Negative Body/ies—Sacred Paintings Written in the Future Past
Kim Jong Gil (art critic)

Fi Jae Lee's studio[1] was swarming with bodies already destroyed, bodies not yet born, bodies clad in the likeness of beasts, bodies at once familiar and strange, bodies with wounds. As I stepped in, my own body shuddered. Holiness is always felt first in the flesh. My body convulsed, trembling of its own accord.

Why was my body the first to react? Was it because my flesh was both terrified and drawn to these seething body/ies? As these two feelings collided, the experience of the divine that Rudolf Otto calls "Numinose (numinous)"[2] surged forth. In the studio, it was my body that clashed with the body/ies that Lee created—the experience was not shallow and cerebral, but corporeal. Her works were both terrifying and entrancing, eliciting a fearful awe and captivating charm.

Fi Jae Lee is a hidden spider[3], spinning her own myths. The thousand meshes she weaves are a spring from which sacred time gushes forth. But the time is not chronological, flowing from yesterday to today to tomorrow; it is a time when a primordial event returns to the here and now, only to happen all over again. The beginning and the present overlap, as the beginning returns day after day, piling up in the present, spiraling round and round as it rises.

This is why when you stand before the Lee's work, time wraps itself around the body, winding its way up and down, rising and falling. You cannot tell whether they are gods or monsters, humans or beasts, entrails or flowers, but the body/ies surge, only to plunge back down. They are sacred and subversive, beautiful and grotesque. Birth is subverted into death. Surely, this must be what the gods looked like before they became religions. Gods without a name, gods from whom humanity, beasts, the dead, and the unborn had not yet sprung forth. The faces of such gods.

"Leeficene" is an era that Lee created for herself. It is not a geological era, but an aesthetic one. Is it a period when art had not yet separated itself from religion? In her studio, I bore witness to a religion called "Fi Jae Lee." She does not paint religion; she depicts the moment before religion gained a name, the instant holiness washes over the body. That holiness is her aesthetic and her religion.

However, in her newest exhibition, *World War –III½,* this sacredness clashes with war. What a peculiar name—there have been a First and Second World War, but the Third has not yet happened. And yet, Lee speaks of not a Third, but of a "negative 3½," a war even stranger

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[1] During the interview, I almost jumped out of my skin. It was the same studio that I visited 20 years ago to interview Kim Soo-nam, the documentary photographer famous for his work on traditional shaman rituals. I was interviewing Fi Jae Lee in the exact same spot after 20 years. There were a few other surprises.

[2] The term "Numinose" (the numinous), coined by the philosopher and theologian Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), is derived from the Latin "numen" (divine power or deity). It refers to the irrational affect that humans feel when encountering a sacred or holy object. It is a spiritual feeling that cannot be fully explained by words or reason. Otto believed that when humans experience a divine presence, they feel two contradictory emotions simultaneously: Mysterium Tremendum, the fearful awe that humans feel before overwhelming power and infinity, and Mysterium Fascinans, the ecstasy of being intensely drawn to and captivated by a mysterious presence, despite that fear.

[3] Or in Wendy Doniger's words, an "implied spider."

than one that does not yet exist.

Lee claims that wars can be positive and negative, in the mathematical sense. While there are wars where soldiers fire guns and seize territories, there are also wars where people are swept up in the conflict, losing their homes and families, getting injured and killed, but are never recorded. Their war lies outside the margins of history books. There are people who must pay the price of a war, despite not starting it, who must bear the brunt of violence, despite not committing any. Lee calls these wars a "negative(-) war."

A minus figure is a number that has been pushed back, a number that has sunk below zero. Just because it is invisible does not mean it does not exist. It is a negative number that sinks even lower as the positive value grows larger. It is bottomless. For Lee, the minus figure is a body omitted from history. A nameless victim, a body pushed to the background while the state, military, and ideologies are in the forefront, writing world history. A body that shrinks as the justification for war grows louder, a body that cannot speak to why it died after death. These are the bodies that appear in this exhibition—bodies that the Minjung theologian Ahn Byung-mu calls ochlos(ὄχλος).[4]

The script of Heptapods bursts in circles.[5] Their writing is cyclical, and there is no knowing where it begins or where it ends. An endless "body-text," where within a single character, the entire speech unravels all at once. The circular writing denotes non-linear time.[6] Meaning is expressed all at once without arranging speech sounds in any order. The Heptapods do not write out sentence by sentence; they know everything in advance and unfold it as a single body.

Lee's paintings read in a similar way. They cannot be read from right to left; their events cannot be traced chronologically from the beginning to end. You see bodies within a single body, from which dangle eyes, thorns, entrails, fauna, scales. One is many and many are one.

