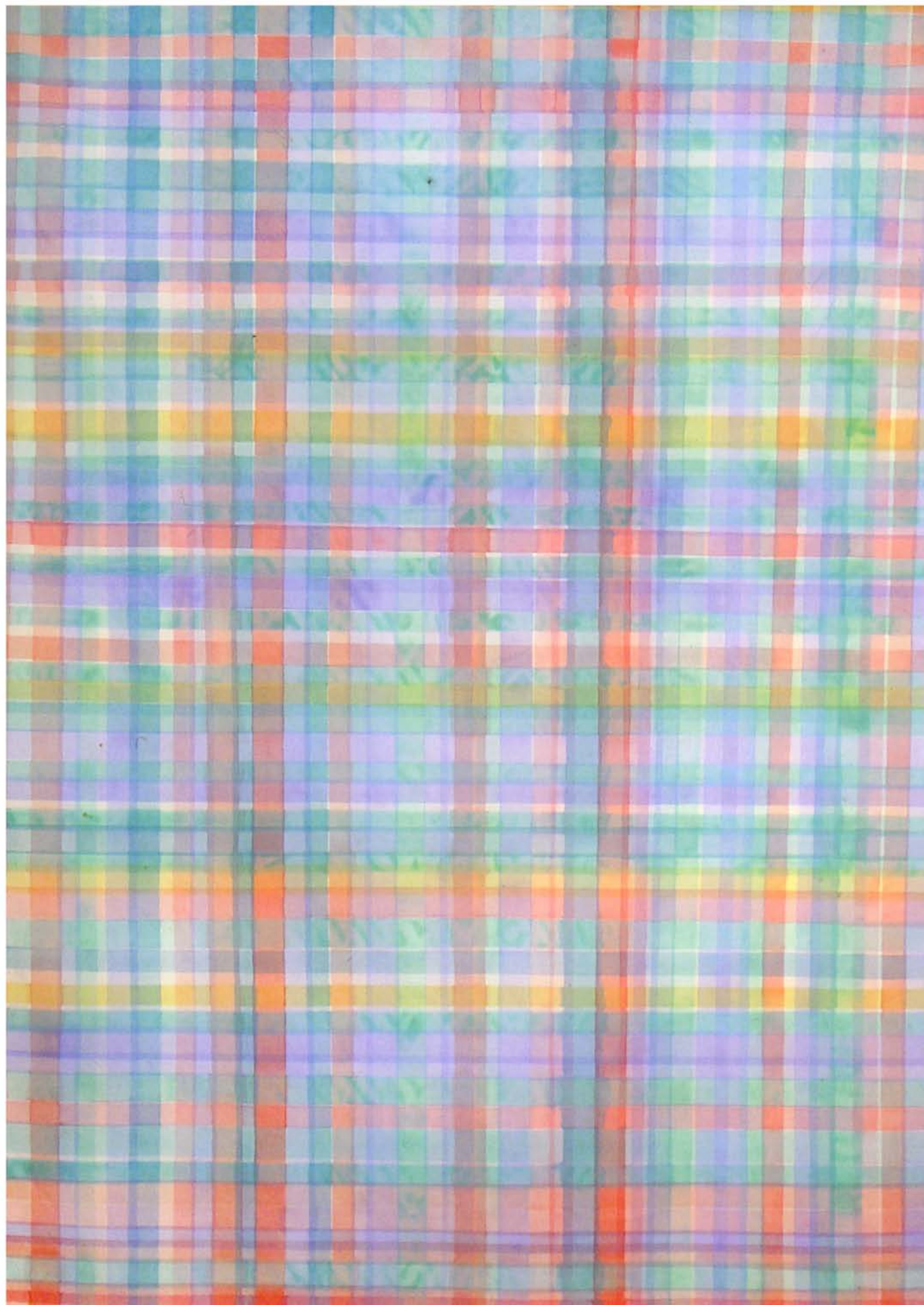


IN PURSUIT OF ...



LEE KIT

BY
JOHN JERVIS



(Previous spread)
SCRATCHING THE TABLE SURFACE,
2006-08, acrylic on plywood, photo
document, 300 postcards. Courtesy
the artist and Vitamin Creative Space,
Guangzhou.

