

Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, *Lee Kit Interview*, **'We used to be more sensitive'** Exhibition catalogue, 10 November 2018

Lee Kit Interview

Hara Museum (HM): When we began preparing for the exhibition, you sent us a request to add walls, one in a downstairs gallery and another in the upstairs corridor. The walls serve to separate spaces, making points visible or invisible depending on the angle of view, creating multiple layers within those spaces. What made you come up with this idea?

Lee Kit (LK): For the ground floor, it was because there are two pillars and columns on the wall. They were very impressive for me. Which meant I don't know how to use them. So I have to cover them up. I didn't have a lot of options. I can build a wall like this just to cover them up but then the walls come out. Or I can just seal the whole wall, which I think doesn't look good. Anyway, I needed to build a wall. I just traced a little bit and then added walls here and there. Since I added two walls that linked together, I needed to extend one of them and open an entrance. But if I make a normal entrance, it's just an entrance. So I thought, I should make an entrance that is lower and wider, a little bit like doors in some old houses or apartments. They have wider but relatively lower doors.

HM: What made an impression on you the first time you saw the space in the Hara Museum?

LK: It was the windows. The other thing I didn't talk about was the corridor. The corridor which is curved, but not very curved. So, when you walk from the entrance or from the café, which is on the other side of the corridor, you cannot see the entire hallway. You expect to see something when you walk down the hallway. The expectation makes you slow down. In most of the museums, there are very long and straight hallways. It actually makes me want to run. And in the hallway at the Hara Museum, you have windows. So you can see the light from the window on the wall. This part is also very impressive for me. When I enter the exhibition hall, even though I am only looking at an empty gallery, I tend to slow down. And of course, there are a lot of details in the space. This is actually another reason why I divided the space, to make it into one bigger space and a smaller space that I didn't know how to use. So finally I left it almost empty. This smaller space feels private. That is where I installed the first work in the exhibition.

HM: You brought several paintings from Taipei. During the installation, you retouched or repainted them. Is that something you usually do?

LK: I started to retouch or repaint in the past two or three years. It isn't usual. But it has become part of my practice.

HM: Talking about paintings, you seem to have started your career by questioning the concept or form of painting. You painted what you called "abstract paintings" which could be used as household items like tablecloths or curtains. You included such an item in this exhibition also. Moreover, the "paintings" you installed were actually simple materials like panels or boards with images projected on them. It's a very interesting way to question the relationship between image and things that are real. What is your thinking behind this approach?

LK: In the beginning, it was an accident. I was too lazy. I was working on an exhibition in Hong Kong. It was around 5, 6 pm. It's getting dark. I should go to switch on the spotlight. But the switches were quite far. I was lazy to walk all the way. I switched on the projector which was above my head. When the projector lit up, I said "wow, this is great." But it was only the white color with pixels. I walked closer and I saw my own shadow. That's how it started. It was a discovery without any intention. I was too lazy. But at least I realized there is something that I cannot paint. I cannot paint the pixels of the projection. It is not just grids. It is all about the real texture. And then I realized, years later, sometimes I didn't even need to paint. But actually, I did, for example, to paint on a piece of plywood mainly monochrome color, layers over layers, over and over again. There is no image on it. So that's what I call "painting". But lots of people said, "no, it's just a piece of plywood, not a painting." By mentioning this example, there is another thing I'm questioning — "what are details?" Particularly in realistic painting. Generally speaking, details mean depicting something. In realistic painting there is a lot of

glazing. Glazing is the main part that tells the main point of the story in a painting. Glazing is a way to enhance the details. In my case, I ask the other way around. Could the 'details' be very very simple? And I'm not talking about minimalist painting or monochrome painting. That is why I think people need to see it in person. The glaze, the surface or the texture. Otherwise I don't need to make a painting or I don't have to do exhibitions. Then I realized that I can make monochrome painting on plywood. At this point, it is not about being lazy. This is somehow necessary. This is what goes on with the projections and videos that create the pixel texture everywhere in the exhibition.

HM: During the installation, you often walked through the galleries, installing things, rethinking, then reinstalling them in other places, repeating this process again and again. As a result, many small holes and nails were left on the walls. Holes are usually repaired, but you decided to keep some of them.

LK: That's part of the composition. The whole exhibition is somehow one piece of work. The whole exhibition is one canvas. I already painted it by installing all the works. It's almost done. But there are some holes on the wall. The holes are like, when you make a painting, some of the hairs from the brushes are left on the canvas. They could look very nice on the canvas. Of course people usually remove them. This is something unwanted. This is a simple metaphor. Again, I ask the other way around, without the holes does it look better? Perhaps not. So I just leave some of the holes on the wall. But for some of the holes we remove them or cover them up because with some of the holes, they do not make the exhibition looks better.