One of the paintings is titled *Mandala Project for the Million Hands Holding Candles*. If a mandala unravels the sacred universe from a single center, in Lee's mandala, the center itself multiplies. A corner of the body becomes another center of a universe. A single cell, entrails, and strange creatures all become a center.

Lee's paintings are "body-texts." They are "icons" you recognize based on likeness, "indexes" embedded with traces of manual labor and materiality, and "symbols" that summon memories of Buddhist paintings, altars, goddesses, and monsters. These three (icon, index, symbol) do not stand separately but move together in a mess. Her painting-texts do not explain themselves, but make their meaning visible. Behold! They have become visible and you shall read! But reading them does not give rise to sentences.

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[4] In the Bible, "ochlos" refers to the marginalized. Unlike the citizens of Jerusalem (laos) who possessed social privileges, they were anonymous, impoverished people without political or social rights. They had no affiliation, pushed outside the established order and legal systems. The Gospel states that they were the sick, sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and so on. Wherever Jesus went, the ochlos were always there. He shared meals with them and became their closest friend.

[5] This refers to the script of the alien race Heptapods depicted in the film *Arrival* (2016) by Denis Villeneuve

[6] In *Arrival,* the female protagonist has memories of losing her daughter Hannah. But this is not a recollection; she is seeing a future that has not yet arrived in advance, while in the present. By learning the Heptapod's circular script, the protagonist develops non-linear thinking, where the past, present, and future coexist simultaneously.

The sentences wash over the entire body.

However, in *World War -III½*, this text is turned upside down. On banners, Lee writes in a language that masks and covers up violence with different violence. But this language is written in a script we cannot recognize, for they are letters of her own invention. At first glance, they look familiar but cannot be read. Even if you read it, its meaning is not immediately comprehensible. And these banners, in turn, obscure the body/ies trembling in a pinkish glow.

Here, the text has two faces. There is a writing that exposes the body and one that covers the body. There is a writing that reveals and a writing that conceals. There is a body-text and a veil-text.

This is why Lee's script resembles that of the Heptapod while being its opposite. One opens up time all at once, while the other makes the truth of violence unrecognizable. But are they truly different? One could say that the very fact that her script is "unrecognizable" accurately represents the language of the world we are living in. War always begins with language. It rationalizes death, justifies seizure, tells the victim that they started it first. Language does not illuminate fact, but becomes a veil to obscure it. Lee's banners are precisely that. They are unfurled before the body but conceal the body.

Thus, in this exhibition, we become viewers who see the artwork, while also witnesses who are rendered unable to see. In this sense, the title of one of the pieces, *What I Do Not Want to See, but Will*, is prophetic. A future where you inevitably see what you do not wish to see. A future that has not yet arrived, yet is already known. The Third World War that Lee imagines arrives precisely within such a time.

Instead of thinking before you paint, Lee reverses the process. Every morning, her drawings are drawn up, as if from a well. Is she transcribing her thoughts? No! She lets the form rise even before they are named. Forms that have not yet solidified into a thing, forms that wriggle when the consciousness tries to grasp them. It is not her thoughts that give birth to form—she lets form lead her thoughts. Forms are born first, and thought chases after it. It is a "body-form" that arrives ahead of time. These forms do not stay fixed, but are free in and of themselves. Lee's paintings blaze with the symbol of freedom.

For Carl Gustav Jung, the mandala is a form that spontaneously arises from a confused mind.[7] It binds together the scattered mind and helps it find a new center between the consciousness and unconsciousness. But Lee's mandala does not pacify chaos with a neat center. Rather, it unleashes the order hidden within the chaos. Instead of eliminating chaos to create a cosmos, she reveals the cosmos inherent in the chaos. Her myriad forms are closer to a sanal[8] grammar that cannot yet be read by humans.

To Louise[9], who has mastered the Heptapod script, the future arrives in the form of memories. She recalls events that have not happened, as if she has already experienced them.

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[7] During a period of great crisis and confusion, Jung drew circular patterns every morning that reflected his state of mind. He later realized that these were the same as the mandala, a cosmic symbol found in Indian religions. This resulted in *The Red Book*, a journal of the soul that records Jung's direct confrontations with his unconscious.

[8] "Sanal," which literally translates to "living egg," is a meridian theory proposed by Dr. Kim Bong-han. He claimed that tiny granules about one micrometer in size called "sanal" exist prior to cells. Referred to as the "Bong-han theory," the hypothesis posits that inside the vascular system are sanal, which contain large amounts of DNA. They later grow into a single, complete cell, while aging cells break back down into sanal.

