

TRACE

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by Josef Ng

An investigator of visual and material perceptions, Malaysian artist Zulkifli Lee captivates with his gestural orchestrations from assemblies of found, and recovered elements in the natural: soil, sand, limestone, turmeric, to name a few. While firmly grounded in the materials and structural format of painting – canvas, jute, stretcher bars, stencils, and palette knife – the artist constructs singular, non-figurative paintings-objects. He values thingness, in this case, nature, over imagery; textural quality of solidity, mass, volume, and patterns over pictures.

Artworks feature in this online presentation share basic rectangular/squarish dimensions and mainly often muted, subdued tones, but each has its own highly distinct character and is rather unlike from each other.

Over the past years, Lee has cultivated a formalistic idiom linking nature, space, and colour to the physics and procedures of painting. Very much influenced by the Islamic aesthetic philosophy of Nazzariyah(1), the artist attempts to harmonize his artistic practice with a visceral approach to the mapping of the natural, translated into visual imagery. The artist's compelling and often abstract works are the result of various complex procedures, combining minimalist rigour with the mellow atmospherics of a lived-in quality that underscores the natural materials he uses.

Lee collects found minerals, such as soil, limestone, stones and so on, and creates astonishing constructions with these natural elements, presenting facets of his undeniable skill with finesse, particularly in terms of the calculated and methodical way he handles his materials by engaging with their physical and phenomenological properties. From grinding and sifting through to stencilling and layering, Lee produces geometric motifs that are repeatedly applied across the highly-textured surfaces of his works. The repetition implies an infinite continuation and becomes points of symmetrical illumination.

To the potential meaning of form manifesting cultural and personal implications, the raw enigma of abstracted surfaces and what they communicated have also long been of interest to the artist. His emphasis is not only on rationality but also on elements of chance that occur during production and the interpretations his artworks induce, prompting one to seek and see mystery in the familiar.

In ***Pola Pecah***, the piece comprises of repetitive cross-marked patterns that is not connected to each other, leaving scattered parts of the visual constructions blank flat and seemingly in disarray, creating negative spaces in shaping. How do these repeated shapes disappear and appear according to our point of view? What is the shift between the reality and the illusion of the contents and of the materialized conditions? To the artist, leaving something 'unfinished' or 'incomplete' in appearance accentuates upon the play of imagination.

Evoking a sense in familiarity and of place, ***Kait***, is created from soils gathered from only one specific site, regardless of their natural properties. The resulting composition gives off the contrast of hues and textures derived and combined from the different types of soiled elements found and utilized. Across the painted surface, the unity of commonality and differences in relations despite varying specimens are symbolic of power that elicits one sense of belonging.

The intentionally unstretched rawness of ***Garisnusa 1***, seems to revel in the ambiguity between image making and object making. With a highly uniformed surface appearance, the result was derived from the artist obtaining the soil material purchased from an industrial store instead of a natural environment Lee usually scouts in. That is why the surface composition almost has no variation of tones compared to other works made from found natural soil. According to the artist, relating how industrial intervention can change the character of material or object, the idea of uniformity as perfection in mass production industry further highlights the tensions in the relationship between human and nature.

Lee emphasizes the perception one has, or believes to have, of reality. And his virtuoso working of natural materials elaborates its opacity, its reality and its textures. Always erudite, his works merge sensory intuition and optical processes, revealing the narrative of materials used along with the corporeality of nature.

The reduction of visual forces at play in any given work amplifies their effect and contributes to the breath of allusion several of the paintings convey, existing as poetic manifestations, one in particular having the vibrant colourized surface appearance, encountered in *Arah*. The painting is a layered combination of two different type of materials the artist normally uses: soil and limestones. With differing elements to create two opposing space of background juxtaposing with the foreground, the work examines relationship of harmony in contradictory opposites.

Lee has also been working on a series of works whose generative surfaces were either burnt, rippled or folded, exemplified by Mashrabiya. Created with 2 layers of canvases, the work represents a strong undercurrent of idiosyncratic, process-based abstraction that somehow remains open-eyed and current. Teeming with wit and mystery, the artist process revolves around the borrowing of nature in acted means, in this case, fire to burn parts of the canvas, leaving holes on it. Lee balances contained and carefully orchestrated regions of apparent visual tension – panels burnt and tapered off, with dangled pieces stop short of falling off.

As one views all the mentioned works in distant and form, zooming into its closeness, all sort of immediacies emerge – your place in the site, your place in reference to the world, your awareness of the elegance and labour of creating something from mere dirt. Or in this case, surrounding environment of nature.

The world is enough, the artist seems to be saying, if we would only include it in our thoughts.

Making the experiential journey from two-dimensional works to sculptures, Lee delves deeper into the interconnectedness between nature and its metaphysical conditions. By conjoining modular structures made of wood and steel respectively, the artist makes use of lattices via the criss-crossing diagonals of repeating vertical and horizontal bands matched together as both the structure and stable form of his sculptural works. Serving as metaphors for the by-products of nature, the works address how the materials are opposites of one another with wood being a product of nature, whereas steel is an industrial product alloyed from the natural elements of iron and carbon.

Lee has also sought to make his sculptures interactive, as visitors are invited to stack and reconfigure allocated pieces from the artworks. This site of encounter can perhaps be understood as an instinctual reaction between the personal and the public, emphasizing on the utility of sculpture in a public space. In bringing participatory into the sculptures, their presence is instantly amplified, fully noticed and active in the experience.

The artist's ability to keep a variety of media in concordance with his thought processes in relation to nature is remarkably consistent. All in all, Lee possesses a rigorous dedication to materiality played out with measured output and flair across the disciplined of his mixed-media paintings and sculptural works.

(1) The Nazzariyah philosophy comprises of four main parts, called Tabiat, Riyaziyyah, Insaniyyah and Illahiyyah. Tabiat can briefly be explained as the beauty of nature that exists outside the control of humans. Riyaziyyah discusses the beauty in geometric forms and numbers. Insanniyah talks about the beauty of humans and Illahiyah is about the beauty of God, the one that created it all.

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