HM: I want to ask about layers. I think it is interesting to have multiple layers of paintings, boards and projections. The whole exhibition is composed of these three-dimensional layers. Layers appear and disappear as the visitor moves through the space. It is an interesting and special kind of composition. Are you consciously creating such compositions?

LK: For this exhibition, yes. I was not totally conscious of it in the exhibitions I did before. Lately, everything is in a balance. It is a very balanced condition for me. It is hard to describe. I have a lot of 'something' but haven't done enough yet. Technically I can manage and I am conscious of it and I also have something to say. This time I have done a lot of it, the layering. The staircase area, for example, we have been talking about how to make use of this area. Finally we left it empty because I think the staircase area as one layer is very important – two layers actually – to stand at the staircase and see nothing except for the commission work of the other artist, which is already there and the spotlight that points to nothing. From another angle, when people walk up the staircase to second floor, they can see multiple layers of square or grids and different reflections created by all the projections in all three rooms on the second floor. The second effect is that, when people keep walking to the first room, they see that there is a girl looking at them, saying hello. That work is very sweet. But it could be quite sad as well. I have to bring people – that there is the other layer of understanding and they will get a little bit of shock. A little bit of a surprise. And doubt. What is this? They see a hand-painted cloth with grids painted on it. But at the same time when they turn around, again they look at a little different composition with the window screen, grid and square in the architectural design of the museum itself. For me, the layer is somehow also invisible because when people start to move, all compositions will change. This is something I cannot control. To say, the 'people' I actually include myself, who is the first audience of my exhibition.

HM: You spoke of the translation of subtitles. Words and phrases are important elements in your installations. They sometimes appear on your paintings and in your videos. They are simple but difficult to translate or understand. Do you expect visitors to interpret them in their own way?

LK: Go ahead! Again, looking at it from the other way around, I cannot control it. I don't have the 'I don't care' attitude though. Everything is open for interpretation – this is bullshit. Everybody understands that. Everyone knows, that everything is open for interpretation. But at least I should narrow it down a little. An example is the video with the feet. It only has a few sentences or lyrics in the subtitle: "Deep inside you never let go. Deep inside you never let this go." I was thinking, maybe this is too much because it provides too much emotions to the video. But then I thought, no, emotion is like a frame to this video, to prevent people from over-interpreting it. I don't want people to look at the video and think "oh this is so relaxing." Yes, it probably is, but I am not talking about being relaxed. So I added these two sentences. But these sentences repeat too obviously so I added two more. So sometimes I add lyrics or phrases which function like frames.

HM: This time you used a lot of projections. Your installations used to have a lot of daily objects in them, like

the mug you used in this one. Why didn't you use more?

LK: I tried not to use a lot. It has become too easy for me. For about three, four years, I was constantly making use of those daily objects in my installation. I didn't even do anything to them — I just put them on the shelves, on the table or on the floor. I don't even call them ready-made objects. They are objects. Calling them ready-made objects is too arty. As a technique there is nothing difficult about it. I'm still not too concerned about the technical aspect of it anyway. But can I convey or tell people something by composing these objects? I think I still can do it but I have to ask myself 'why?' Do I still have something to say through this approach? Maybe not. But it doesn't mean it is a wrong approach. So I used a very limited number of objects this time. Or, I re-shoot them in a video, without putting the actual objects in the exhibition. And then it provides another layer of space. Or, I 'translate' them into a text that I use in as a subtitle. For example, the mug with the text "Full of joy" printed on it. The last sentence in one of the videos says: 'my arm is not long enough to reach the cup.' If you watch this video or at least you are standing in that room, you'll see the cup. It is placed close to the window in that room. I would say I used two cups, a physical one and the other in the text. But I am not talking about this cup. If you think I am talking about this cup, then you see "Full of joy" then suddenly the text on the cup will relate to the story in the video. So it is nothing about the beauty of the video or the beauty of the window or the space. It is about something more.

HM: The pedestals that you used for the projectors were cheap items easily purchased at a home center or a store like Tokyu Hands, for example. They also look like objects. A box might not be visible from one position, but then become visible in the back. What the visitors see is a commonplace plastic box placed in the corner.

LK: People will discover it, or not. I don't know. Sometimes, I am just being practical in using these kinds of cheap objects. For example, the pedestals for the projectors. If I put projectors everywhere, that means I have to send you the dimensions of all the white boxes — if I need any — to produce them in advance. For hiding the projectors or putting the projectors on them. Once you make these pedestals or boxes, it is hard for me to change them. But if I use this kind of cheap material, in this case, the plastic containers, it is easy to get them and it is easy to change. Once I arrive in the city, then I can just go to a home center to buy them. Another aspect of using these plastic containers is the reflection created by the projection through their transparent surfaces.