[9] This refers to Dr. Louise Banks, the protagonist of the film *Arrival*. In the film, Louise is a brilliant linguist who changes the fate of humanity, as well as a wife and mother who willingly embraces her tragic fate. Amy Adams brought the character to life with a delicate and profound performance.

Lee has also written that she wants to shift the time of her artworks to the distant future, both before her birth and after her death. To her, the body is not just a piece of flesh pinned down to the here and now, but a place where the distant past and distant future overlap in multiple layers.

Can this be called a "future past"? It is a time that has not yet arrived but is already buried within the body, a time that has already vanished but will be reborn in the future. In this sense, another one of her titles, "The Festival a Day before I was Born," carries weight. A festival takes place even before one is born. The body extends all the way into the future after death. There is no present tense in Lee's paintings. No, it is more accurate to say that the past, present, and future are all the present. The Leeficene is not a world where time flows, but where time gains life as a single body.

Then when does *World War -III½* take place? Not yet, but already. Even before World War III, something a step further, a three and a half, arrives first. It does not make logical sense, which is why it is all the more accurate. In Lee's time, the future can invade the present first.

The "½" is a fissure that opens up between war and peace. A time when people die even though no war has been declared, a time where violence prevails during talks of peace. A war that no one wanted yet must inevitably fight. A nameless war. This is where Lee's "future past" becomes political. A body that already remembers a war that has not yet happened!

Lee has long been interested in the theme of the exterior skin. Aren't her works bodies that turn their skin inside out? The discrimination and language barrier she experienced while studying in the United States made her rethink the skin wrapping her body. Why must we only have one body? Why must we explain ourselves through this single organ? Ever since, she has imagined alternative bodies by shedding, changing, and turning the skin inside out.

Her works repeatedly elicit the idea that myriad bodies live within a single body. For Lee, the body is a place where events, people, relationships, and societies are inscribed, as well as a site where ruined bodies and future bodies live off as parasites.

In Lee's work, there is both an "outer self" and an "inner self." This does not mean peeling away the outer shell reveals a pure self that is hidden. This misses the point of her body/ies. Lee's inner selves have multiple cores. The deeper you go, the more there are—a woman, a child, a dead grandmother, extinct creatures, future creatures, and even non-human entities murmur and swarm. To Lee, the inner self is the moon reflected in a thousand rivers (月印千江), the shadow that moves the moon at the heart of the sky (影動天心月), countless beings in the shadows.

The title of another work, *The Whole World on My Body 2.0*, is also profound in how it suggests that the world does not exist outside the body, but rather inside it. If so, a world war cannot also take place solely outside the body. If there is a world on my body, a world war also passes through my body. Our skin, organs, senses, and memories become the frontlines.

Lee does not wish for a body that has fully-formed on its own. The body is embedded within the world and constantly changes based on its relationships with other beings, environments, and technologies. Lee considers femininity to be the power to crack open the outer skin imposed on oneself and change into a different body. In *Fiminism Fnositicism*[10], she

[10] Lee coined the term "Fiminism Fnositicism" for her 2018 solo exhibition. The first part is a portmanteau of "Fi Jae" and "Feminism," turning feminism's exploration of the female body, existence, and social oppression back onto the artist herself. The second is a portmanteau of "Fi Jae" and "Gnosticism," which likewise turns

portrayed such bodies that are "in-between," through a ritual/altar exclusively for women, and angels who cross the boundaries between heaven and earth, life and death.

We may be trapped inside our outer shells, but the moment we turn that shell inside out, different versions of ourselves are born. Lee's feminism does not stop at liberating a single woman; it shatters the prison of the body. In her newest exhibition, the dead grandmother constantly resurfaces. Look at *The Excavated Souls of My Kind Grandma and Birds Buried Alive with Her*. Excavated! Instead of "remembering" the dead, she "digs" them out. Is memory something that is buried, instead of existing in one's head? Like how an archaeologist in the distant future will excavate our civilization, Lee excavates her grandmother buried deep inside her own body.

After losing her maternal grandmother, Lee became extremely sensitive to sound. Sounds, unedited, rushed into her body from all directions. Instead of blocking them out, Lee transcribed those sounds into color and space. Tuning her frequency to the fact that her grandmother was gone, absence became a wider gateway to her senses. What is astonishing is the color of death. Death is not black, but colorful and bright. Like the grandmother's sewing basket, it embraces multiple colors. The dead grandmother does not vanish, but becomes a vast medium.

Passing through that medium, sound bleeds into color, memory becomes space, and absence animates the body once again. Lee calls this "somatic communication," which is another key to understanding this exhibition. War reduces death into numbers, into statistics regarding how many died and how many were injured. Political rhetoric justifies those deaths, and the news replaces past deaths with new deaths. But the death of a grandmother cannot become a number. Her scent, sound, touch, and sewing basket remain.

