

## Interview with LEE KIT

Artist: Lee Kit (L)

Interviewer: Koichiro Osaka (O)

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O: I'm interested in the way you express yourself. Being lazy and bored.

L: I'm a very boring guy.

O: No, no. You make such meaningful statements by not doing things. You mentioned this yourself - how political it is not to do things in a place like Hong Kong that is constantly seeking productivity.

L: I do plan, but I also plan for doing nothing.

O: Can you tell me a bit more about this particular exhibition? I heard from the gallery that you sent them a floor plan for a wall construction, but nothing at all about what to exhibit.

L: This is my usual, in the past few years. If the space is a canvas, and actually this is some element on the canvas. Then it's not a problem if there's nothing here.

O: I heard you just brought paintbrushes and paint, like a classical painter who goes to find the landscape with an easel and a canvas with no fixed plan.

L: Yeah. The only difference is that people didn't travel by plane. But now I have to take a flight. So I look like a businessman, travel like a businessman, but I'm not a businessman. I really like it though because I'm kind of hidden. I'm in the airport for example, no one knows I'm an artist. So, I actually like it. Ways to make myself disappear. To disappear at openings, disappear in airports ...

O: How do you start and develop ideas for your exhibition and how do they end?

L: Usually I think about the space configuration or the space design. Then I decide on the soundtrack for the exhibition. Every exhibition has a soundtrack, so soundtrack A is for exhibition A. It's like each piece is a song and I compile a music album. I will try plan A, B, C, and D and then the most important is to set the mood or the atmosphere of the show.

O: What do you mean by the "atmosphere" for the exhibition?

L: For example, the loneliness in Tokyo. I'm curious about the loneliness I feel in Tokyo. From the design of the city. From the cleanliness of the city. From the way people walk, the way people are having lunch in the park, to the way people are buying lunch from the convenience shop, and also the collectiveness and the repressive way of living. When you're walking down the street, you know you feel lonely, you know you feel sad. You're somehow fucked up by something. But you're okay with it. You're just walking, but you still feel it, and you just keep walking. So maybe we're becoming more mature.

O: Thinking about your early painting with stripes and Gingham pattern, you seem to be fostering some personal relationship with your artwork. You wash your painting, and take it for a picnic, to a bar, or to an exhibition, or any place in your daily life. It's not quite intentional or conceptual for that matter, but it seems you purely develop affection to the painting.

L: Yeah, to be with it. My friend has a very good description about this hand painted cloth. She's a curator and artist. She said these are like your dogs or your pets. You just want to be with them. If I try to formalize it, trying to tell people more intellectually about that series of work, what can I say? I make some paintings, I wash them everyday, I look at them everyday, and sometimes use them. That's not even a concept, it's a description. Later on, I stopped showing it. I still use it in my apartment. No one knows.

O: Are these words that appear in your works quotes from magazines and lyrics?

L: Yes and quite random. Sometimes they simply catch my eye. It could be something very short. Or I just write my own.

O: But you don't make references intentionally. It's easy in your position to comment on specific political events, for example. But in your work, you try your best not to make any reference at all.

L: I really try my very best not to quote something. I really don't agree with political art, for example. It's a little bit unrelated but I think it's kind of related...

O: Please go on.

L: Yes, political art. If you're saying something that clearly, don't do art coated in politics. But usually people who do political art have a very clear statement or a cause. If you like it, I respect it. But it's useless, it's just useless. It's the same case. Like you said a quote. If I quote something, then it becomes useless. I don't want to repeat something like "my mom is a woman." Everybody knows that my mom is a woman.

O: I feel that position very strongly in your work. Whatever political motive you have in your work, you never express it in a defined way. You filter our realities. You begin with specific and concrete events, but the audience can only imagine your initial thoughts.

L: I think it opens up the imagination and brings creativity. Or at least people know they need to be curious to understand what it is, because you need to take a minute to understand the relationship between all these objects and the artworks. All of them don't work together. Similar to democracy, for example. It doesn't work as an approach, so maybe we need more imagination.

O: What becomes the filter in your work? An emotion, an atmosphere, or other medium that allows anyone access.

L: I feel like I'm making coffee. When I walked here, I read some news on facebook, and thought fuck it. I got very angry. I entered this office, and I see my colleagues, and I'm very angry, but of course I have to deal with the things in the office first. So I calm myself down, and then I talk to them, and then I forget about the news. And then a message comes and my mom told me something very annoying. And then everything happens at the same time. I have three emotions. Angry, annoyed, and trying to be myself. So then what do I do? Maybe I just want to make coffee. What's left behind is the coffee in front of me, but when I'm making the coffee, of course I'm filtering things like coffee powder -

but also filtering my emotions. But when I'm drinking my own coffee, other people won't know my emotions or that I'm consuming them. Then I'm ok. But in political art, they actually want to show everything to you from the coffee beans. I just want to show the coffee.

