

HYPERALLERGIC

Lee Kang-So's Sensual Semiotics

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LOCKSGALLERY



Installation view of Lee Kang-So, *Untitled-75031* (originally 1975), at Gallery Hyundai, Seoul, 2018



SEOUL — The first thing that registers, as I enter the gallery on the opening night of *Disappearance*, is a strong smell of *makgulli* (tangy, cream-colored alcohol beverage made from fermented rice, undistilled and minimally filtered): more accurately, the acrid odor of *makgulli*, exuding, not straight from a bottle, but from the pores of its consumers, mixed with the carrying smell of distinctly Korean dishes.

Disappearance, the reenacted work based on artist Lee Kang-So's 1973 performance at Myeongdong Gallery (also in Seoul), at least on the opening night, becomes what it sets out to be: a bar in a gallery. Not any bar but a *chumak*, a liquor hut in a literal translation, a bit like a tavern. *Makgulli* is the go-to drink here, if not the only. During the opening, the bar is packed with people, many in dapper, formal attire, women in their makeup, old men in their suits and hats.



Archival photographs of Lee Kang-So's *Disappearance* from 1973

There are certain connotations associated with *chumak* and *makgulli*, parallel to the western myth of the suffering male artist, who, tormented by the force of his own creativity and by the paralyzing, incomprehensible absurdities of the world that suppress him, finds, in the sweet oblivion of alcohol (and in the equally mystifying and unfathomable thing called woman) a warm solace, a respite from narcissism and self-pity, a fleeting yet sure-fire corporeal comfort. To many (male) protagonists of Korean literature, as well as to the writers themselves (who also happen to be male), *chumak* seems to be the last bastion of disappearing human warmth, or to use a more appropriate Korean expression, *human smell*. A poor man with much on his shoulders can go staggering into this shabby tavern, quench his thirst and hunger with humble drinks and food, while licking his wounds, singing rebellions, cursing abstract yet real enemies, weighing mistresses, dissecting his wife's character, and tearing up for his poor mother. If he is lucky, he will meet fellow wounded men and they can bask together; or, with more luck, a motherly hostess of the bar (*chumo*, or quite literally, the mother of liquor) would sympathize and refuse his money. He knows he is the only one capable of recognizing her humanity, anyway.



Chun Sang-byeong, a much-loved Korean poet, professes in his poem "*Makgulli*": "*Makgulli* is not just a drink;/it is as good as a meal./It does not just feed a belly/but a heart with joy./A Godsent blessing." In another poem, "*At chumak*" (1979), he writes:

One alleyway to the next
 Over there, a small *chumak*
 One more drink please, Ma'am
 It's just that, a dusk is a poor poet's only reward
 It's just that, to his murky eyes this world is but
 Sweet and mellow
 One more drink please, Ma'am
 To be oblivious is to be sublime.

Korea has suffered great traumas in its recent history. Shortly after its liberation in 1945 from Imperial Japan, the nation was split into two sovereign states: South Korea under the U.S. military government and North Korea aligning with the Soviet Union. The Korean peninsula became a political and ideological battlefield for the Cold War, and when the Korean War ended with an armistice in 1953, both nations found themselves in abject poverty, disintegration, and destruction. In South Korea, General Park Chung-



hee took control through a military coup in May of 1961. Between 1961 and 1979, when Park was assassinated, the nation quickly rebuilt, at least economically, from the rubble of colonization and the Korean War — impelled by a mixture of aggressive development plans and patriotic nationalist sentiments feeding off of McCarthyism. On the other side of the growing national wealth were the authoritarian martial law; oppression of free speech and press; persecution of politicians, journalists, activists, artists, and students; enforced curfews; abject corruptions; and many dubious deaths, incarceration, and tortures — Chun was one of those imprisoned and tortured. Society changed rapidly. The tide of westernization crept in — its democratic, liberal, and capitalist dreams — even under the blanket of the authoritarian regime. A sense of hope stemming from fuller stomachs, improved education, and strengthened infrastructure pitted against a collateral fear of the inscrutable capitalist machine, the dissolution of traditional ways of life and family structure, the attack of the rising feminists. (For an excruciatingly vivid cultural montage, read Park Wan-Suh's exceptional novels.) This is the time both Lee and Chun started their career.

So, if one understands the symbolic place *chumak* and *makgulli* hold, *Disappearance* represents not just any place for winding down and replenishing, but that of a fleeting yet profound consolation; an escape from the severities of reality; an endearing remnant of the old and dilapidated; and a bliss of a crude yet mellow oblivion for intellectual, psychological, and masculine paralysis, all of which amounts to far more than performance art challenging the separation between of art and life.