HM: Yes, reflection of the box here is rather interesting.

LK: I had to use this kind of container to make that effect. I even tried to use a very nicely done glass container. There was a time some technicians provided me other options by using transparent boxes made with glass. They also created home reflections but it was too beautiful. The effect was too neat. I don't need that kind of neatness. So it has to be this kind of domestic plastic container, with very simple design.

HM: Another effect is the constant change in the reflection due to interaction with visitors or because of the weather condition, especially in the large gallery downstairs. This is also an important element in this show.

LK: This is a coincidence. There are a lot of coincidences in this exhibition, or in all of my exhibitions. There is a certain kind of coincidence that I could make use of but which I cannot control. For this time, it means the weather. Because there are a lot of windows in the exhibition space, the light keeps changing. I have to get along with it. This is also why I walk around during the installation. Sometime I just sit on the floor looking at the space. I have to look at the change in the light, in relation to the space and the feelings that I want to capture.

HM: Talking about materials again, the paintings in this show were done on cardboard or wooden panels. Do you prefer such materials to paint on?

LK: I feel better using those materials.

HM: You don't paint on canvas or paper?

LK: I did when I was studying at the university. Back then, I already had the question that, why I don't feel totally comfortable about painting. You mentioned the form of painting and I was thinking about the form of painting

back then. Then I realize the reason was very simple. I hate canvas. I loved making stretchers. I even made a lot of stretchers simply because I liked to. From cutting the wood pieces, putting them together and sanding them. I realized that I don't like canvas. So I shifted to making hand-painted clothes with checkers patterns. They were painted on fabric, not canvas. Regarding the form of painting — is it minimalist painting? Yes it is. Is it a realistic painting? Yes, it is a realistic painting — it is a table cloth! When I hang it on the wall, it is a minimalist painting. If I put it on a table, it's a table cloth. You won't even realize it is a painting.

I also realized that I like classical paintings, or classical things. But I don't like classic materials. For example, I don't like oil, I don't like canvas. But I love cheap materials. I do paint on paper too.

HM: So let's talk about the exhibition title. We at the museum had a long discussion about it. It was difficult to translate. I think I can "feel" the meaning, rather than "understand" it.

LK: I just find this title beautiful. I thought about this title after our meetings. We had two meetings and had almost confirmed a title (which I can't remember now). Shortly after our second meeting, I was in Tuscany working on another solo show where I made a work called "we used to be more sensitive": I made this work because I heard a story about the director of the museum. He looked like a small-town mafia, always disappearing, never in the office, I didn't know what he was doing. I saw him all the time though. But then I heard about his background and the story of his life. Such a sad story. The way he performed everyday — like a cover, a healing — to pretend that he is not a nice guy. But I don't think I should tell the story now.

At the time, suddenly this sentence appeared to me — "we used to be more sensitive." It is neither from a song or a book. Two weeks later, I did the show and I left this town. The sentence still lingered on in my head and I was thinking about our exhibition. Then I thought, I should just use it as the title for the exhibition at Hara Museum. This is how I formulate an exhibition, starting from the title.

To say "we used to be more sensitive": I don't mean we used to be more sensitive only. We are too sensitive now. Nowadays, people are somehow too sensitive; everything has become all about political correctness. Either-or. It is surprising that we are living in a world full of hopeless hopes. Agony with pleasure. It is like we have to take sides. I don't think we have to take sides all the time. Political correctness is ruling the world. I don't think anyone could be happy to live in a world like this, given that the world is run by horrible people already. Does it relate to Japan? Perhaps so. Like, here's an example, some working people were having lunch in a park or in convenience store. I even tried to pretend that I was the same as them and sat with them and ate with them. It felt peaceful actually. But I felt hopeless as well. Anyway, in the context of Japan, of course, you know much better than I do. But it is not only about Japan. It is about the world that we are living in. Political correctness in a chaotic time, globally.

HM: You moved away from Hong Kong, your birthplace, to Taipei. How do you feel about your distance now from Hong Kong?