(Opposite page)
**SOMETHING ABOUT USING THE
HAND-PAINTED CLOTH (CLOTH 2)**,
2007, acrylic on fabric, 240 x 153 cm.
Courtesy Osage Gallery, Hong Kong.

At some point in the early hours, the voice recorder—a mean little thing with an undersized LCD screen—slipped from my bag and out into some Hong Kong bar. With it went the interview with Lee Kit recorded the previous day. The recorder wasn't an object to be mourned, and, as it happens, the words it held weren't particularly memorable either. My abilities as an interviewer aren't great, and Lee, though charming, isn't much of an interviewee. When he talks, beer in hand, he is likeable, self-deprecating and impressively laid-back, but he is also highly adept at shrugging off the tiresome business of interpretation. Much of what I extracted seemed to mirror interviews that I'd read online beforehand. If you want to know what he said to me that December morning, just Google . . .

So, in the end, the voice recorder's break for freedom wasn't much of a loss. More importantly, I wouldn't really have wanted the interview to go any other way. Lee has never been overly concerned with the dirty business of hawking his artworks as conceptual enterprises to passing gatekeepers to critical and commercial success. For a while he even refused to discuss his works at all. During his time studying fine art at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the early 2000s, where he later returned for a master's degree, he engaged with critical theory largely as a means to persuade dogmatic teachers of the relevance of his practice, which centered at the time on labor-intensive, hand-painted grid paintings on loosely stretched canvases. He feels that the most valuable part of his education came through socializing with peers and professors, and that abstract theorizing today dominates art education in Hong Kong at the cost of practical training and professional guidance.

The 34-year-old Lee is now, after a bad-tempered selection process, Hong Kong's chosen representative for the 55th Venice Biennale. He is generally acknowledged to be among the leading lights of a new generation of artists that is attracting international attention to the city's art scene through inventive, unconventional work that takes a homespun, idiosyncratic approach to artistic production. Lee's first solo show was held in 2001 in the industrial suburb of Fo Tan, at the studio of his teacher, the painter Lui Chun Kwong. The two were among the first to move to the area, now an established location for artists' studios, and Lui was an important figure for a number of Hong Kong artists, both for his open-minded approach to his students' preoccupations and for his painstaking focus on process in his own practice.

Lee was already experimenting with painting on unstretched fabrics at the time, starting with an old shirt hanging around his

studio, and these trials would soon lead to the hand-painted striped and checkered cloths that have become his signature works. Lee found their slow, methodical creation an effective way of dealing with emotions, while their utilitarian qualities and their role as a diary of his personal history provided, in Lee's eyes, a necessary rationale for artistic creation. More than that, these symbols of both thrift and leisure were a wry response to society's skewed priorities, in which productivity and profitability are sanctified above all else in both life and art. While pursuing an occupation that many dismiss as worthless, yet others raise to a quasi-religious status, Lee had stumbled upon genuinely functional pieces. He put them to practical uses as tablecloths, curtains and dishcloths, a process that, along with the washing and ironing that it necessitated, provided additional layers of both surface and history to the resulting works.

His cloths may have been ripostes to the highly formalized power of the artwork, but this was matched by their aesthetic appeal, with their washed-out, diluted colors, often faded pinks or blues, evoking nostalgia and the passage of time. The works are a symbol of Lee's determination to live as he chooses, intertwining his practice and his life, but they also communicate to viewers the heightened emotions that Lee experiences in their presence. In some later cloths, this sentimentalism is amplified by the addition of lyrics from the Velvet Underground, the Lemonheads or even the Carpenters painted across their center. Alternatively, Lee sources patterns from photographs found on the internet that feature textiles in use, often at social gatherings. Low-resolution copies of these original images are then displayed alongside the finished cloth, together with a large painting on cardboard of words or logos that riff on the objects visible in the shot. Lee's titles for these last works, such as *Story 8: Yoko Went Picnic with Her Sister and Daughter on a Quiet Sunny Day* (2010), are invented narratives, sometimes sinister, sometimes elegiac, that he extrapolates from the picture. The universality of such cloths over place and time and the innocence of their appeal give the works a potent mixture of optimism and melancholy, heightened by the simulated retro appearance of the grainy photographs.