The death of one individual is the death of an entire universe. And that universe comes back to life in color. This is why Lee's idea of the "negative" is refreshing. The negative body is a body that has stepped outside history, but that does not mean it ceases to exist. Even after death, it returns in the form of scent, color, sound, and becomes present by passing through someone else's body.

The "birds buried live" with the grandmother create a colony of death. The death of a non-human is placed beside the death of a human. Lee dismantles the hierarchy of death. Everything intertwines—the funeral of a human and the death of a bird, memory and burial, rituals and art. This is why I find myself lingering on the word "kind." The opposite of a "negative war" might not be a "positive war." Perhaps it is kindness.

Gold powder, pigments and brushes used in Buddhist paintings, reinforced plastic, synthetic clay, fabric, dried squid—these are the materials that find their way into Lee's hands. Through these materials, she crosses the future past. The colors of an ancient temple collide with the products of a petrochemical civilization, and creatures that once glided through the ocean are offered on an altar, all dried up. In *Everything Ascending to Heaven Smells Rotten*, the squid is an amalgam of one's gaze toward an unfamiliar body, death and decay, memory and scent.

A future art must invent the "now" through a body that senses the future. Lee does

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Gnosticism's pursuit of salvation through intuition and mystical knowledge that transcends the material world back onto herself.

precisely that through her material. Gold powder invokes the distant time of rituals, while plastic suggests a future beyond industrial civilization. The bodies of dried creatures embrace death and invade the present with their smell. Each material embodies a different time. But for Lee, materials are tenses in themselves. They are a sensing body, a boy living in the here and now.

When these different tenses cling to a single artwork, a monster is born. A monster is a life form that has not yet been classified. It is a new form that arises when the partitions that divide humans and beasts, women and men, the living and the dead, the past and the future collapse. This is why Lee's monsters are terrifying and beautiful. Like Otto's notion of the sacred, they pull us in, while making us tremble.

There is one last thing we should consider. Lee's monsters are bodies that cross biological boundaries, but they also cross the boundaries of war. It is impossible to tell whether they are perpetrators or victims, alive or dead, predator or prey. Consider works like *Xiaolongbao(小籠包) Eroticism*; *Noodle, Vomit, Hole*; *The Tear Bed and Rice Bed are Damp*; *Our Meal Is a Meal That Will Burn*; and *Wall Wall Wall*—what are we supposed to call these?

Eat, vomit, lie down, burn, and block. The dining table becomes a bed, the bed becomes an altar, and food becomes a body. In her artist statement, Lee refers to the victims in her paintings as sacrificial offerings displayed like food on a dining table. How horrifying! She inverts the body that eats and the body that is eaten. War turns humans into sacrificial offerings, laying them on a table of excuses.

Perhaps it is true that sacrificial offerings have always been the foundation of the sacred. Before gods were given names and churches were built, people must have knelt before such hybrids, terrified and ecstatic. But the moment someone becomes a sacrifice, that ecstasy bears blood. Thus Lee's Numinose is not innocent; it is frightening and entrancing, but also cruel. When the body and time intermingle to give birth to a new species, it also gives rise to the Leeficene.

I would like to add a few more lines to Lee's definition of the Leeficene. The Leeficene is an era where violence cloaks the body with language. It is an era where the dead return as color, sound, and scent. It is an era where a future annihilation already inhibits the body as a memory. Therefore, *World War -III½* is not an exhibition depicting a future war. No, it depicts a war that we do not yet call a war.

A war we claim has not yet begun, despite the fact that it is already happening. A war that no one wants, yet someone must fight. A war where the victim must take responsibility for the violence. A war where the words of the living silence the mouths of the dead. This is a negative war.

Lee records that war with the body. Her paintings are an epitaph flown from an era that has not yet arrived, a future scripture written before language was born. Now, the bodies of the dead are nailed on that epitaph. It is not a text you read with your eyes but a mandala you read with your body, one that is repeatedly obscured by a banner the more you strive to decipher it.

And yet, the body cannot be completely hidden. The pink flesh trembles under a cloth, the dead grandmother returns in the form of color, birds are buried alive beside her, dried squid emit their odor, and bodies not yet born crawl their way into the present.

Even when words conceal violence, the body speaks out. I believe this is the "negative body" created by Lee. A body that endures from the day before its birth to after its death. A

body that existed before the war and will survive beyond its aftermath. A body that does not vanish when covered up. From those body/ies, Fi Jae Lee’s sacred painting-texts begin anew.