LK: I was too angry in Hong Kong. For a short period of time I realized that I was formulating, arranging, planning to kill somebody. As if I were planning an exhibition. I was thinking about a particular politician who was, and probably still is, very influential in Hong Kong. I just found it too crazy to have this idea but the feeling was real. Too real to deny it. But I had to keep a distance otherwise I would go mad. I was thinking to move to Berlin before moving to Taiwan. During a visit to Berlin, which was my third time to this city, I found that there were too many artists there. I rented an apartment from a landlord who was an artist. I never saw him, I saw his assistance who was a young artist. We went to a bar later at night and everyone in the bar were artists. The bartender was an artist. This young artist was so nice — he accompanied me to a supermarket one day. He met a friend who worked there who was an artist too. Enough. I can't stand to live in a city where I'd run into artists all the times. Then I decided to move to Taipei. Then I realized that Taiwan is a very nice country, people are nice, but also dare to speak up for themselves. This is very important. I moved to Taipei to keep a distance from Hong Kong so I can think about how to contribute a little bit to my hometown. Though I can't do much, I can do a little more meaningful things. Then I started to think about my culture, part of it is the Chinese culture. I really see it in China. But I can somehow see it in Taiwan. Anyway, it was like suddenly everything becomes clearer in a rather unclear way since I started living in Taiwan. Perhaps, the reason why I moved to Taiwan is simple — I just wanted to be a better person. Or, to be a person who causes less trouble to the world.

HM: What some people may not understand is your relationship with mainland China as a Hong Kong Chinese and the nature of the diaspora (of the Chinese people). Chinese identity is very complicated — its historical background, political background and cultural background.

LK: China doesn't have a long history. Chinese culture does. China as a country has only less than 100 years of history. We have 5,000 years history of Chinese culture, but not as a country. Before, it was called the "Qing dynasty" or some other dynasty like the "Ming" or the "Tang." Those dynasties were not called "China." For example, the Qing was a Manchurian rulership. These are historical facts.

HM: It's very interesting how you frame your existence in a very personal way. You wake up and don't even remember where you are. So in a way, you are talking about universal experience. But people look at your art and perhaps wonder how your background is reflected in it. Your upbringing. Your political stance. What the effect is of being from Hong Kong and now in Taipei, and also travelling a lot. How all of these aspects give you insight into the nature of modern life.

LK: From my background, my family are Indonesian-Chinese who moved to Hong Kong. I was born in Hong Kong. And colonized by the British, which I cannot say is a bad thing. I cannot imagine Hong Kong being under the Chinese regime for the past 40 or 50 years. But it is happening now. I studied in a British school, not one full of rich kids. My classmates were mostly from low-income families. Because of our education in this school, Ying Wa College, we already had a sense of justice, equality, and we tended to ask ourselves questions when we were young. We actually didn't realize it until we grew up. I realized that I tend to question people and question myself as well. But it could be a wrong thing to question people all the times. So I ask myself, before judging people, I should judge myself first. I have a metaphor. If I say you are a bitch, actually I am not sure whether you are a bitch or not. I must be a bitch. Simply because I say you are a bitch. So before I judge people, I have to judge myself. Secondly, I still don't understand why the artist is so important. We shouldn't have more privilege than other people. But somehow, we do have privilege. At least, sometimes people listen to us when we talk. Sorry, I am not sticking to your question. It is going nowhere.

I should have used this privilege to do something more than making exhibitions. As an artist I have access to people with resources or power. Probably I could be the one who can convince them to do something. But I don't need to tell people what I am really doing. Not even the people who I am working with closely. It is almost a conspiracy. Conspiracy is a bad word. But right now, it is the time to get rid of political correctness. The reality is in the grey area. We probably should make use of the things that we cannot change. Set one foot on the dirty side, one on the clean side. Then you start to walk and you are pushing the whole thing forward. This is my visualization of a very simple approach. By questioning myself and also the world at the same time.

HM: And you are also questioning art itself?

LK: Yes, I think so. I cannot avoid questioning art. As an audience I see so much bad art. It is ok. It is a matter of taste. If I say this is bad art, I would say I don't like it. But I cannot say this is bad art. If I point at something saying this is really bad, that means that I am aware of my privilege, that I am using my privilege. What I learnt from the past ten years from the people I met and worked with is that, don't look up to yourself. Nothing is special. When shit happens, it happens. Get along with it. But solve the problems. Or fix them. Sorry that I seem to have linked everything together again! But for me, everything is linked together.

HM: Do you think you have a kind of a moral stance towards the world? A moral base?

LK: Yes I think I have. I am a very classical person and somehow still believe in a certain traditional value. (haha)

HM: You've used the words "hypocrisy" and "phony." Do you think being real or honest is important?

LK: Yes, it is very important. At least being honest to myself. Why would I lie to people? If I lie to people that means I did something wrong. So, the best way to avoid lying is try not to do anything wrong. But if I did something wrong, it is ok. Because feeling guilty is actually quite good in that it could be a drive to do something better, including make myself a better person. Being honest is very important. But the bad side of it is that sometimes I say something too straight forward.