O: And that makes your work paradoxical because what appears cannot be evidenced in what you say about politics, and the inner process is hidden. For this reason, your presence becomes very political. Because trying to be yourself is a political act. And to create a space that accepts a variety of positions while sharing fundamental feeling requires a highly political skills. You are a very rare artist who creates expression without the voice to your generation in Hong Kong, through realisation of the "atmosphere" or simply your emotion. It's not something that many people can do.

L: I have to. I don't have a choice now. I have put myself in a difficult position. I'm not a commercially successful artist - I'm not this kind of artist, I'm not that. In a way, I have a freedom of choice, because I cannot go into that kind of category anymore. It's a dilemma.

O: So the "atmosphere" in your exhibition accepts a variety of feelings. I think this atmosphere is rooted not in optimism but comes rather from boredom, anger, annoyance - or feelings usually labeled negative and counter-productive. This is what I am interested in - this resilient power of negativity. You tackle these feelings face to face. Is that what you've been doing from the very start?

L: I realized from the beginning that I like to confront the main problems. Like if I have five problems, I will confront all five of them, but I like to confront one main problem. I like to confront it. At least I can not imagine that some people are always happy. I choose to confront the things that I cannot get away from. And I have to experience every day. Like the feeling of missing something or the feeling of being angry. And in a way, through this confrontation, it becomes consumption. I'm consuming my own emotions as well. So I won't be controlled by it forever. For example, being angry it could make me really mad. You can do something totally irrational. I don't want to be irrational. So maybe the best way is to confront the negative feeling. I don't think it's negative as long as it belongs to us. We have been brainwashed for a long long time that negative feeling is bad. Negative feeling is not bad. I'd rather be able to enjoy sadness or enjoy being alone. So I would rather choose this grey area, where all of these emotions exist. The way I choose to

confront things is nothing special. Everybody can do it. I even think everybody should do it.

O: Being rational, logical and productive and a doubt to a kind of brainwashing. You experienced the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong to China in your teenagehood. How did you and your friends managed this shift of collective identity?

L: Oh, we don't manage. My friends don't manage, they just live their lives. That's it. For me, it's a slow suicide. You're committing a slow suicide. So no, I think people in the country do not have a collective approach to how to confront the lives we are living now. We are so fragmented now.

O: But if you think about umbrella movements, is there a strong sense of responsibility to prevent this from happening in your generation, so you don't pass it to the next one? When the principles of democracy - the fundamentals for Hong Kong's identity were at risk, you resisted so intensely.

L: Too intense, somehow. I live in Taipei a year ago, and there was a sunflower revolution there. And I'm against this kind of thing. I was there, actually I arrived in Hong Kong and I just got to the airport express, when I was sprayed with tear gas - like fuck shit. I was so unlucky. So I was there. I don't totally agree with this kind of approach. It's another kind of collective brainwashing. It could be another kind of dictatorship. It's against democracy. We are sitting here fighting for democracy. We are sitting here fighting for democracy and the idea of democracy. But are not using democracy to turn our rights into another kind of, another form of dictatorship.

O: But I think the movement has a very clear intention of what to prevent, naming who to be kicked out from the capital, for example.

L: But easily and quickly, it's all consumed, and in less than one year, all of these leaders and the movement turn into certain kind of dictatorship or privileged class. Because they offered that movement, they obtain some kind of power. I don't mean to criticise the Umbrella Revolution. I'm commenting on my feelings about this kind of movement. Maybe the collective framework is the main thing that I should avoid somehow. In Canton we usually say, if it's two people, we have drinks. If we have more than three people, it's

a party. A party means having fun. In English, party has a different meaning, like a political party.

O: I hope you don't take this wrong, and I don't write like this, but I feel there is a great resignation in the back of your mind. Many conflicting emotions coexist in this state of resignation, but I think and I feel somehow that in this way you're giving up about what art can do.

L: You can write it. I've given up. I mean giving up in terms of a way that, the best way to let art exist is that we don't talk about it. We just let it happen. But now we cannot do it. We have to, for example, have a system. We have the writers, we have the artist, we have the gallery, we have the blah blah blah. No, it's impossible. But the best way, I prefer, is to just let it happen. It's impossible. But on a personal level, I can do it.<sup>1</sup> I'm giving up. I'm giving up everyday, but it still happens.

O: Finally, can I ask you about your collection of hygiene products. I heard you have a vast collection of cream and face wash.

L: Yes, I still collect. I collect a lot of Nivea Creams... I have a whole collection of hygiene products. More than a thousand. I think almost two thousand.

O: Do you use them all?

L: I don't use them, I just collect them.

O: What do you do with it?

L: Nothing. Look at it. I know it's very strange. For example, if I stay at a hotel, I will take their soap, I will take their toothbrushes... I don't know, I just like the design of it. And also, maybe I have a fascination from when I was young.

O: When you were young?

