



LEE SEUNG-TAEK

## *Harnessing the elements*

*In the decade that followed the Korean War,  
a pioneer of the avant-garde began to stage  
dramatic but transient outdoor events that  
experimented with earth, smoke, wind and fire.*

*By Ashley Rawlings*



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On an overcast, windy afternoon in the fall of 1971, Lee Seung-taek and a group of friends ventured out onto Nanji Island on the Han River in Seoul, and unfurled three giant strips of scarlet cloth. With one person holding each end, the cloths rose with the wind, gradually unraveling to their full 80-meter lengths—three enormous red arcs, billowing, swaying and whipping in the sky. *Wind - Folk Amusement* is one of many large-scale outdoor works in which Lee gives form to the transience of nature.

The fluttering material in Lee's "Wind" series recalls the multicolored flags and banners of Korean folk festivals. In both this series and in other installations, Lee has employed the five cardinal colors: blue, red, yellow, white and black. Recurring throughout Korean classical art and architecture, these colors represent the Five Elements of ancient Chinese astrology—wood, fire, earth, metal and water, respectively—and it was thought that the interrelationship between these elements, together with the forces of *yin* and *yang*, influence all natural phenomena, including human fortunes. Lee has made dramatic use of earth, water, wind and fire throughout his career, but for all its echoes of tradition, his exploration of these materials is situated in the context of the postwar Korean avant-garde. His diverse body of work, which ranges from stealthy performances in public space to iconoclastic installations of found objects, is a celebration of irreverence, carefree provocation and a relentless desire to create striking and incongruous new visuals.

Lee's emergence as one of the most prolific experimental artists of 1960s Korea took place against the odds. In a telephone conversation with *ArtAsiaPacific* in April, he describes an early interest in art, but one that was heavily influenced by the political climate of the time. Born in 1932, he grew up in Gowon, a town near the coast northeast of Pyongyang, while the Korean peninsula was under Japanese occupation (1910–45). Following Japan's surrender at the end of World War II, life in the Soviet-controlled northern half of the country became dominated by Communist ideology. "My high-school art classes were mainly focused on painting and making bronze sculptures of Kim Il Sung and Stalin," he recalls. When war broke out with the US-backed South in 1950, Lee initially joined the anti-Communist resistance, but within weeks he and his family fled by boat, traveling farther down the coast to Jumunjin, where US and South Korean forces were stationed. In an effort to maximize the

1. Detail of **WIND - FOLK AMUSEMENT**, 1971, in which red sheets were flown in the wind in Seoul.

2. **BURNING CANVASES FLOATING ON THE RIVER**, 1964, installation on the Han River in Seoul.

3. **WIND**, 1969, installation with strips of white cloth attached to iron pipes, 5 x 30 x 50 m.



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family's chance of survival, Lee's parents decided that he (the third of four brothers) and his eldest brother should accompany their father, while his other brothers and their mother would remain in Gowon. None of them imagined that the division between North and South would become permanent, and today Lee still knows nothing about the fate of his family in the North.

The 19-year-old Lee joined the army and was stationed in Seoul. While fighting there, he was shot in his right knee, and was sent to a hospital at the very south of the peninsula to recover. Despite being honorably discharged and paid compensation, he rejoined the army's training division a year later, where he taught cartography. Shortly after the war's end in 1953, he entered the sculpture department of Hongik University, where he read the existential and nihilist writings of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Lee's first works evoke the misery of Korea's fate as a pawn caught between superpowers. His graduation piece, *History and Time* (1957), was a rough, worm-like crescent of plaster, painted dark red and blue, wrapped in barbed wire and suspended from the ceiling. Meanwhile, Lee's professors took advantage of the bronze-casting

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techniques he had learned in high-school, commissioning him to make a statue of General Douglas MacArthur in Incheon City in commemoration of the US commander's amphibious invasion there in September 1950. Following the monument's unveiling in 1957, Lee received numerous commissions from local governments for sculptures around the country—a lucrative profession that allowed him to realize his avant-garde ambitions.

The starting point for Lee's experimental approach can be found in *Godret Stone* (1958). The work was inspired by *godret* warp-weave looms, which use weights made of six to a dozen small stones carved into yo-yo-like discs and tied together with string. For his version, Lee carved much shallower and smoother grooves in the stones and strung them up on a bar of wood. He explains that when he made the piece in 1955, he did not originally think of it as an artwork; he simply wanted to decorate his room. However, over the next three years, he began to see that the work offered a different perception of stone, that something hard could be made to look soft—"I was the first person to make a squeezable stone!" he exclaims.

This shift toward exploring dematerialization was also inspired by images Lee happened across in daily life during the late 1950s. The first of these influential encounters was seeing a small newspaper photograph of one of Alberto Giacometti's signature sculptures of the human body reduced to a lean, minimal structure. "I wondered what would happen if I denied even the skeleton in Giacometti's work," Lee says. "Form was a very important element in art, but I would be making something formless. I agonized deeply over this idea. I thought I was insane." He was also inspired by images of immateriality in other contexts. He explains that during the 1960s (and until as recently as the 1990s), cinemas presented propaganda bulletins on South Korea's economic development before screening the main feature. He recalls a visit to the cinema during his student years, and his being struck by footage of smoke rising out of factory smokestacks and residential chimneys, a symbol of industrial progress, national prosperity and a call for all Koreans to engage in the reconstruction effort. "I realized that these are elements that I envisioned as formless works of art."

