

Press Release

Lee Kang So

Dwelling in Mist and Glow

13 June—2 August 2025

Thaddaeus Ropac
Seoul Fort Hill
1-2F, 122-1, Dokseodang-ro, Yongsan-gu, Seoul



Lee Kang So, *Untitled-(N)91142*, 1991.
Oil on canvas. 198 x 243 cm (77.95 x 95.67 in)

Whether in painting or sculpture, I wish for all works to form a structure where some pure energy in myself and that in the onlooker can mutually interact.

— Lee Kang So

Following a major retrospective of Lee Kang So's work at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art,

Korea (MMCA) in 2024, Thaddaeus Ropac Seoul presents *Dwelling in Mist and Glow*, the artist's first solo show at the gallery. Spanning five decades of his multimedia artistic production, the exhibition presents paintings, prints, sculptures and an installation that crystallise the uniquely expressive nature of Lee's practice, which has blazed a trail in contemporary Korean art.

The title of the exhibition is drawn from a classical Korean poem written by Yi Hwang, a renowned 16th-century Confucian scholar. Composed during a retreat to Andong mountain, the poem reflects Yi Hwang's deep engagement with nature: 'Dwelling in mist and glow / Befriending wind and moon'. Lee Kang So profoundly resonates with the poet's sense of unity with nature, which echoes his own conception of art as an act of attunement with the natural realm and its ever-shifting rhythms, rather than personal assertion. For the artist, 'When mind and cosmos become one, self and object dissolve.'

Lee Kang So seamlessly blends elements from both traditional East Asian art and international stylistic tendencies. His quick, skillful brushwork reveals his affinity with calligraphy and ink wash painting, while his impressionistic waterscapes evoke the spiritual strokes of literati painting. Lee's gestural mark-making, meanwhile, harks back to 1950s Abstract Expressionism and the work of Willem de Kooning in particular, albeit eviscerated of the Western painters' emphasis on individual expression. Some of his works also display drips and spatters reminiscent of Cy Twombly's oeuvre.

Harnessing each movement's expressive potential, Lee Kang So has forged a singular path to painting that foregrounds, as art historian Robert C. Morgan sets forth, 'the gesture as the essential movement, the way into the space, the Tao of everything alive and noble and fecund in nature.' Communing with his paintbrush, Lee aims to kindle 'Spirit Resonance,' the vital energy that



Lee Kang So, *Untitled-90207*, 1991.
Oil on canvas. 130.3 x 162.1 cm (51.3 x 63.82 in)



Lee Kang So, *Untitled-88008*, 1988.
Oil on canvas. 182 x 227 cm (71.65 x 89.37 in)

flows from the artist through to the artwork, according to 5th century principles of East Asian painting. In his own words, 'Endless cultivation and training conveys my spirit precisely in the interactions between body and brush, paint and canvas.'

Dwelling in Mist and Glow bears witness to the progression of Lee Kang So's pictorial practice, from his rarely exhibited paintings of the late 1980s and 1990s to recent works on canvas from the 2010s. Lee's stylistic evolution is evinced by his treatment of deer, ducks and boats – the leitmotifs that recur throughout his oeuvre. The lone boat is endowed with particular significance in the artist's work, 'both operat[ing] as a symbolic metaphor of "crossing", gliding across the water surface toward the other side, and realiz[ing] another sort of crossing toward the representation of a true painterly reality that transcends the delimitations of the image itself,' writes art critic Minemura Toshiaki. 'This latter kind of "crossing" is none other than the point of convergence and identification between modern Western painting and East Asian ink painting found in Lee's work.'

While the boat is rendered in relative detail in Lee Kang So's earliest paintings on display, it is reduced to a mere outline in subsequent works, surrendering to the artist's sensuous, spontaneous markmaking. As Minemura Toshiaki contends, 'the strange attraction of Lee's painting does not lie in its images, but arises from the conflict and conversation between images and the various elements that threaten and seek to negate them.' Indeed, over time, the pure, non-representational

painterly gesture takes increasing precedence over the figurative impulse embodied by the boat to express the ineffable sublimity of natural forces.

The exhibition establishes a fertile dialogue between Lee Kang So's paintings and his sculptures, revealing the 'pure energy' that permeates both facets of his practice. In *Untitled-94095* (1994), Lee's signature boat – having broken away from the canvas to materialise in space – glides meditatively through the courtyard connecting the gallery's first and second floors, amid blocks of bronze that approximate tridimensional brushstrokes. Further channelling Lee's vital artistic flow, the sculptural installation *Paljindo* (1981/2017) springs from the very floor of the gallery like a variegated mountainscape. The works seem to suspend time; in the artist's words, 'When subject and object fade into oneness, what endures is the silent process of mutual becoming.'

The 1990s were a time of extensive sculptural experimentation for the artist, who was particularly interested in the mutable materiality of hexahedrons. Sculpting in concert with gravity, he began throwing flattened clay cuboids into the air and letting them fall to the ground, yielding, in his own words, 'sculptures made by themselves'. Similarly to the Impressionists who ceaselessly depicted the same objects to capture the ever-changing nature of light, Lee Kang So strives to give form to the perpetual flux of natural processes in his sculptures. Teetering on the point of collapse, Lee's haptic stacks of ceramic, bronze, iron and aluminium become poetic sculptures that crystallise, as art critic Eleanor Heartney writes, 'the accidental beauty of the natural world'.



Lee Kang So, *Untitled-94095*, 1994.
Bronze. 70 x 85 x 35 cm (27.56 x 33.46 x 13.78 in)



Lee Kang So, *Serenity-16229*, 2016.
Acrylic on canvas. 218 x 291 cm (85.83 x 114.57 in)



Portrait of Lee Kang So, 2024. © Lee Kang So Zagupsil. Photo: Park Chan Woo

About the artist

Lee Kang So lives and works in Anseong (Gyeonggi Province, Korea). He graduated from the Painting Department of Seoul National University in 1965, subsequently participating in a number of avant-garde artistic initiatives in the following decades. In 1970 he was a founding member of the artist collective Shincheje (The New System), which stood in provocative opposition to the existing art circle dominant in Seoul. In 1974 he was instrumental in the founding of Daegu Contemporary Art Festival and championed the fostering of regional artistic practices outside of the country's urban centres. From 1985 to 1986 he was a visiting artist at the State University of New York in Albany, NY whilst working as a professor at Gyeongsang National University, Jinju. He then participated in the MoMA PS1 Studio Artists Program from 1991–92. These international encounters speak to the wide reach of Lee's work from the early decades of his career, as he formulated an idiosyncratic practice that developed alongside the legacies of other avant-garde movements, including Mono-ha in Japan, Korean Experimental Art, Minimalism in the United States and Arte Povera in Italy.

Lee has exhibited widely in Korea and beyond. In 2024, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea organised a landmark survey of his oeuvre. Between 2023 and 2024, his work was shown alongside that of his contemporaries in a major institutional touring exhibition, *Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s–1970s*, which travelled to the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. In the five decades of his artistic career, the artist has shown work in countless other institutional exhibitions, including at the Daegu Art Museum (2021; 2020; 2018; 2011); Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2019); Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Étienne Métropole (MAMC+) (2016); Tate Modern, London (2012–13); Musée des Arts Asiatiques, Nice (2006); Artsonje Museum, Gyeongju (2003); National Art Museum of China, Beijing (1995); Tate Liverpool (1992); Barbican, London (1992); Brooklyn Museum, New York (1981); Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (1976); and Musée national d'art moderne, Paris (1975).

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