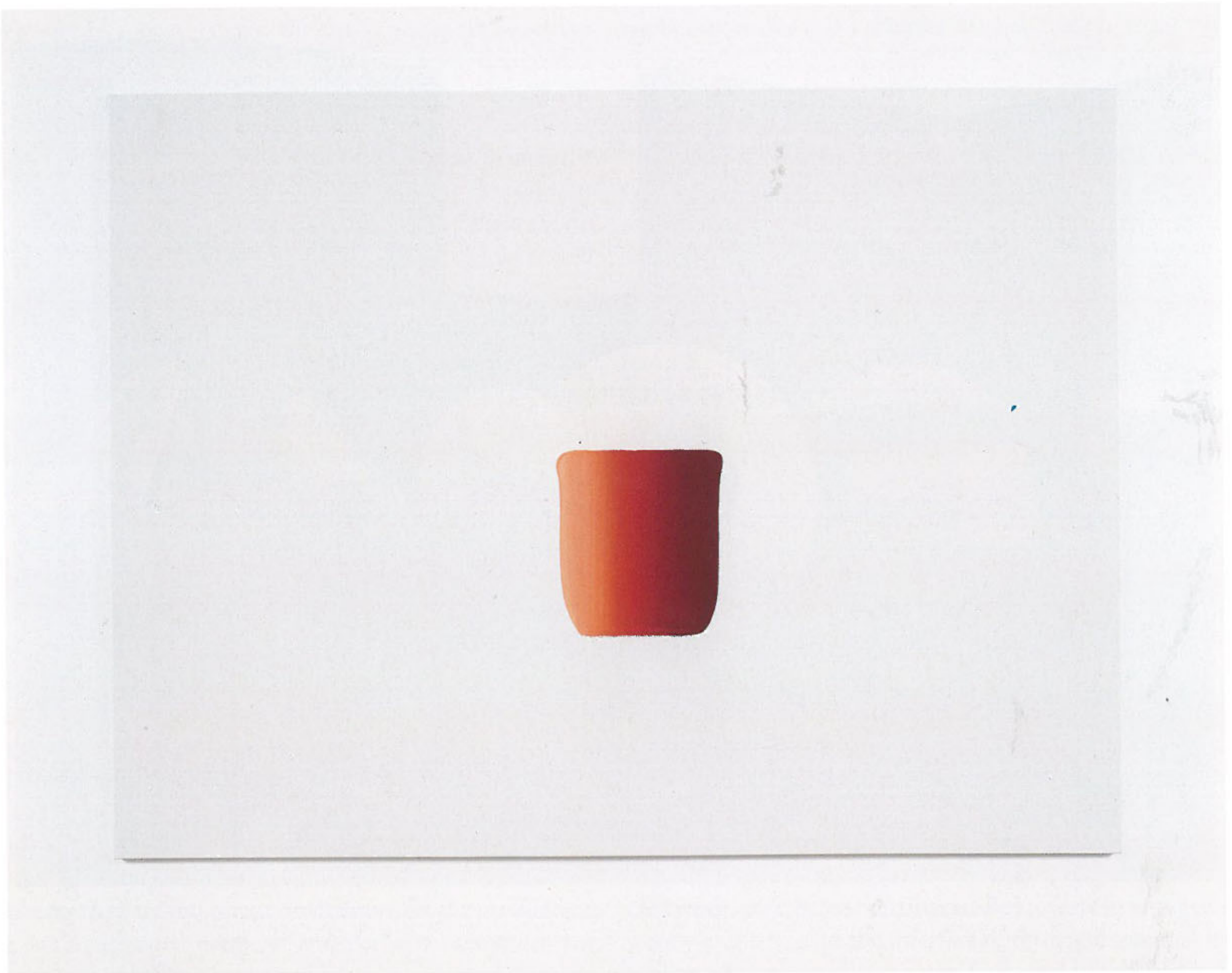
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