

WSJ. MAGAZINE | FEATURE

# Lee Ufan's Quietly Groundbreaking Five-Decade Career

The artist Lee Ufan has pushed the boundaries of painting and sculpture. Now a flurry of major solo exhibitions honor the man of steel



A SINGULAR VISION Artist Lee Ufan at Dia:Beacon in Beacon, New York, next to his work *Relatum* (formerly *Iron Field*), 1969/2019. PHOTO: ADRIAN GAUT FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

*By Robert Sullivan*

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**On a chilly spring morning**, Lee Ufan is climbing up and around a quarry on the eastern end of Long Island looking for boulders. The site is a village-size pit of sand and soil, ringed with piles of white stones of varying sizes. Lee, a sculptor, painter and philosopher, has traveled from Manhattan by car. He arrived ready to work, dressed in black jeans, a dark blue jacket and a corduroy shirt of autumnal gold. He is trim and fit—about 5 foot 8 with shaggy silver hair—and he moves quickly through the landscape. He doesn't speak much, mostly keeping to hand gestures. From time to time, he refers to his drawings, sketches of future sculptures. Later, he motions toward a boulder and says, "This is good."

Lee, 83, is well aware that boulder hunting might seem odd to people unfamiliar with his work. How would he explain himself if someone asked what he was doing? The Korean-born, Japanese-based artist replies in Korean through a translator: "You can

only laugh! The question that naturally follows is, ‘Well, what kind of rocks are you looking for?’ I would say it’s a gradual process of finding the right ones, and a lot of things go into this process.... There are the concepts that I am thinking of and then there is...the space where I intend to use the rocks.”

Down in the mine, in East Quogue, Lee occasionally asks for assistance from others. Today, the group includes Pace Gallery vice president Joseph Baptista and Anne Reeve, an associate curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. This September, the Hirshhorn will open an exhibition featuring Lee’s paintings and an installation of 10 newly commissioned sculptures from his *Relatum* series. The exhibit will be the largest site-specific outdoor sculpture project Lee has ever undertaken in the U.S., as well as his first exhibition in Washington, D.C., and it will also mark a first for the museum—it has never before offered the entirety of its 4.3-acre outdoor plaza to a single artist.



Relatum, 1974/2011. PHOTO: COURTESY OF DIA ART FOUNDATION © ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/ADAGP, PARIS

“This one,” Lee says in English, pointing again. Baptista marks the boulder with tape, at which point it falls under the care of Aidan Boland, a front-end loader operator at the mine and, after Lee, the person most intimate with its topography. He wraps the rock in

a yellow nylon construction sling and then, using an excavator, lifts it into a dump truck. Having started out somewhere in New England about 20,000 years ago, then dragged through ice across what is today Long Island Sound, this particular stone is bound for the high ground in the old marsh that is now Washington, D.C.

Lee has been an artist since the late 1950s, and he is widely recognized as a founder and chief spokesman for the Japanese avant-garde group known as Mono-ha, often translated as “the School of Things.” As a sculptor, he constructs what can be called environments using a combination of natural materials—boulders or stones or wood that he finds out in the world—and completely man-made pieces, like forged steel. As a painter, he is known for works of almost maximal minimalism: for instance, a series of large canvases, each painted over the course of several weeks, each consisting of one or two intentionally confined brush strokes. He paints with a long broom-like brush, holding his breath for the duration of the brush’s movement. Think of him as the pen-like instrument that draws out an earthquake’s tremors on a seismograph; each of his concise brush strokes reports on the vibrations of the world.

Lee’s concept for a work always precedes the action. “His studio is a very serene and uncluttered space where he’s probably only thinking about one painting at a time,” says Hirshhorn director Melissa Chiu. “The moment at which he decides to paint or selects the rock, that’s the one brief moment of making, but it’s all the thinking that went into it before that trains and prepares him for the act.” If, with his paintings, Lee is recording an encounter with the world, then with his sculptures, he is orchestrating one for the viewer. He is not sculpting in the classical sense—there is no chisel or mold. He is pointedly not sculpting.