Perhaps equally engaging are works in which a stained or battered cloth is placed alongside, or even replaced by, a photograph of its previous life as a tablecloth, curtain, bedsheet, towel, dishcloth or window rag. A past use, a past life, is evoked in the fall of light or a splash of coffee, and there is the fragile promise of a future life if the work ever escapes from its imprisonment in a gallery. Perhaps best known among such works, and also the earliest, is *Sunday Afternoon*:



Picnic with Friends and Hand-Painted Cloth at Yung Shu O, Sai Kung, HK (2003), a picnic to which Lee took four of his painted cloths. This act of optimism, friendship and mild defiance to celebrate the end of the restrictions imposed during the 2003 SARS outbreak resulted in intimate, close-cropped photographs that captured the messy, relaxed gathering.

Such photographic records of the cloths' appearances at communal events, including Hong Kong's annual July 1 protests in 2004, established the idea that these were more than just wall-mounted artworks, an impression furthered by Lee's important 2007 show at Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong, "3/4 Suggestions for a Better Living." The diminutive gallery was transformed to resemble a bar, with liberal use of Lee's cloths on walls and tables, and, at a series of parties and gigs during the show, his friends served food and drinks while sporting T-shirts with "My Favourite Waste of Time" printed across them. In a gesture of freedom and indolence, gallerygoers were at liberty to smoke at these "private functions" in the newly smoke-free city.

The following year, at Osage Singapore, Lee briefly took down cloths from the wall to place over tables for the gallery dinner that followed the exhibition opening, ensuring their practical life outlived, for a while at least, their enshrinement as an artwork. Such a continued use is a fond hope of Lee's for his cloths, each one of which, he claims, is created with a particular person in mind. He will often place the finished work in the hands of some unsuspecting individual who happens to have been rattling around his brain—sometimes a friend, or sometimes, as at the end of his 2007–08 residency at Bolton Street Cottage in Wellington, the suspicious shopkeepers who displayed an unwavering interest in his identity card.

This continuing emphasis on social gatherings reinforced the widespread assumption that Lee was dabbling in the fashionable genre of relational art, and that his works, whether acting as picnic blankets or as complete gallery environments, were primarily aimed at facilitating social engagements. His next Osage show in Hong Kong, "Someone Singing and Calling Your Name" in 2009–10, seemed to epitomize this. Lee created a warped karaoke bar, with battered couches, old televisions and a projection playing brief videos of ducks, Nivea, Vaseline, Pears soap, bread and bleached landscapes, accompanied by out-of-context or invented lyrics and out-of-sync music that, along with the uncomfortable chill of the air-conditioning, undermined the inherent participatory promise of the karaoke experience. On the floor, transparent display cases housed appropriate products, while affixed to the walls were colored paintings on cardboard incorporating simplified, painted logos of these brands, seemingly weathered and broken—a series of works that had started earlier in the year and continues to this day.

In fact, Lee is amused but unmoved by this mooted association with relational art, viewing these social activities as mere byproducts of his work and of the life he leads, that would, and certainly should, be taking place anyway. Such speculations have probably contributed to Lee's retreat from these events, which he had tended to use as a means of hiding in a crowd, not of displaying his wares, and even





(Opposite page, top)
SUNDAY AFTERNOON: PICNIC WITH FRIENDS AND HAND-PAINTED CLOTH AT YUNG SHU O, SAI KUNG, HK, 2003, acrylic on fabric, photo document. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page, bottom)
Installation view of "3/4 Suggestions for a Better Living" at Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong, 2007. Courtesy the artist.

(This page, top)
MAKING CUSHIONS, 2008, acrylic on fabric, sewing, readymade objects. Courtesy the artist.

(This page, bottom)
LEE KIT at ArtAsiaPacific's washroom, 2013. Photo by Ann Woo for AAP.



