

Fi Jae Lee: Before I Die...

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Perhaps it is to be expected that the artist-daughter of a renowned writer and poet should be both thoughtful and lyrical in articulating her practice in words, but Lee Fi Jae has, perhaps understandably, steered away from writing for quite some time. Now she is writing a book – an illustrated field guide to a new and extraordinary species of sculpture creatures she has been painstakingly crafting over several years.

The accompanying book would be a bestiary if we knew that her inventions were animals. The publication is one aspect of a large-scale, multi-part project that will eventually take over an entire gallery in a major natural history museum. The scale of Lee's ambition is impressive, and she is very determined.

Lee Fi Jae's practice is diverse. Her early performance/ installation work is bold, raw, and hyper-theatrical; it echoes the visceral, often bloody performances of artists such as Gina Pane in the 70s and Ron Athey and Franko B. in the 1990s. These artists were considered transgressive, and their works were defined as abject – a concept borrowed from French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva¹ that is used to describe artworks that illicit feelings of revulsion and/or disgust in the viewer. The abject in Lee's work is very present and clearly triggered by the sudden and violent realization of her own corporeality, having experienced both racism and sexual harassment after her move to the US in 2005. "Before I moved to the US, I didn't know about my body... [later] my skin became like a prison for me."²

She began to make work with squid/squid skin. Squid is a regular food source in Korea, so the cultural references are obvious, but the Korean word '오징어' can also be used as slang to refer to someone unattractive. Lee made sculptures of her family out of squid skin, but overnight, they became rotten and fetid. She threw them away. Key life moments such as this have significantly impacted her art practice. After her grandmother passed away, Lee became hyper-sensitive to sound and found it difficult to make work for an extended period. Eventually, as a form of catharsis, she created an installation that included a bejeweled female form laying on a bed – the chest could be

¹ Julia Kristeva Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, Columbia University Press, 1980

² From a Zoom conversation with the artist 23 June 2023

opened to reveal blue cords that could be attached to the ceiling above the sculpture.

The work, as with some of Lee's later vaguely figurative sculptures, hints at the *écorché*,³ a term most often used in the French art academies of the 19th century to describe the human form drawn without skin. More macabre examples would present the model (or cadaver) posed so that they appeared to reveal their insides by disrobing or undressing their skin. While Lee's works are beautifully constructed, ornate, and seductively decorated, they are also overwhelmingly detailed, tempting viewers into gluttony that could easily become excessive. It's difficult to tear your eyes away... as when watching some horrific moment but being unable to turn away. Does the artist intend these works to make some sort of violent assault on the viewer, to elicit intense emotion?

As a viewer of Lee's challenging performances, the audience is passive, simply looking at the action as it unfolds, and no matter how intense, the images and memories would eventually fade with time. With her sculptures, the viewer is actively involved and implicated... they are challenged to recognize and accept their own scopophilic intention and make an active decision to move away (or not).

"The experience of my sculptures is like a ritual. A shamanistic ritual. The sculptures change the context, creating the circumstances in which the viewer can have a changed experience."⁴

In contrast, or seemingly so, Lee's recent paintings, inspired by her studies with a Buddhist monk, appear calm and meditative. Multiple motifs repeated over and over again offer a mantra for our eyes. However, the motifs carry deeper, perhaps darker meanings. In the work titled LCGC, 2022, multiple female figures are presented, each holding two pairs of shears or scissors. In Western symbolism, scissors can represent the act or intention of severing or separating spirit from life, but they can also signify the unification of the spiritual and the material. Multiplying the motif might suggest the paring away of the non-essential elements of life – a literal or metaphorical cleansing.

This is a critical moment in Lee Fi Jae's life and practice – a moment of introspection, high ambition, and great determination – she is committed to creating powerful, significant works of art.

"Every day starts with drawing.

³ French word that translates to English as 'flayed'. Art students from the French academies were encouraged to focus on learning to draw bone and muscle before adding flesh to their drawings/etchings

⁴ From a Zoom conversation with the artist 23 June 2023

I have hundreds of them...

Every single sculpture is made of thousands of small sculptures...

I am compelled to make them.”⁵

⁵ From a Zoom conversation with the artist 23 June 2023