Since then, Lee has explored innumerable permutations of this

4. **GODRET STONE**, 1958, 18 small, carved stones tied to a wooden bar, 60 x 40 x 5 cm.

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he does not necessarily stage them for an audience,  
and he has no qualms if nobody witnesses them on-site.



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basic premise, an approach that he refers to as “non-sculpture.” And yet, in spite of his efforts, he was a tangential, lone-wolf figure in the South Korean art world of the 1960s, receiving little recognition from his peers. “At that time, there was no such thing as conceptual art in Korea,” he says. Indeed, the mainstream was characterized predominantly by paintings and sculptures by artists of the prewar generation, who continued to work in European Cubist and Fauvist styles. “Some professional artists and critics, such as Lee Il, appreciated my approach, but most ordinary people were cold toward it. Only a few were interested in seeing something new.”

During the 1960s and 1970s, South Korea's artists worked in relative isolation, developing their styles independently from trends in other countries. Some art magazines from Japan and the US were imported, but they were too expensive for most people. Among those of Lee's generation who sought to create new forms of expression were the members of the Contemporary Artists Association, founded in 1957 by Park Seo-bo and other artists in their 30s. Their exploration of dynamic, abstract brushwork and the materiality of paint bore a strong relation to the Art Informel movement in Europe. Although the French art critic and curator Michel Tapié promoted this movement in Japan in the late 1950s, influencing the members of the Osaka-based Gutai Art Association, historians debate to what degree, if any, information about these activities would have percolated into Korea while the country was still recovering from the war.

Likewise, Lee's work has formal and conceptual parallels with that of the Japanese Mono-ha artists, who were active between 1968 and 1972, and sought to draw attention to the interrelationships between natural materials through juxtaposition. Lee tells AAP that he was barely aware of artistic developments in other countries, and rarely had any interest in what little he saw. For him, the purpose of his art was to create visuals that were unexplored by his peers. “My art questions stereotypical notions of material. I work by looking at the world upside down. Most Korean artists followed the norm, but I took an oppositional stance to that.”

In an early work that signifies a literal rejection of convention,

5. UNTITLED, 1974, installation of black-and-white wooden planks placed on a royal tomb in South Korea.



entitled *Burning Canvases Floating on the River* (1964), Lee took three figurative paintings of the kind that represented the stolid old-guard of Korean modern art, set them alight and cast them adrift in the Han River at dusk. Lee has repeatedly made works along the Han, as it represents a fundamental bond between North and South Korea. By the same token, however, the South Korean military keeps the river under close surveillance as it is an easy route of infiltration. Lee explains that he was only able to execute *Burning Canvases* on Christmas Day, when security in the capital was relatively relaxed. As soon as he had set the canvases on the water and photographed them, he left the scene. How long the canvases floated there and whether or not anybody saw them remains unknown.

Though many of Lee's works are spectacular events, he does not necessarily stage them for an audience and he has no qualms if nobody witnesses them on-site. Nanji Island, a deserted, 280-hectare terrain within Seoul's metropolitan area, was an ideal place for experimentation, and he has performed many works there. One example was *Painting Water* (1979), in which he spray-painted river-like stripes of water-soluble blue and white pigment down the side of a sandy hill, where they remained until rain washed them away. For *Green Campaign* (1980), he hired a team of laborers for a day



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6. GREEN CAMPAIGN, 1980, site-specific installation on Nanji Island, Seoul, consisting of moss and black-and-white planks.

7. PAINTING WATER, 1979, performance documentation of the artist spray-painting pigments on Nanji Island, Seoul.

8. AT LAST, ART HAS BEEN GARBAGE, 1973, mixed-media installation featuring a painting of Jesus Christ in a pile of trash.



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to help him plant vast swathes of moss seeds and fertilizer across the island, with the plant flourishing over the following months. Throughout the sweeping installation, Lee laid down black-and-white wooden planks, marking off sections of the landscape. The artist models these planks on road barriers and uses them to redefine any setting, natural or manmade, as his artwork. At the same time, he takes a symbol of military checkpoints and the division of Korea and turns it into a depoliticized marker of territory.

Outdoor pieces such as these exemplify Lee's idea of “non-sculpture,” and yet he does not reject craftsmanship. His body of work includes solid sculptures of his own making, as well as assemblages composed of found objects. Lee's art-making is spontaneous to the point of incoherence; there are few obvious sequential developments in his style. He develops his ideas on a whim, sometimes coming back to them many years later and reworking them in a different context. One example is *At Last, Art Has Been Garbage* (1973), made when he discovered an abandoned painting of Jesus Christ in the street. Intrigued by the casual iconoclasm of discarding a painting of Jesus, as well as the phonetic similarity between the Korean words for Jesus (*yesu*) and art (*yesul*), Lee made an installation in which the painting stuck out from a pile of trash.