HOW TO SET UP AN APARTMENT FOR JOHNNY, 2011, cardboard paintings, hand-painted cloth, video and readymade objects, 30 square feet. Courtesy of the artist and Osage Gallery, Hong Kong.



Lee's installations do, at least in part, reveal his personal convictions, and in particular his concern about the increasingly consumerist and conservative tenor of Hong Kong life.



a decline in his painting of cloths, which he felt were beginning to dominate discussion of his practice. His cottage-industry approach to the fabrication of outsized pillow cases for his exhibition at Osage Singapore in 2008—an art-world laborer creating avowedly meaningless products, emblazoned with ambiguous lyrics that could be applied equally to experiences of love or work—suggests a degree of cynicism about the expectations that come with artistic success.

Lee's installations do, at least in part, reveal his personal convictions, and in particular his concern about the increasingly consumerist and conservative tenor of Hong Kong life. The much-praised *How to Set Up an Apartment for Johnny* (2011), with its accumulation of shabby furniture, vinyl floors, pale painted cloths, cardboard paintings and even an ersatz shower, replicated the show-flat experience, and was offered for sale at Art Basel at a price per square foot equivalent to the current going rate for residential property in Hong Kong. Similarly, a small piece in the window at Arrow Factory, Beijing, *It's Not an Easy Thing* (2012), with its aged ghetto blaster, battered furniture and cheap poster, seemed at first glance to be a homage to a personal moment of anticipation prior to a 1980s release by Taiwanese singer Cai Qin. Yet Cai's songs, with their lyrics of love and hurt, as well as the date of the poster, were used by Lee as subtle allusions to June 4, 1989, a fact that did not go unnoticed by locals, who asked if the installation referred to "that event."

Most of Lee's installations, however, gain their impact from moments of more personal exposure. Lee creates a shared stillness



(This page)
IN PURITY, I SILENTLY REACH FOR YOU, 2011, cardboard paintings, readymade objects, public washroom setting, 20 square feet, installed at Hot Spot, SH Contemporary 11. Courtesy of the artist and Aike Dellarco, Shanghai/Palmero.

(Opposite page, top)
JOHNSON'S - 1000ML, 2011, acrylic, emulsion paint and inkjet ink on cardboard, 59 x 62 cm. Courtesy the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou.

(Opposite page, middle)
KAO BLEACH (II), 2011, acrylic, emulsion paint and inkjet ink on acid-free board, 47 x 44 cm. Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page, bottom)
SUPERDRUG - CLEAR PLASTERS, 2011, acrylic, emulsion paint, heat-melt glue and inkjet ink on acid-free board, 43 x 42.5 cm. Courtesy the artist.

in the gallery space with *In Purity, I Silently Reach for You* (2011), his understated re-creation of a public washroom—the sort of location that has acted as a refuge for Lee during many openings. His cardboard product paintings reappear here, beguilingly restrained in size and palette, and carefully positioned to catch the light. They suggest both the protective embrace that such rooms offer Lee and his long-standing fascination with the brands that lurk there, from Kleenex to Johnson & Johnson. These products have been a constant in his life, an obsession that dates back, according to Lee, to his rejection of toys in favor of Nivea products—a particular favorite—at the age of four.

He assigns this strange childhood relationship with branded items to the ubiquity and proximity of Western packaging in the claustrophobic environment of 1980s Hong Kong, which facilitated this colonization of his mind by such products as Vaseline lip balm and Carr's biscuits. Their power is maintained today by a semiobsessive showering routine, during which bathroom products act as witnesses to moments of vulnerability. They even become associated with, and acquire the names of, his friends as proxies for the latter's presence. This may be a very personal reaction, but it is one that he feels is related to the role that these brands now play in society. They have insinuated deep into our homogenized environments, and our thoughtless acceptance, even our emotional attachment, allows them this ubiquity in our lives. This is not, for Lee, some trenchant criticism of consumerism but rather an attempt to understand what might lie behind this intractable yet seemingly unconstrained entanglement.

