

The Machine, Fi Jae LEE

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The visual grotesqueness in Fi Jae LEE's work is the first thing that catches your eye. This grotesqueness stems not only from the fact that her work deals with the subject of the others' body (as a woman) and its monstrousness, but also from the excessive detail of each individual artwork element that forms her overall work. Her paintings, produced through intensive manual labor over long periods of time, are filled with symbolic objects composed of simple combinations of figures. In her paintings that resemble a mythical allegory, partial objects of four-limbed shapes that are suggestive of human beings or alien gods appear dismantled, transposed and repeated. Like the title of the exhibition, *Excavating Future Species*, Lee's painting creates an uncanny sense that reminds us of the origin of some existence we don't yet know. Her sculptures, reminiscent of ancient excavated relics, are likewise created from small pieces on an obsessive but crafty level. These tiny pieces have a metallic surface of dense scales or feathers, sometimes with thorns shooting out like lightning rods. Just as we classify the geological age when mankind began to have a great influence on the global environment as the 'Anthropocene', these fragments are imaginary species and what was (once) part of Fi Jae LEE, since they got their name and form due to the artist in a worldview called 'Phanerozoic Eon, Cenozoic Era, Leeficene'. While Lee's paintings seem to deal with origins that have not yet come to pass, her sculptures appear to be contemplating the strange fate of species in the 'Leeficene' that are 'already' taxidermied as soon as they emerge. Perhaps it's more of a pity? In fact, it is difficult not to overlap the fate of the human species in the 'Anthropocene' with that of the species in the 'Leeficene'.

The labor-intensive pattern found in both her paintings and sculptures makes our eyes become closely glued to its details, initially seeming to be part of a religious self-performance. However, they are too anomalous, too colorful, and too decorative to clear the mind. In other words, the traces of Fi Jae LEE's manual labor make us imagine the pleasure of inventing novice shapes

rather than the pain of filling empty space. On the other hand, the details of paintings and sculptures that Lee excessively portrays are small—intensely too small. They seem to be minute, anti-sublime objects that are so small they end up slipping through the filter of interpretation, quite contrary to sublime objects that are too vast to be captured within the semantic system of human reason. The small details of Fi Jae LEE's work disturb the hermeneutic urge to hold on to a fixed meaning, just like a fractal, in which the form of the part is constantly repeated in that of the whole. This urge creates an optical illusion that seems to continuously repeat self-dissolution. The details of Lee's work refuse to leave even the smallest element of clues that could turn into some semblance of meaning by being repeatedly divided. These anti-sublime details found in Fi Jae LEE's paintings and sculptures remain as a terrifying surplus that can never be fully grasped, classified, or interpreted from the perspective of visual centralism, an important principle that helped form the modern subject. Just as we panic at the 'uncountability' of vast seas and infinite sand, we can react equally to 'uncountable' objects because they are too small. Therefore, once again, if her work relates to grotesqueness, we could possibly draw a temporary conclusion that it's not because the figures she creates are monstrous, but because the elements that make them up are extremely small.

By twisting Paul Klee's statement that art makes the invisible visible, can one say that Lee makes the invisible invisible again through visible objects? In other words, we can never 'decode' her work in a conventional visual art reading method. Additionally, this all the more refers to the fact that her manual labor shows greater interest in stimulating so-called 'inferior' senses, such as touch, smell and taste, than in serving faithfully in the methodology of visual reproduction. If so, we need to point out the fact that her work has often been explained in the context of 'abject art'. The 'abject', whose importance has been particularly emphasized in feminist art criticism, is the concept of Julia Kristeva. Abject art refers to objects that remind us of the state of union with our mother that must be repressed to enter the symbolic order as a speaking subject, or to enter the self-effacing state triggered by such an object. The 'abject' here mainly refers to body secretions, but includes all sensory objects that have been expelled and excluded from the (Western-male-visual-logos-centered) culture in the sense that it has the effect of