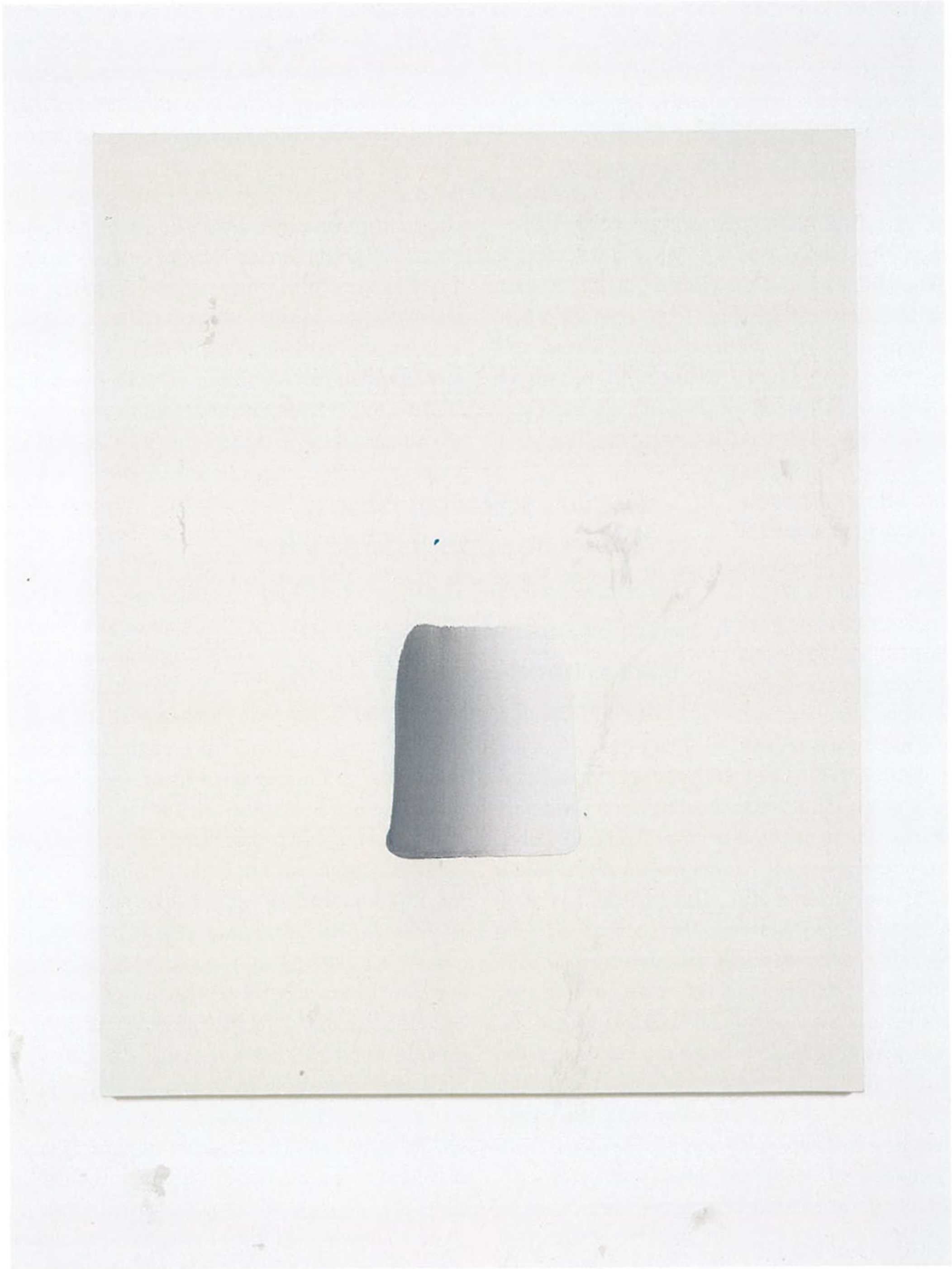