Disappearance doesn't just refer to how a bar loses its identity and becomes a stage set as the viewer leaves, but more emphatically to a sense of loss as this *type* of a bar, a lowly *chumak*, with all its cultural, social significances and implications, is coming to an end. In a similar vein, Lee's 1974 installation *Becoming and Extinction*, composed of fresh apples on a straw mat on a floor and a bowl for the participant to put money in, isn't just about the decaying of the unsold apples but also the demise of this *kind* of commerce, a humble exchange springing from necessity. His 1971 piece, *Void*, presents viewers with a passageway made from two dozen columns of ceiling-height reeds covered in plaster. As much as the work points to the existence of the viewer, the phenomenal body in space, it summons a feeling of emptiness, of solitude among the clusters of angelic dead reeds. The objects and spaces that Lee simulates in his performances and installations symbolize the artifacts of a certain disappearing time and class, their culture and sentiment. Mourning their disappearance intersects with mourning the inevitability of it, the constant flux of becoming and unbecoming, the continuum of life and death, in both cultural and metaphysical sense.

Despite all the right artifacts — a dozen of timeworn wooden tables and benches, yellow aluminum kettles and bowls, vintage matchboxes and cheap newsprint calendar — it is difficult to *use* the bar as what it refers to, a *chumak*. This is because sometimes the essence of a place may not depend entirely on its appearance. This disparity between, in this case, signifier and signified, raises the question: what is the best way to convey something, especially if the essence of it seems to escape appearance? Although Lee's iconoclastic artistic legacy is tied to his refusal of a rigid, linear narratives and distrust in institutions of aesthetics and politics, much of his work from the 1970s explores the scope and meaning of mark-making.

Lee expands what constitutes a mark to a remnant, debris, imprint, and mess in

Untitled-750-31, originally installed in 1975 at the 9th Paris Biennial. In this work, the act of mark making is delegated to a bird and its limited agency imposed by the length of the rope. A recreation at the recent Gallery Hyundai exhibition includes a feeding pod placed at the center of a white powder circle, a rope tied to a pole on the pod. The other end of the rope falls near the periphery of the circle, as if what was tied to it has escaped or been set free. There is a general, indicative mess of bird droppings, dried up leaves and grains, one conspicuous feather, some ostensible footprints, and scattered powder, so even without photos documenting the 1975 performance, showing a live bird tied to a similar structure, one could surmise as much. Inherent in the mode of delegating is a sense of fatalism, of avoidance and compromise, of desperation in the face of the seemingly impossible task of creating an image of something that is disappearing. A line, a shape, an image, and ultimately any appearance is merely a coincidental, yet predestined occurrence.

In his 1975 work “*Untitled-75032*” and 1972 work, “*Gulbi*,” Lee does not stop at stripping away or breaking down the components of mark-meaning relationship but starts to pick up the pieces, the debris of flesh and bone, literally and figuratively.

“*Untitled-75032*” is three sets of painted and numbered deer bones scattered with varying degrees of skeletal inaccuracy atop chalk drawings of deer on a flat, black platform. The drawing itself is a skeleton of an idea of a deer: two dozen segmented lines refusing to contain the figure. Neither the broken sign of a deer nor the cluster of futilely numbered deer bones is — literally the remains of it — must be more the deer than the drawing of it. But we bury or cremate the flesh and bone of our loved ones and keep the letters or photos, not the other way around. It is not a matter of practicality but a more fundamental one: the creation, attachment, and conveyance of meaning occur not entirely in a body, nor entirely outside of it; neither completely retained in marks, nor completely removed from them; but somewhere in between. Lee suggests that a body and its records constantly exchange places of the tangible and the ethereal, the permanent and the fleeting.



In “*Gulbi*,” a twined, vertical array of dried fish is fixed to a coffin lid propped up against a wall. One fish is missing from its knotted slot; behind it is a similar sign-like chalk drawing of a fish in the style of a sign. A fine and expensive local specialty, traditional *gulbi* is made by drying salted croakers in sea breeze for up to three months. This stringing of multiple fish is its usual appearance. Every Korean has heard the parable of a miser named *Jarin-gobi* (which some suspect is a wordplay from putting together *jul-in*, or “salted,” and *gulbi*). This exceedingly frugal man brings home a bundle of *gulbi* one day. Naturally, his wife and children are excited yet suspicious. The man hangs the string of *gulbi* to the ceiling above the dinner table. He takes a bite of plain rice, looks up at the hanging *gulbi*, and exclaims, “How savory!” His family imitates him, grudgingly and half-heartedly. His son happens to glance at *gulbi* twice before he swallows. The man sees this *indulgence* and exclaims, “That’s too salty — what a waste!” I always thought that this hyperbolic story — which, like all folklore, has more ludicrous variations — was making fun of, if not condemning, such an extreme level of stinginess: the absurdity of looking at *gulbi* and *pretending* or *imagining* to taste its saltiness. As I look at Lee’s “*Gulbi*,” it suddenly seems like an allegory of looking at a painting. Isn’t that what we all attempt when we look? And isn’t it precisely this absurdity Lee embraces as he takes on the the process of registering signs, of converting and synthesizing them to create for oneself an experience that

is as intensely real? Through the remains of things, through their marks, through the oscillating interplay of signs and things, one may taste the transient, uncontainable, and unreachable experience of existence.



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