Just over a decade later, Lee revisited this associative connection he had made between art and trash, as an environmentalist subtext began to emerge in his practice. Not long after he had made *Green Campaign*, Nanji Island ceased to be a pleasant place to visit. South Korea's rapid industrialization during the 1970s and '80s brought environmental pollution with it, and Nanji Island, once rich in flora, was converted into a landfill site in 1978. Ultimately, 92 million tons of refuse were dumped on the island, resulting in two 90-meter-tall mountains of trash. As the damage to Nanji Island worsened, Lee responded by returning there in 1986 to stage a performance in which he crawled inside an empty septic tank. The framed photograph of this work, showing a somewhat disgruntled Lee leaning out of the metal tank, is overlaid with black strips with white writing in Korean and English that reads “And, art come to a garbage finally. And me.”

Since the late 1970s, Lee has striven to raise awareness of the environment through his “Earth Performance” series, for which he created inflatable vinyl spheres of varying size—from three to seven meters in diameter—painted to look like the Earth as seen from outer space. He has taken these globes all over the world, including politically charged sites. In 1982, he floated one in front of the Berlin

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9. The artist staging an "Earth Performance" in the Sculpture Park at Suwon World Cup Stadium, 2002.



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Wall, and in 1993 he walked one through Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The artist, however, remains apolitical and altruistic in his explanation of the piece—"I wanted the public to perceive the Earth from a new perspective, to recognize its beauty and protect it." He says that he stages these performances primarily for children, whom he invites to play with the globe, purposely deflating and reinflating the piece to change its shape. "Fascinating things start to happen when it is less full. People's interactions are more diverse and interesting. When it is almost entirely deflated, kids can go underneath and be inside the piece."

Though Lee has operated outside of the mainstream of the Korean art world, over the past few decades he has gradually gained enough recognition from a handful of open-minded artists and critics to win him some commissions for his contemporary work. For the Seoul Olympics in 1988, he was asked to make a piece for the city's Olympic Sculpture Park. Rising out of the ground, *Tile Works* is a nine-meter-tall and thirty-meter-long undulating roof of ceramic tiles, its form suggesting that some kind of distorted temple has been half-buried in the earth—a contemporary artwork that draws on the tension it creates between its reference to Korean architectural heritage, its warped but elegant shape and the sheer irrational incongruity of its emergence out of the ground. "I take inspiration from Korean heritage," he says, "because things that are the most ethnically specific and local are also the most international."

In 1990, the Korean Culture Art Fund asked him to serve as the commissioner for the country's participation in that year's Venice Biennale, for which he chose artists Cho Sung-mook and Hong

10. *DISPERSAL FAMILY*, 2001, cloth figures with two sculptures of the artist's head, 12 x 9 x 0.6 m.



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Myong-seop, two peers whom he admired for their experimental installations. Two years later, at "Metabolism," a satellite event of documenta 9 in Kassel, Germany, he staged a performance in which he set fire to a wall. In 2009, at age 77, he received the prestigious Nam June Paik Art Center Prize, and this year he was chosen to participate in the Gwangju Biennale, opening in September. Lee tells AAP that he is mulling several potential submissions, including an Earth performance, a classical bronze sculpture of a woman set on fire and an installation of penis sculptures affixed to trees.

In contrast with the light, optimistic character of most of his work, however, throughout his career Lee has continued to produce somber sculptures that, like *History and Time*, reflect on the division of his homeland. One of the most poignant expressions of personal loss is *Dispersal Family* (2001), an installation of two puppet-like figures made of bundled cloth. Their distorted, conjoined bodies are sprawled across the floor, each bearing a sculpture of Lee's scowling face. The spaces between the figures are marked off by black-and-white barriers, except that here the markers seem less to signal inclusion and are more an awkward sign of separation.

As Lee approaches his ninth decade, he remains a hedonistic figure, drawing on whatever source of inspiration takes his fancy. Most of his work is uncollectable, and yet his income from building public statues affords him the rare luxury of not having to compromise his ambitious projects in order to earn a living. He is content to make art for art's sake, regardless of whether or not anyone is there to see it, and he is likely to continue working in this manner. His compelling life story and his position in art history are barely known—his legacy remains in the balance.

What remains, however, are the images. It is fitting that Lee should take part in this year's Gwangju Biennale, whose artistic director Massimiliano Gioni envisages the event as an exploration of the unquantifiable proliferation of images in the contemporary age. If Lee's on-site installations at the Biennale succeed in captivating a broad audience, and the visually arresting documentation of his earlier work is widely disseminated, then there is a chance he may still enter contemporary folklore as a silent pioneer of the postwar Korean avant-garde. Equally, his art may end up lost in the fray. Either way, Lee will continue to work without limits.

12. *HISTORY AND TIME*, 1957, painted plaster sculpture wrapped in barbed wire, 2.5 x 1.4 x 0.4 m.