blurring the boundaries between self and other. Therefore, Lee's *Everything Ascending to Heaven Smells Rotten* (2010)—giving off a strong smell of squid—or *The Custom Dress for Wings* (2011)—made of dried pollack and lace—can be understood as an ‘appropriate’ example of abject art. Consider Fi Jae LEE's *Phanerozoic Eon, Cenozoic Era, Leeficene Encyclopedia* series, which evokes a harsh, rough or bumpy sense of touch through sculptural description, such as *My Moth* (2019) and *The Excavated Souls of My Kind Grandma and Birds Buried Alive with Her* (2020). Instead of staying in the place of an aesthetic object that enables elegant distancing, these pieces make the skin—the boundary surrounding our ego—immediately feel, exposing their unique physical properties that evoke the urge to touch. Therefore, the historical art category of ‘abject art’ seems to be an extremely suitable framework for critics (like me) who attempt to contextualize Fi Jae LEE's work around anti/non-visualism. However, is that truly everything?

Since her debut in Seoul's art world in 1997 when she was only a freshman in high school, Fi Jae LEE has been working in various ways, including drawing, painting, sculpture, installation and performance, regardless of media. It is not easy to summarize Lee's approach to expand her worldview vertically and horizontally by directly or indirectly melting a wide range of interests—extending from religion and mythology to deep-sea creatures and subculture—into her work. This is all the more so because she employs a difficult strategy, not putting the world's current trends in front of her work, which is the attitude from artists who are trying to make their debut into the ‘art world’. Although her work has included ‘women’ as subject matter for a long time, she has not presented it with the ideology of ‘feminism’ (which should go without saying). Likewise, she has embodied the image of non-human beings such as the species of ‘Leeficene’, but has not used ‘big’ concepts such as ‘other’ and ‘ethics’. This is likely because it's not the way she works. On the day of my visit to her studio, she told me about the "thousands of bodies" that consist of her body, which I understood as her feeding, growing and cultivating traces of things from others that she senses, experiences and remembers in her body. From this point of view, her body, where the crowd of "thousands of bodies" dwells together, is an organism's body consisting of lungs, hearts, stomachs and intestines, and is also a huge machine with

enormous capacity and productivity. None of these distinctions is actually the same as what they were at first—through a process of sufficient ripening—after they are reproduced into a completely new form for the outside world by being ground, mixed and reassembled in a machine named Fi Jae LEE. They are transformed into drawings, paintings, sculptures and performances under the signature of this machine that follows its own system of symbols and visual logic and are reborn. The way Fi Jae LEE exists as an artist follows a mechanical logic that recreates one into the other, and follows the logic of life that performs the cycle of birth and extinction that is repeated forever through the medium of one's body. Thus, what's important in understanding Lee's work is not only to calculate exactly where she stands in regard to her work (though this is necessary), but also to capture the mobility that her act of drawing and sculpting creates, just like breathing and spitting out.

In the same context, let's explore this solo exhibition. *Excavating Future Species* includes not only drawing, painting and sculpture that Lee has produced daily, like a diary, but also a performance: *Food Reincarnation*. *Food Reincarnation* is a meal ceremony and a relational aesthetic performance that materializes the table inside the exhibition hall, which is a "place where dead bodies gather" and "a place where images are born", and therefore "a space where dead creatures' bodies are reborn into new images." The performance invites the audience to the table as participants and artists, making them create a 'new image' out of the 'dead creature' they ate. Lee's idea is that the "dead creature's body" we eat every day does not forever disappear through digestion, but is transformed into an energy-providing fuel by connecting to an organ called our body. Thereby being reborn as an idea or an act, it has no conventional grief expected from the 'funeral of the Anthropocene'. This is because it's not all sad. Just as "thousands of bodies" reappear in the form of work through a machine called Fi Jae LEE, "dead bodies of living things"—and we ourselves—are part of the huge cycle of life and death, which prepares us for another birth at the already-arrived end of the Anthropocene. Perhaps during the course of the performance, the exhibition hall itself seems to have become a huge machine, just like Fi Jae LEE. In this machine, which is hollow inside, what goes out directly comes in again, repeating the movement that has the same beginning and end, like fractals where the form of the part repeats that of the whole.