

Won Lee's unexpected balancing act

R.M. VAUGHAN

Won Lee's new suite of bronze sculptures marks a bold departure from the artist's internationally acclaimed series of monumental figurative works. Fans of Lee's tall, sombre giants might wonder if the lively tabletop dioramas on display at Toronto's Muse Gallery were made by the same artist. After all, Lee's massive sculptures (many over two metres tall) adorn public spaces from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Mexico to his native South Korea.

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Lee's latest works incorporate fragmented figures (thread-thin stick people, blobby Bonhommes, a menagerie of deftly crafted animal-human hybrids), warped walls and gravity-defying ladders, spare dollhouse-sized furnishings, plus trees and mounds – all meeting on a series of dream plateaus, flattened landscapes where time, perspective and the rules of nature are up for grabs.

Despite the fact that the new bronzes weigh more than a trunk-load of groceries, Lee somehow makes each work seem as delicate and spontaneous as a vase casually filled with hand-picked wildflowers. Given this balancing act, it's hardly surprising that many of Lee's tiny characters dance, tilt, jump and tumble across the small stages he creates - they're just trying to keep up with Lee's ever-changing vision.

Chatting with Lee, who divides his time between Toronto and Mexico, I discovered that although he is steeped in cultural theory (he frequently lectures on the writing of French theorist and art critic Gilles Deleuze), Lee is ultimately an artist who relies first and foremost on his Lee talks about shaping clay (to later be cast in bronze), the way dancers talk about "being in the body."

He is also, he readily confesses with a giggle, a notorious fussy pants. The casting factories Lee works with often have to yank the clay models out of his hands, because he won't stop tweaking the turn of a leg, the heft of a rump, or the pointy tip of an ear.

This exhibition is certainly a change from your previous practice.

I try to not stick to any particular style. I'm still there, in the work. I'm not forcing

myself to do something different, but when I'm working on certain pieces, I recognize that they open many doors. So, I push that door open and go see what is there.

And smaller works are obviously more accessible - financially and physically. Not many people have enough room for one of your giants.

Actually, even the monumental pieces I make small in the beginning, and they can be installed in a house very easily. The cost and marketability, all those things, I try to push aside when I am working. If I think of markets, I wouldn't be able to go where I can go. My dealer in the U.S. said, "I just got my clients used to your last series, and now you're somewhere else! How am I going to sell them?" Perhaps in time my clients may get used to the new series, but, maybe not. Ha!

These works remind me of set designs.

Oh, thank you very much! When I was doing my last series, I realized I was putting multiple figures on one plane, and traditionally sculpture is upright, and then it dawned on me that I can play with the field, the plane, and maybe I could use space in a way more attuned to our everyday life.

But I didn't want to tell any specific stories. If I have a form in my head before I start, it usually comes out really bad! Ha!

I try to keep that feature of unformed-ness - once I start a sculpture, it will lead me, instead of me trying to tell a story, to lead it. I want to be in a very non-preconceived world. I want to stay there, and follow my thoughts. I want to encounter the time, follow my immanent thoughts. That word, immanent, is really important to me.

I have to let the work lead me, let my hand almost automatically form the shapes. I don't do any sketching, because if I do, it is always terrible! Stale, awful!

This immediacy you describe is not a work process we traditionally associate with something as labour-intensive as casting in bronze.

I use techniques, types of clay and wires, that allow me to be spontaneous, allow me to make things immediately. Even the mould guys, and you know the moulds are very fragile, I am always stopping them, saying "hold on, hold on, let me fix

this part!"

Your larger works are in many public art collections. But the way you talk about your work is almost paternal. Is it hard for you to let go of your work, leave it to the public?

In the beginning, yes, because my work is quite personal, and I feel like every one of them is my child. It was very awkward the first time I had a public work installed. It felt like being naked in public.

But every place I install a piece, I go first and survey the field (except for the Congo, I couldn't go there because of the civil war) - so, finding a perfect place for them to sit, and looking at what other viewers might feel from the sculptures, that makes me more comfortable, makes me feel good for every sculpture. I've gotten used to being "naked."

R.M. Vaughan is a Canadian writer and video artist. Vaughan is the author of many books and contributes articles on culture to a wide variety of publications. Vaughan's short videos play in festivals and galleries across Canada and around the world. Vaughan is currently between countries.