

WON LEE

ARTIST STATEMENT / BIO

Won Lee (1946 - 2021) is a Korean-born sculptor whose work is primarily focused on the figure. Lee spent time drawing and modelling the figure in clay, often refining the shapes into abstract forms before firing them in his studio kiln. When he wasn't working in his studio, he travelled to China or Mexico to cast his figures in bronze. He was a highly prolific and energetic artist, despite the fact that he was afflicted with polio while growing up in Korea. The effects of this disease never stood in the way of his highly charged production. When constructing a two-meter-high clay model, he worked without hesitation, without a break, and often without assistance. Like the early Abstract Expressionist sculptor, Reuben Nakian, Lee belongs to a heroic tradition in sculpture. Less a classical formalist than Nakian, Lee kept an intense eye on each manoeuvre as he modelled the clay, working in direct response to his models. Each detail is attenuated, the treatment comparable in some ways to the late existentialist work of Giacometti. Lee's figures are focused on a holistic pattern involving texture and exaggerated mannerisms of scale and proportion. He inscribes the ambient parts with a subtle, yet assured tactile resonance and, in doing so, manages to accentuate a faceting of the surface that enhances the feel of the material. Although Lee began as a figurative painter, his move into sculpture within the past decade, after an interruption in his work of several years, offers a forceful interplay with the plasticity of the medium.

"On one level, his sculpture equivocates between a type of expressionist realism and an abstract formal style. They are energetic forms that express the artist's feelings toward art and life. Rather than imitating appearances in the external visual world, they seem to emerge from an experience with the void, as if to suggest the Zen Buddhist concept of sunyata... In contrast to the "expanded field"- a term introduced by the art historian Rosalind Krauss and widely employed in defence of installation strategies used by postmodern artists in the eighties - Won Lee has once again gone in an opposite direction. Here I would argue that some of the most interesting sculpture, since the eighties, has moved away from Krauss's concept of the expanded field, particularly as architects have usurped this position from sculptors (with the exception of Richard Serra). Instead, sculpture is moving toward a more confined psychological space, a space of anxiety, that searches for another type of intimacy..."

- Robert C. Morgan is an international art critic, lecture, artist, and curator.

Lee received his B.F.A. at Pepperdine University and his M.F.A. at Johnson State College. He also attended the Otis Art Institute. Won's sculptures have been featured in numerous magazines including Sculpture magazine. He lectured on postmodern art theories and practices around the world. Internationally acclaimed Lee has a vital body of work that continues to make an impact wherever his work is exhibited.