



Larger than life

By John Shoesmith
Photograph: Ruth Kaplan



Won Lee thought he left his artistic life behind when he married and became an accountant. Now, more than three decades later, he's making waves internationally for his super-sized sculptures

Standing a shade over five feet, Toronto artist Won Lee is a small man, but his personality — he laughs lustfully and often — and his art — including massive public sculptures in Singapore, Mexico and the Democratic Republic of Congo — are truly outsized. Focusing primarily on the human figure, Lee's works have recently been exhibited in shows in Milan and Madrid, and this month he will be the feature artist in a major show in Jalisco, Mexico, which coincides with the International Sculpture Symposium.

It's a particular triumph for the 66-year-old artist who, after moving to California from his native South Korea in the early 1970s to study painting ("Sculpture was too easy for me," he boasts), ditched it all for the business world for two decades. "I was a bohemian back then," he says of his initial years in California. "I was poor, but I actually liked being poor."

When he married in 1977, however, he felt the need to be a responsible husband. Although he thought he might return to art once on more solid financial footing, he made a clean break. "I destroyed everything," he says. "My brushes, my canvases, anything that related to my artistic life."

He relocated to Vancouver to study commerce at the University of British Columbia, articulated at Deloitte and Touche in the early 1980s, and eventually moved to Toronto to set up a private accounting practice, primarily to service the large Korean community in the city. It wasn't until the early 2000s that he started to think about art again.

He went to Vermont to study fine arts and dedicated himself exclusively to sculpture. "I knew that's where my talent was," he says. While he initially split his time evenly between accounting and his art, he now spends the majority of his time, up to 85% by his measure, working at his studio.

As Lee sees it, there is no incongruity between art and accounting. "With both, you first need to learn the mechanics of how to do your work," he says. "Imagination and the ability to feel things helps me in both disciplines."
