



Jaewook Lee **Space as Window**

BY DENISE CARVALHO

Jaewook Lee's work deals with the perceptions and theories that define our sense of place, humanity, and nature. Consisting of video, installation, and performance, his practice assumes that all relationships in space are sculptural, hence form, weight, volume, scale, and negative space create material extensions and possibilities of physical and sensorial space. In a way, his work references a long line of advances in and controversies over perspectival theory, from the canvas as a window giving the illusion of space to approaches related to quantum physics and metaphysics. Among Lee's most recent themes is memory as both recorder of knowledge and conductor of imagination and poetic license. Memory's sense of time resembles a traveler moving from experience to experience, documenting but also reordering according to empathy and the desire for expression.

Window Project (2005), a window installation at the Hangaram Design Museum, featured a series of photographs that reflect on Seoul as a conflicted place in the memory of its residents. Adhesive tape echoing the vertical rise of skyscrapers seen through the window seemed to comment on the fast-moving progress of the city. The background of the skyline was shaded in a fog of pollutants, the eerie view confirming the duality of the city in its romantic, but contradictory longing for both modernity and nature. For Lee, the idea of the growing city of Seoul resides not just in its architecture, but in an increasing proximity of all matter, physical and cultural, linking brands and languages through trilingual logos, conjoining new building technologies and historical styles, merging flocks of people and their cultural differences. As progress continues its exponential growth, revitalization brings traditional architecture back to life, merging old and new into another ideal, in which memory is both what was and what has become. At night, colorful and bright LED decorations enhance billboards and architectural sites, creating a poetic sense of detachment in which technology and nature evoke each other. In a commercial city, lights are a form of spiritual invocation, a reminder that the desire to dream is still present.

Big Seoul (2011), a single-channel video and sound installation, explores the state of the

Treatise on Rhythm, Color, and Bird-song, 2016. Mixed media, 33 x 20 x 13 ft.



Window Project, 2005. Photographs and mixed media, view of installation at the Hangaram Design Museum, Seoul.

city in different periods—including the war, shown through the American bombing of a bridge over the Han River to stop a North Korean invasion. The video also shows cutouts from images of postwar South Korea, printed on translucent paper and applied to the glass of a window overlooking the Han River. Among these images are scenes of people walking toward the river to gather water after the war, an act that is iconic, since for many generations, water from the Han River was trusted as clean.

In *Building/Unbuilding* (2012), a collaboration with the Korean artist Charlie Hahn, Lee identifies the process of “unbuilding” the city as a necessary step to break the interdependence of building, dwelling, and thinking. Unbuilding is referenced through two jigsaw puzzles mixed together and left undone on a table. One of the puzzles contains an image of Seoul; the other depicts Pyongyang. The work also includes a video of the artist reading from an interview that he conducted with a North Korean defec-

tor now living in the United States, who reveals the tragic loss of family members in the face of extreme hardship, untreated illnesses, and starvation. As Lee reads the interview, the words become profoundly disturbing to him. This moment makes a striking connection between his attempt to unbuild the city and his need to erase a sense of identity and self.

In *Becoming Pollens* (2013), a mound of powdered fibers that were once woven into the flags of South and North Korea, effaced symbolic meaning becomes the only path toward reunification of the two countries. Lee’s follow-up version of the work, shown at the Museo Juan Manuel Blanes in Montevideo, Uruguay, continued the trituration; this time, the flags represented Argentina, Chile, the Czech Republic, South Korea, Lithuania, Poland, Uruguay, and the U.S., the countries of origin of the artists participating in the exhibition.

In the installation and performance *When All Things Evaporate, We’ll Talk About Minerals* (2014), a collaboration with Simone Couto exhibited at Pioneer

Left: Jaewook Lee and Charlie Hahn, *Building/Unbuilding*, 2012. Mixed media, approx. 45 x 45 x 13 ft. Below: Jaewook Lee and Simone Couto, *When All Things Evaporate, We’ll Talk About Minerals*, 2014. Mixed-media installation and performance, 49 x 49 x 16 ft.



Right: *Becoming Pollens*, 2013. Powdered North and South Korean flags, 4 x 4 ft. Below right: *Becoming Pollens*, 2014. Powdered flags (Argentina, Chile, Czech Republic, South Korea, Lithuania, Poland, Uruguay, and the U.S.), 30 x 10 x .1 ft.

Works in Brooklyn, Lee explored the individual importance of all things and their total obsolescence in a world of materiality. Evoking a world of evanescent emotions and actions, art history books, origami, crystals, and a sculpture imitating a meteorite (made of books about meteorites) were dispersed in a large room that hosted numerous performances. In one of these, which reflected on the interrelation between the geometric and the organic, a man rotated around the large meteorite sculpture, trying to mimic its form with his body. Another performance featured a flutist breathing as she prepared for her performance on an invisible flute, playing Messiaen's "Le Merle Noir" while staring into a crystal. The artists and gallery-goers traveling together from Manhattan to Pioneer Works in a chartered bus had already listened to the music on their way to the opening. Watching the performance, audience members were supposed to remember what they had heard an hour before. The fragmented time/space experience seemed to evoke a detached link between nature and culture, here represented by the cycles of life, of growth, of action and inaction in the oldest time of all, that of minerals.

Nothing but a Symphony (2014), a video and sound installation, focuses on nature as reminiscent of memory. A young Korean woman plays an invisible cello sitting on rocks near the ocean, performing from memory a song that she has played hundreds of times. In a later scene, a jellyfish moves smoothly through water as if following the rhythm of the cellist's hands. The silent film becomes even stronger when the screen is filled with primary colors—yellow, red, blue, and white converging into an internal rhythm created by the memory of the song being performed. Colors here are vibrations, just like rhythms, sounds, and silence.

Treatise on Rhythm, Color, and Birdsong (2016), made for Lee's solo exhibition at Space O'New Wall in Seoul, features a video, two installations, and five drawings. The



work draws on Messiaen's "Le Merle Noir" and the Surrealist paintings of Remedios Varo, taking into consideration their interest in science, magic, and nature. The video, based on Lee's travels to the canyons of Utah, uses the landscape to tell a story about memory revisited as Messiaen's music merges with sounds of wind and water. The performance of a flutist accompanies an image of a masked woman responding to the elements of nature, who invokes Varo's painting. Geometric forms become windows inside windows on the screen of the video, where parts of nature are cut out and repasted onto the same image, showing fragments of distinct time and space. The drawings of the same geometric elements rendered in bright colors address the importance of synesthesia. The installation includes a terra-cotta sculpture of a canyon, as well as two freestanding

sculptural platforms for sculpture and the video monitor. The horizontal and vertical elements of these platforms, rendered alternately in pink and green, reference the most common colors of Utah's canyons. Devoid of nails or hinges, the constructions reflect on the connection between nature and culture.

The traveler as an aspect of Lee's work is important not only because it reflects on his own journey from Korea to the U.S., but also because it references the history of modern Korea and the search for spiritual meaning in a technologized society. In Lee's work, the artist is a poet, philosopher, and visionary, someone whose journey is not only in the senses and in the mind, but also in real space, moving from place to place, in search of higher plateaus to achieve balance with the past.

Denise Carvalho is an independent curator.