The karaoke works at Osage are an extreme example of a related area of investigation. What seems like a sly appropriation of lyrics to further an air of nostalgia in fact conceals a deep ambivalence about the role that music plays in our lives. Having listened to his sister's records obsessively as a child, too young to understand their English lyrics, Lee chooses to highlight ambiguous phrases that can have potency across a variety of contexts, depending on personal circumstances. The ritual of karaoke, where drink, music and tears combine to provide a cathartic yet meaningless outlet in moments of respite from daily life, is perhaps the most extreme example of music's place in what Lee perceives as a "brainwashing" of society. Yet the songs themselves, invested with memories and associations,

allow us a daily release—they are, in a word that Lee uses frequently, “readymades” that facilitate this brainwashing, anaesthetizing us to the ceaseless pursuit of usefulness rather than inspiring us to embrace the freedom to be creative, or even to be trivial.

The work *Scratching the Table Surface* (2006–08), in which Lee exhibited a table that he had spent two years digging at with his fingernails, is an understated paean to this freedom—the seeming lack of purpose of his occasional clawing is a testament to the value of pointlessness itself. Lee is emphatic that he is not engaged in delivering manifestos with his art, that he is not attempting to diagnose the ills of society, but rather is exploring his own character, with its propensity to both reverie and unease. Despite his social and political convictions, and his sadness about recent changes in Hong Kong society, Lee is not seeking to proselytize for a lifestyle but merely to pursue his own with a degree of integrity and comprehension.

He certainly does not intend to pursue overt political agendas when he represents Hong Kong at the Venice Biennale—he is acutely aware of the futility of such posturing in the closeted atmosphere of the art world, where, until recently, he was inured to being mistaken for a waiter. He has, however, started to experiment with works that are less concerned with projecting his own feelings than with exploring the surroundings and state of mind of others, such as the discredited Hong Kong politician Henry Tang, or at least a fictionalized derivation of him. The restrained apartment installation *Henry (Have You Ever Been This Low?)* (2011) comes complete with muted cloths, faded cardboard paintings and a copy of the notorious self-help book *I Want to Change But I Don't Know How!*, all hinting at the disappointments, guilt and emptiness of a selfish life.

As we talk, there are occasional hints of Lee’s ambivalence toward his own immersion in the items, musical or cosmetic, that recur in his work. His discovery of Johnson & Johnson’s mixed record on animal testing has recently wrenched one abiding fetish from his grasp, suggesting a hollow core to some of these relationships. There also seems to be some self-doubt as to whether his own lifestyle bears the close scrutiny that his practice, with its defense of aimlessness as a means to creativity and fulfillment, inevitably invites. Such frailties, however, are part of the enigmatic appeal of his works, which are more akin to a personal artistic poetry than to any firm conceptual offering. Lee is seeking to capture what he feels are inexplicable emotions and memories through the exploration of familiar yet uncertain spaces, and the brands and songs that are the backgrounds to so much of our lives. Occasionally his pared-back installations are so sparse that little remains with which the viewer can engage. But their light-filled aesthetic, at once intimate yet everyday, beautiful yet faded, simple yet charged, remains beguiling.

Despite his status as Hong Kong’s newly appointed art star, Lee has recently moved to Taiwan, offering a range of reasons for the change—the presence of his girlfriend, access to cheap studio space, the novelty of living in a new city and, in particular, the need for a leave of absence from, and some fresh perspective on, what he considers a depressing degeneration in the political situation in Hong Kong. Lee has returned to painting cloths—this time for decorative purposes under strict instructions from his girlfriend—and hopes that this new distance will allow him to arrive at a way to contribute to positive change in Hong Kong. He does not, however, intend that this should be through the medium of his art. Despite this, it seems likely that the two strands—his approach to life and to art—will remain intertwined. His works are intuitive acts that reflect and encompass his life, exploring feelings that are powerful because they are indefinable. The flailings of critics looking to jam Lee into approved conceptual structures, or to jerry-build fragile extensions to accommodate him, invariably fail to convince. His works are still moments of unmediated communication, and their resonances, like those of a landscape painting, or perhaps those in a domestic interior by Vermeer—a long-standing favorite of Lee’s—are affecting precisely because they are not susceptible to categorization. And, like the man himself, they prove remarkably efficient at resisting vain attempts to contain them within a voice recorder. 🎧