# Lee Ufan

*by Wenny Teo*



One of the leading lights of both Mono-ha and Dansaekhwa, for the past five decades the influential Korean artist has fused Eastern and Western philosophy to make works that concentrate attention on the slowness of experience, the encounter of human and natural orders, and the silent language of things





*above Dialogue, 2014, watercolour, paper, 106 cm × 76 cm*  
*opening pages, left Dialogue, 2014, oil on canvas, 218 cm × 291 cm × 6 cm*  
*opening pages, right Dialogue, 2014, oil on canvas, 227 × 182 × 6 cm*

On an unusually sunny spring morning in London, I found myself standing in the bright atrium of Lisson Gallery, surrounded by Lee Ufan's most recent *Dialogue* paintings (2006–). In the natural light, the four large bare canvases on display appeared even more starkly exposed; throwing into sharp relief the solitary tract of graduated colour that hovers just below the centre of each. At first glance, these singular blocks of paint look as though they'd been pressed onto the canvas with the single stroke of a broad brush. Closer inspection reveals an intricate build-up of pigment, glue and crushed stone, meticulously applied over an extended period of time. This dense accretion of painterly detail agitates the empty surrounds of first canvas, then gallery space, charging both with a palpable energy that is difficult to describe.

Indeed, although I have admired Lee's work for as long as I can remember, I still struggle to define his practice in concrete terms, let alone articulate the visceral experience of encountering his paintings and installations firsthand. Against the sheer horror of blank page and blinking cursor, a familiar litany of art-historical keywords like 'materiality', 'process', 'seriality', 'phenomenology', 'abstraction' and, of course, 'Minimalism', come to mind, but not necessarily to the rescue. While these terms are effective descriptors of Lee's formal rigour and stylistic affinities, they also implicitly serve to affix the work of this groundbreaking Korean artist, philosopher and theorist within a distinctly Euro-American art-historical narrative, which is of course problematic. This is after all an artist who was at the forefront of the Japanese Mono-ha and Korean Dansaekhwa groups during the late 1960s and early 70s – two seminal artistic developments that challenged the hegemony of Western Modernism and paved the way for so-called 'global turn' to come.

Of these, Lee is best known as the chief proponent and theorist of Mono-ha, or the 'School of Things', that emerged in a period marked by geopolitical tension, student protests and a radical interrogation of Japanese identity. The artists associated with Mono-ha did not actively speak out or speak up against the powers that be, but rather let their 'things' speak for themselves. The exhibition includes a signature example of this tendency, tastefully enclosed in a small external courtyard. *Relatum – A Rest* (2013) consists of a large unpolished stone, cleanly positioned on an obsidian glass-covered steel plate. Moving around this terse juxtaposition of natural and industrial materials, one immediately sees the tropes and technics of Minimalism and Arte Povera, albeit through a glass, darkly. In an early version of this series from 1968, Lee cracked the steel support, so that it looked as though the stone had been suddenly dropped from above, or that the smooth, industrially wrought surface had naturally fissured under its weight; a metaphor, perhaps, for how Lee's work exerts pressure on, or even shatters, the illusion of art history as a coherent, unified field whose parameters have been sharply defined by the West.

Yet, in an effort to circumnavigate the deeply ingrained pitfalls of Eurocentricism in describing Lee's practice, I find myself gravitating instead towards the equally riddled terrain of East Asian philosophical language and their approximate English translations – to Japanese words like *deai* ('encounter'), *soku* ('in-between') and *ryôgesei* ('ambiguity'). These terms frequently crop up in Lee's own

writing, as do references to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault. It is tempting to ascribe the elusive power of his work to the subtleties of Eastern philosophy, or evoke postcolonial notions of hybridity, liminality and in-between-ness, and certainly the artist's own cross-cultural biography lends itself to the ever-pertinent questions of identity politics. Lee was born in Korea in 1936 under Japanese colonial rule and moved to Japan during the 1950s. Despite achieving success as an artist, philosopher and theorist, he was always classified somewhat pejoratively, as a *zainichi*, an ethnic Korean. In his native Korea, on the other hand, Lee's long-term affiliation with Japan was regarded suspiciously, particularly at a time when many artists were seeking to define a unique, national artistic identity. When Lee later exhibited in Europe, he was simply regarded as 'Asian', but no less marginalised for it.

More recently, however, Lee's contribution to the expanded field of global art practices has been stridently acknowledged and openly celebrated. His critically acclaimed retrospective *Making Infinity* was held in the New York Guggenheim in 2011, and last year he became the fourth artist commissioned to produce a spectacular body of work for the gardens of Versailles. There's even an entire museum dedicated to his oeuvre, designed by Tadao Ando, on the island of Naoshima in Japan, opened in 2010. Lee's paintings and installations have been included in major museum collections around the world, and his *Dialogue* paintings appear perfectly at home in the pristine white space of Lisson Gallery.

Or do they? Looking again at one of his greyscale brushstrokes and observing their delicately fading patina of crushed stone and pigment, I am reminded of a passage in a book, appropriately titled *The Emigrants* (1992), by the German writer W.G. Sebald: 'He felt closer to dust, he said, than to light, air or water. There was nothing he found so unbearable as a well-dusted house, and he never felt more at home than in places where things remain undisturbed, muted under the grey, velvety sinter left when matter dissolved, little by little, into nothingness.' This desire to still time, or rather a protracted interest in the accretion, slowing or suspension of time, might well be a trait shared by those who have never quite been able to settle. This is something that can be seen in Lee's painterly process and methodology as well: in order to make each mark, the artist crouches on a wooden plank stretched across the surface of the canvas, and holds his breath for the duration of each carefully applied brushstroke. Lee waits for each layer to dry before moving on to the next, and thus, a single canvas sometimes takes months to complete.