L: When I was young, I didn't talk. When I was small. I just didn't talk, not even to my parents. But I talked when I'm taking a shower. My parents helped me to take showers because I was young. I remember after I was five or six years old, I started taking

showers by myself, and I realized that I was talking to myself. But in that moment when you're naked, taking a shower, no one is around you. Only those bottles. Nivea cream, or Johnson & Johnson. So then I have that association and fascination with all of these bottles.

O: Do you personalize those bottles?

L: I do. I do.

O: Like you go into the shower room and you're like, "oh hey, John."

L: Haha not in that way.

O: You just sense their presence?

L: I associate the blue color of Johnson & Johnson bottles with certain kinds of emotions. Just an association. I'm not a freaky person, just talking to them like, "Hi, bottles!"

O: I will keep this conversation with me, and the next time I see your exhibition, I'll think about how your work is related to your affection for hygiene products. It's always a pleasure for me to stretch my thoughts. Perhaps it's not quite your intention. But that's the best part.

L: Like reading, it guides you to nowhere.

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<sup>i</sup> In September 2015, Lee kit together with cultural producer Chantal Wong opened "Things That Can Happen" ([thingsthatcanhappen.hk](http://thingsthatcanhappen.hk)), a non-profit art space in Kowloon, Hong Kong. It closed in September 2017.

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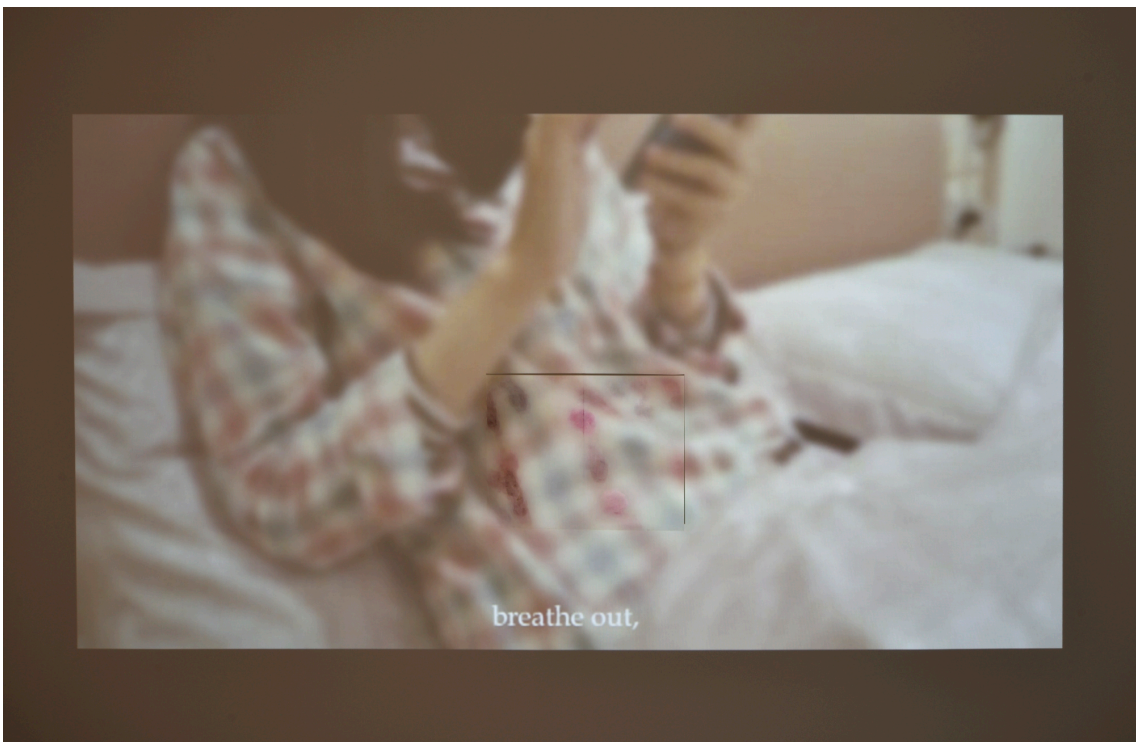


*Not untitled*, installation view, 2017, ShugoArts



*Half sane*, 2017, acrylic and emulsion paint on plywood, looped video, plastic box, wooden plate: 61x45cm, plastic box: 41x54x20cm





*Bed side story*, 2017, acrylic, emulsion paint on paper, looped video, Plywood: 35.7x46cm, projection: 125.5x233.5cm



*His pinky hand*, 2017, acrylic, emulsion paint, inkjet ink pencil on plywood, 59.9x45cm



*Not untitled*, installation view, 2017, ShugoArts, Right: *Take it away*, 2017, acrylic, emulsion paint, inkjet ink and correction fluid on paper, plywood, 38.2x29.5cm, Left: *Not untitled*, 2017, acrylic, emulsion paint, inkjet ink pencil on plywood, 37x32cm