

ARTFORUM Review

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For Lee Kit, painting is like breathing: an act of leaving an invisible trace within a space so that “[e]ven if a person isn’t there, you can feel his breath.” Lee treats surfaces like conveyors of personal residues, combining and arranging his works into installations that evoke the feeling of faint presence, as if produced from someone’s recent departure from a now empty room. This approach is palpable in Lee’s most characteristic works: faint transfer prints of well-known logos and labels—such as those of Johnson & Johnson, Pears, or Dove—on cardboard treated with watery acrylic color washes and pastel shades. These are often presented in spaces with towels, plastic hooks, and other household fixtures, so as to produce a sense of both familiarity and alienation through the domestication of the abstract space that surrounds an artwork.

And while this exhibition, “By the way,” invoked that same double sense, it also marked a subtle turn in Lee’s practice with the introduction of figuration into his paintings: the lower legs of a man wearing smart shoes emerging from a color block of sky blue in *The Boy in Leather Shoes*, 2013–14, for example, or a woman wearing a blazer, her head and neck similarly erased with the same brilliant hue in *Mary Took It*, 2014. *Nivea Nivea*, 2014, was one of two works featuring a product label: A black box with a white Nivea logo painted on it sat on the floor like a tombstone with a household light fixture dangling in front of it. Opposite this was an upright, sky-blue painting on cardboard, *Uriage, Normal to Dry*, 2014, placed on the floor and leaning against the wall, resting on a stack of foam packing material that resembled pediments of monuments or memorials. Both works recall a blue plywood painting shown in the catalogue for the artist’s exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2013, in which FUCK YOU was printed in lieu of a label: Their placement suggested a demotion of sorts—a sign of an emerging concern with figure as opposed to product.

Within this tension between past and present practice lurked an underlying anxiety, as expressed in *What to do?*, 2014. In the video component of this work, the artist’s fingers tap on a table as subtitles recount the story of a woman at once trying to bleed and fall asleep “violently”—a comment, perhaps, on psychological tics lurking beneath composed facades. A deliberate uniformity united the objects in the gallery’s main space, which followed a color palette of blues and browns, with whites and black elements interspersed. This color scheme was replicated in another room, where a video—*A voice-over (a landscape painting)*, 2014—projected a lingering shot of a green field with a path, a small grove, and a clear blue sky. A silent narrator ruminates, via the video’s subtitles on a desire to be immersed in the

landscape and reflects on how looking at it produces a sense that “nothing really matters” and “everything will be fine.” Both video works evoke the artist talking at once to himself and to a marked absence—a missing person, perhaps.

The composition of this exhibition-as-installation produced a move from the domestic landscape to the natural landscape via that Romantic gesture of recalling man’s insignificant presence in the cosmos. It invoked the everyday world—its real and ideological horizons—as an abstract thing, be it a painting, a white cube, or a bedroom: a space upon which we might project our subjective conditions while also seeking solace from them. A composed, material projection onto a surface, painting really is like breathing, as Lee says. It is the trace of a bodily expression suspended in abstract space. But this feeling is tangible only when someone is there to sense it.

Article in ARTFORUM
April 2014 issue Vol.52 pp.279