It is curious, then, that it was the work of Jackson Pollock that provided the catalyst for Lee's experimentations with the medium in the 1970s. Whereas Pollock's action paintings are characterised by gestural freedom, as well as the concomitant values of originality, individualism and 'genius' embodied by such spontaneous acts of artistic creation, Lee takes his time. There is a sense of resistance here that presents a distinct challenge to both the heroic mythologies of Modernism and the inexorable thrust of modernity itself. Indeed, in a period marked by the radical reassessment of capitalist values, as much as an interrogation of Western artistic signification, 'the canvas was a territory', as Lee phrased it. But while contemporaneous artistic movements in Japan like Gutai took up the call to arms through

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expressive, performative acts of destruction, Lee pared down his work to its most basic components, entering instead into what he calls 'a dialogue with practices of not-producing and not-creating'.

Lee is genial and avuncular in person, and at the age of seventy-nine, he shows no sign of slowing down whatsoever. He divides his time between studios in Japan and France when not overseeing the installation of his pieces in various galleries and museums throughout the world. In these numerous exhibitions, his work is often described as 'an art of emptiness' – a reference to the concept of *yohaku*, which traditionally refers to the voluminous negative space most often seen in classical East Asian painting. To the artist, however, *yohaku* is more than an emptiness that signifies. He describes it as 'an open site of power in which things and space interact vividly'. There is no doubt a politics in this, as well as a sense of immediacy that acts against the sedimentation of time in his painterly practice. I wonder if more recent events, like the Fukushima disaster, for example, have affected Lee's views on the agency of 'things' and the urgency of artistic action.

"Art in its deepest places is always about politics," Lee says, "but art is not a weapon. Demonstrating and making noise isn't the only form that politics takes." The only tool that artists have at their disposal, Lee suggests, is the ability to express images and emotions, in the hope of triggering questions related to the larger structures of power in contemporary society – questions of rampant consumerism, the forces of industrialisation and capitalism, and the constant pressure we feel continually to perform under these conditions. This critical investigation of the relationship between subjects and objects lies at the heart of Lee's practice. There is a clear antihumanist thread that runs through both his paintings and installations – an eco-aesthetic critique of how manmade forces gradually violate the natural world, deforming our shared environment. At the same time, one detects a socially engaged concern with the often unseen forces of power

exerted upon us in everyday life, manipulating, objectifying and even dehumanising us as a result.

We might draw a productive comparison between Lee's artistic endeavours and the well-known idea, proposed by Bruno Latour, that 'we have never been modern'. Rather than perpetuate the modernist opposition between nature and culture, subject and object, we should instead reconsider the agency of human and nonhuman actors alike, moving towards a hybridised structure that forces us to acknowledge what he calls a 'parliament of things'. As the art historian Joan Kee argues in her book *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansekhwa and the Urgency of Method* (2013), Lee was not simply attempting to refute Western ideas of signification. Rather, Lee ambitiously sought to 'bring forth a different kind of world, one brought together by a desire for parity, rather than hierarchy, among its constituents'.

Shortly before I leave the exhibition, I take one final look around, and find myself in small, darkened room where Lee's paradoxically titled work *Dialogue – Silence* (2013) has been installed. It consists of a single boulder placed in front of an empty canvas. There is an interesting spatial relationship established here between these inanimate objects that is somehow touchingly human. Lee obligingly stands in front of the flock of photographers summoned for the press preview and eager to capture the artist in front of his work. He obliges their requests for him to stand this way and that, shuffling uncomfortably towards the spotlight.

I find myself recollecting snippets from another piece of writing by Sebald, fragments from a poem also written in the 1960s, and published in an anthology entitled *Across the Land and the Water* (2011): 'Irony it is said/Is a form of humility... Time measures/Nothing but itself... One leaves behind one's portrait/Without intent.' ara

*An exhibition of work by Lee Ufan is at Lisson Gallery, London, through 9 May*



*Relatum – Rest, 2013,  
mixed media, dimensions variable*



*Dialogue – Silence*, 2013,  
virgin canvas, stone, dimensions variable

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