In many ways, Lee has always resisted categorization. Although he is now revered in Japan, he was, as a Korean-born artist, initially an outsider in the country’s cultural scene, caught between the colony and its colonizers. He was attacked in 1978 for being, in the words of one critic, “nothing more than an aspect of Western ways of thinking.”

“I do not exist in Japan,” he said at the time, “and if I go to Korea I cannot confirm a definite reality.”

In the West, meanwhile, he was characterized as almost stereotypically Asian, critics confusing his passion for French phenomenology with Zen Buddhism. But 40 years later, any reluctance to accept Lee’s work, especially in the U.S., is turning. “It’s really in recent years that people have been able to appreciate his vision,” Chiu says.

In May, the Dia Art Foundation honored Lee with a gala at its location in Beacon, New York; the organization concurrently opened its own exhibit, which features five of the

artist's works, four purchased by Dia over the past two years, and one on loan. Days before the gala, Lee had flown to New York from Shanghai to install his sculptures—or reinstall them. These works, created in the late '60s and early '70s, were realized anew in Dia's old factory site. In a sense, they functioned like plays newly produced by a theater company, the local cast in this case including boulders from his favorite region on Long Island and small water-smoothed stones collected downhill from Dia on the banks of the Hudson River. Lee is the forever-curious director.

One particular piece—it was originally titled *Iron Field*, though now, like all his sculptures, is called *Relatum*, a term from geometry denoting the relationship between things—required 5,500 pounds of sand and 23,600 thin metal strands, each hand-cut the week of the gala. After the sand was spread out on the floor, the metal strands were arranged like reeds or shoots of sedge. All Dia hands were called in, though Lee finished the job himself, tossing the final strands into what looks like a metallic marsh. Jessica Morgan, Dia's director, was taken by the way the viewer feels drawn by the piece itself, as if it were not magnetic but tidal. When asked about it, Lee references a Paul Valéry poem about the nature of the beach: "That sea forever starting and restarting." "I think of it in terms of the beach signifying change," Lee explains.

**Lee was born** in what is now South Korea in 1936. His father was a journalist, and his family resisted the Japanese who had ruled Korea as a colony beginning in 1910. Growing up, Lee noticed his grandfather's limp, the result of a knife wound inflicted by a policeman during the March First Movement, the 1919 uprising of Koreans against Japanese rule. Lee's father insisted that he attend primary school, against his grandfather's wishes, where he was forced to speak Japanese and to use a Japanese name, as Japanese demands on its colony grew more severe during World War II. Once enrolled, he studied painting, calligraphy and poetry—a traditional Korean education at the time.

Lee grew up in the southern province of Gyeongsangnam-do, and his first sense memories are of the outdoors. "There was a small stream that was very, very pure and unpolluted," he recalls. "I would swim in it with my friends. I would sometimes just lie on a bed of rocks to look up at the sky. I feel like the experience of rocks was always within me. Even before I learned how to read or write or gained knowledge through books." He'd rather not talk about the Korean War, but briefly recounts an incident that took place on a bridge when he was a teenager—a plane firing, people running and the fear that people behind him did not make it to safety. "That sometimes comes in my dreams to this day," he says, and when he speaks, his hands cover his face. "It's just an



Relatum, 1974/2019 (front), and Relatum (formerly System), 1969 (back). PHOTO: COURTESY OF DIA ART FOUNDATION © ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/ADAGP, PARIS



ROCK STAR "I feel like the experience of rocks was always within me," Lee says, recalling a childhood spent playing with river rocks. PHOTO: ADRIAN GAUT FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

experience I try not to dwell on."

He enrolled at Seoul National University in South Korea in 1956. But two months later he visited an uncle in Japan and stayed on, studying philosophy at Nihon University in the hopes of becoming a writer, while selling paintings to make money. He was as interested in politics as art, supporting Korean reunification and writing about the military coup in South Korea in 1961 for newspapers and magazines. By 1968, he had been swept up in the avant-garde movement that was in part a reaction to U.S. militarism in Vietnam and to rampant postwar industrialism and consumerism. There were student protests against the renewal in 1970 of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between Japan and the United States, as well as continuing unrest over not just the U.S.'s use of nuclear weapons in Japan, but the existence of nuclear weapons at all.

