

## Encountering every moment as it presents itself: the work of Won Lee

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At their largest, Won Lee's sculptures suggest the more imposing work of Rodin. There is a rooted and squareness that almost---but, only almost-- lets the viewer fail to notice that the heads on his figures are invariably out of conventional proportion to the rest of the body. The heads are small and sometimes seem an afterthought. When I asked about his diminutive heads --in some works (Time has escaped #1 in the Playground series)--they are nearly missing--Lee shrugs his shoulders, laugh his deep and frequent laugh and says "the brain is so uninteresting; the least important part of the body".

He holds fiercely to the belief that it is not enough for the work to engage us intellectually. "It must strike us with energy and sensual vibration". He goes on to say "No matter how good an idea I come out with, it is not enough for me simply to create interesting work."

As uninteresting as the brain may be to Won Lee, the sculptor, his is a mind that plucks an intriguing concept and works it like the clay beginnings of his finished bronze. Immanence is a force that has preoccupied him since he encountered it in the writings of the French poststructuralist Gilles Deleuze. Immanence is often best understood by what it is not or by its opposite: transcendence. If transcendence assumes a wondrous and sacred world beyond us, immanence says: this is the one we have: open to it, live in it, find what is holy within it. The plane of immanence that we share is a smooth and undivided space.

Among my current favorite work of Lee's are the pieces that make up his playground series. A suite of images, each one features a number of characters--human and animal - occupying the same plane. Lee says the pieces "just started coming and I was so happy when they did! I began with two figures on the same plane, then three asking myself 'why not?' Won lee started this series in China--- one of the two countries (Mexico is the other) where he casts his bronze pieces. This is narrative work; but, it plays with the concept of story. The figures seem to have to do w/ each other, but even when they are engaged in common pursuit as in frenetically scaling a wall (At the edge of immanence #11), they are not really interacting. They are in relationship with each other, Lee says, "but ambiguously; to the viewer they enjoy a visual relationship. But, they are almost always

unaware of each other.” It is this tension, this visible but unaware quality that animates the series project for the artist. “If I do anything intentionally, it would not be that interesting.”

The effect is a curious one. The series invites a deep and prolonged gaze; and the viewer while not invited to participate in the action cannot help but be attracted to it. It is as if the scene froze just as something were about to happen. We yearn to enter this animated world of long-limbed agile creatures curiously and ambiguously sharing its surface.

Won Lee is an artist who wants more than anything to “take in the world as it is,” to come to his work as an artist fresh, “with no preconceived ideas. “ He describes the position he wants to occupy as one of being ungrounded, free from the work he was seeing or making yesterday, nothing before him but what is immediately in front of him.

I ask what it is like to go forward each day as if there is no past. He acknowledges that it is unsettling on the first day of a new series. But, he has learned to be still, to ask with curiosity - and some anxiety-whether the images will come.

Invariably, he says, “and very luckily, something always strikes.” I noticed how often Won Lee talks about his good luck. Like so many people deeply committed to their art, he considers luck that which he has earned through steady attention over a long time, faith in the process, an astonishing command of his materials, and a habit of showing up to his work over and over again with curiosity and a belief in its possibilities.

Green Mountains Review \* is pleased to feature Korean-Canadian sculptor Won Lee as its cover artist for the upcoming Fall 2013 issue. In addition to his cover art, we are pleased to feature an inset of several pages of images of Lee's recent work.

\*Green Mountains Review, housed at Johnson State College in Vermont, is a biannual, award-winning literary magazine publishing poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, literary essays, interviews, art, and book reviews by both well-known writers and promising newcomers. For the past quarter-century GMR has

produced issues of international scope with work regularly selected or cited widely. GMR was recently named by U.S. Poetry Laureate Natasha Trethewey as one of the seven small press publications that she will focus on and promote during her tenure.