

HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

The Avant-Garde Oeuvre of a Classically Trained Sculptor from North Korea

Seung-taek Lee is one of the most fascinating and deeply committed artists of this generation.

Robert C. Morgan



Seung-taek Lee, “Drawing” (1966) (all images courtesy of Lévy Gorvy)

While the avant-garde that emerged in the 20th century is most often seen from the perspective of Europe and the United States, it also arrived in East Asia, particularly after the resounding shock of the Second World War. Asian artists, such as Gutai and Mono Ha in Japan and Dansaekhwa in

Korea, evolved new avant-garde strategies that began to attract international attention. These exemplary artists worked independently, investigating unique forms and using indigenous materials that were significantly different from those found in the much-lauded avant-garde movements of the Western world. One of the most fascinating and deeply committed artists of this generation is North Korean sculptor Seung-taek Lee. Although represented by the prestigious Hyundai Gallery in Seoul, the 84-year-old sculptor is only now having his first exhibition in New York, at Lévy Gorvy, where he is represented in the United States.

Lee, born in 1932 in Kowon in the region of South Hamgyeong-do above the 38th parallel, has always been a solitary artist, eschewing identification with any groups, movements, trends or ideologies. He worked briefly as an official government sculptor in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea before moving to the Republic of (South) Korea shortly after the end of the Korean War, where he was again hired to produce government-sponsored public monuments. But he was dissatisfied with the limitations placed upon him, especially by those who commissioned the monuments, and decided to expand his knowledge of art to become more than a craftsman. He applied and was accepted to Hong-ik University in Seoul, where he became involved in the history and philosophy of art. When he graduated in 1959, Lee knew that his path toward becoming an avant-garde artist would be different from most of his colleagues, as it is extremely rare for a North Korean artist to move in the direction of the avant-garde. Although he was trained in classical sculpture, he decided to radically transform his approach to art and began to experiment with ideas and materials on a conceptual level.



Seung-taek Lee, installation view

Lee's radicalness accounts for his famous "Non-Sculpture" (1960), made early in his career. The work consists of an elongated wooden plank placed diagonally on the floor and wrapped with filaments of rope holding an assortment of small paper balls covered in ink. The appearance of this elegant work is opposite in every way from the art Lee was paid to do: casting figures of statesmen in bronze. Instead of being upright, it lays on the floor; instead of being unified, it is disparate and seemingly chaotic; and instead of exemplifying a superficial permanence, it is constructed from indigenous Korean mulberry paper that is said to have a duration of more than a millennium.

In the exhibition catalog, Korean art historian Kyung-An cites Lee's rejection of "established ideas and boring orders." His rebelliousness is further apparent in "Burning Canvases Floating on the River" (1964–74), in which he set fire to three oil paintings. The artist's comment in performing this action is a critique of Western oil painting, which was embraced by

Japan during the occupation of Korea (1910–45) In numerous other, more intimately conceived works, there are subtle statements against censorship and the oppression of indigenous Korean culture during military rule in the Republic of Korea (1963–88), found in the *Tied Knife* series (1962), the hand-carved *Tied Stone* series (1959–60), and “Tied Book” (1976). In each of these carefully executed works, the object is bound with wire or hemp rope, thus suggesting bondage or delimitations in terms of use or function.



Seung-taek Lee, “Non-Sculpture” (1960)



Seung-taek Lee, installation view

Another theme in Lee's work is an interest in the immaterial aspects of nature. One example of this is his three *Wind* paintings (1972–82), made by attaching wavy lines of rope to each canvas. Lee uses the rope to symbolize ripples created by the wind blowing over water. Wind is again employed in the installation *Wind-Folk Amusement* (1971), in which three 80-meter strips of red cloth flutter in the windy skies on Nanji Island on the Han River. This is depicted in this show with a series of drawings in pencil and gouache (1971–90), along with a recent video of a re-enactment of the original installation (2015).

In an interview with Swiss curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist, published in the exhibition catalog, Lee makes it clear that he consciously rejects the appropriation of what is already well-established in order to discover and rediscover new possibilities for art. Assuming this is the case, he is less interested in pop art than a kind of generic populist art — that is, an art of

ordinary people. This can be seen in the untitled bowls installation (1972/2015), in which Lee pays tribute to those who engage in the rural culture of *onggi*, through the fermentation of pickled condiments in traditional earthenware bowls. In the exhibition, these bowls have been re-made and fired as porcelain, then placed directly on the floor.



Seung-taek Lee, installation view

One of Lee's early masterworks, "Godret Stone" (1958), also uses and transforms common everyday materials. Here the artist has fastened small carved stones to ropes, hanging them at different heights from a horizontal wooden plank fixed to the wall. The inspiration for this work is a weaving device once used in Korea, which employed a series of small stones to hold the garment in shape as it was being woven. In "Godret Stone," the stones have no particular function, thus raising the question of their significance once their original use has been left behind

This is one of the ways that Lee's work is connected to the Western avant-garde of the time, particularly the "readymades" of Marcel Duchamp. Even though the traditional use of the stones in Korean weaving has become obsolete, the thought of a once-used, now useless object continues to engage our senses. This is particularly true for objects appropriated by artists which are now in museum collections, such as Duchamp's hat rack and typewriter cover. In each case, the objects have lost their function and now appear superfluous, yet they continue to raise the question as to whether the loss of an object's function is necessary for it to be transformed into a work of art.

This confluence between the Eastern and Western avant-garde is essential to Seung-taek Lee's aesthetic perspective. It accounts for his rebellious impulse to awaken the parallel process of thinking in relation to looking at art. His divergent approach to art-making through the immaterial use of wind, fire, and water further sensitizes our ability to grasp new realities in terms of how we identify materials in relation to culture and how, as an artist, he became a fundamental voice for articulating Korean traditions through transforming them into meaningful objects and events in present-day life.



Seung-taek Lee, installation view

Seung-taek Lee continues at Lévy Gorvy (909 Madison Ave, Midtown)
through April 22.