As a founder of Mono-ha, Lee worked with artists focused on “not making.” The artists used found objects to comment on the paralyzing effects of technology. A 1968 piece by the late Nobuo Sekine was a watershed moment in the movement. Sekine’s *Phase—Mother Earth*, at Suma Rikyo Park in Kobe, Japan, was a 9-foot-deep, 7-foot-wide hole dug in the ground, the extracted soil stored alongside, its dimensions matching the hole. It was an object that drew attention to its source as well as to its own demise: Replace the plug and the piece was gone. The world was rearranged to affect your experience of the world. For Lee, Sekine’s directness seemed to speak beyond politics.

Journalists deemed these artists troublemakers, targeting the anti-colonial Lee in particular. “They would say, ‘These artists don’t know how to paint or sculpt, these artists are just throwing things around,’ ” Lee recalls. He bristled at the name, but as time has passed, he has become more comfortable with Mono-ha, given the expansiveness of the Japanese word for *thing*, which refers not merely to a single object but to substance in general, as distinct from mind and spirit. Rather than the School of Things, it is the school of all things. It is a school that ponders the very substance of things, the materials of the world, pulsing, as they are to Lee, with information and life history.

This is the key to understanding Lee, for whom there is no such thing as an inanimate object. Imagine seeing a field or a city or a room the way a TV meteorologist sees the nation, with high and low pressure systems, with visible winds and colorful storms. “You know Westerners think it is an object, a single object,” Lee says of the word *mono*. “But in Korean and Japanese and maybe in Chinese, the word is not object, but all objects. It’s matter.” For Lee, being in the world means always being in communication, whether you’re speaking or being silent—a communication between people and people, between people and the world.

In those early years, Lee’s work was political, or so he sees it today. “One time I

exhibited a canvas on the floor, and it had nothing drawn on it,” he says. “I refused to draw on it—in a sense, using violence.” In other words, he resisted what was expected of him, not a slight move in the art world then or now. If Lee was irritating to the Japanese for his anti-colonialist views, he was gradually welcomed more and more in Europe, invited to the Paris Biennale of 1971. He eventually made a home in Paris, in addition to Japan, where his European success moved the Japanese to appreciate him more.

He showed steadily in Europe and Asia through the '80s and '90s, honing his quiet sculptural practice while headlines in the art world focused on work by the likes of Julian Schnabel and Jeff Koons—art that, in one way or another, drew attention to itself. Lee’s first show with Pace Gallery was held in New York in 2008. In 2010, a museum of his work designed by renowned architect Tadao Ando opened on the Japanese island of Naoshima. He was the subject of a major retrospective at New York’s Guggenheim Museum in 2011, and in 2014 the Château de Versailles welcomed the artist to exhibit in its gardens; most recently, he opened a show at Centre Pompidou-Metz, in Metz, France, which is on view through September.

**Back on Long Island**, boulder hunting stretched well into the afternoon, though eventually Lee took a break for lunch at Topping Rose House in Bridgehampton. Until he did, it wasn’t clear that he would let up on his work. Does he ever relax? “I would say rest for me is when everything goes well,” Lee says. “I may put down my brush, go for a cup of coffee, maybe half a day to a spa...but it is impossible for me to imagine going on a vacation.” When not in Paris or on the road, he lives six months of the year in Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture, just south of Tokyo, with his wife. (They have three daughters.)

After lunch, when the party pulls into Marders, the old Bridgehampton nursery, which stores Lee’s boulders, the artist bounds out of the car, as if animated by his rocks—a little over a dozen—arranged in rows, some from past East Coast exhibits, the new ones preparing for their trip to the Hirshhorn. In an essay from the late 1980s titled “What Can Be Seen in a Moment,” Lee wrote: “The fact of being able to feel or see the world is in itself mysterious, but there are moments when things and their surroundings suddenly open up....” The meeting with his rocks felt like one such moment for Lee: The stones activate his senses, remind him that we live in a world that is in communication with us, and vice versa.

The next day, at Pace’s 57th Street gallery in Manhattan, he talks about the ways that encountering a boulder are akin to encountering the unknown: “They have this energy that’s very chaotic. It really reminds me of something transcendent, something of the universe. I feel like these rocks really contain multitudes of information and history.

And so yes, some of them I come back to like an old friend.”

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