

Won Lee: The Primal Desire

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Won Lee is a Korean-born sculptor living in Canada whose work is primarily focused on the figure. 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*. Won Lee's defiant forms perpetuate a feeling of awkward balance, a type of dislocation, or dissemblance of nature - as seen in the Deleuzian-inspired, *Difference and Repetition #2* (2007). Another sculpture titled *Emerge* (also from 2007), is a miraculous two-meter high bronze - a gritty abstract figure that leans forcefully and asymmetrically to one side - as if in search of finding a physical support. One may speculate that the presence of such an abstract figure may in some way reference the Polio-inflicted body of the artist himself, who functions physically and mentally undaunted, without visible restrictions.

Lee works with unrestrained vigor and self-confidence, fully focused on the nuances and expressive possibilities of how the figure is constructed and how it coalesces. There is the inner soul pulling away from the outward appearance, as in *Parting* (2004), one of his most extreme psychological statements on the female body. In this context, Lee belongs to a generation of figurative sculptures that have returned to traditional materials, such as bronze and hard stone, in order to express the human condition in the postmodern age. His work is about a return to intimacy, to the poststructural aspect of Being in a fragmented world, without recourse to signs that guarantee meaning. Recognizing the conditions of anxiety that foreground loss of spiritual contact, Lee's aesthetic impulse is to return to the Earth, to nature, and to the shamanistic traditions found in his homeland, particular at the tip of the peninsula, the most traditional region of Korea, in the area of Jeollanam-do. Here shamans are still present, enabling the culture of animism to prevail and spiritual healing to continue. So the work of Won Lee represents a kind of split, as visibly illustrated in *The Parting*, and again in *Shaman's Daughter* (2006), between the fragmentation of mundane existence and the desire for a more complete awareness and sense of wholeness, the will to find a semblance of humanist reparation in a world gone awry.

Won Lee works in bronze and occasionally in stone as, for example, in *Shamans and Poets* (2004) a two meter high sculpture of two looming figures, carved in

Korean black marble. The concept of permanence in sculpture, as implicated in the use of bronze and stone in contrast to temporal disposable, or synthetic materials, raises an important dialectical aesthetic/anti-aesthetic question often associated with postmodernism. It is unusual, if not paradoxical, for a sculptor like Won Lee to work in bronze and marble and yet adhere to a postmodern theory of art - a tendency he advocates frequently in lectures on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. To go one step further, the use of "hard" materials has another implication as well. Won Lee is primarily focused on the containment of space, the figure, or occasionally an ensemble of figures, such as Shamans and Poets. This allows for a mode expression over that of being a singular idea or concept, the latter being more within the province of postmodernism. This is further evident in his recent series of smaller bronzes, entitled *Maquettes in Mexico* (2007), that are focused on the space between two figures, the familiar *pas de deux* theme, where the negative aperture plays an expressive role, usually relegated to traditional aesthetics.

In contrast to the "expanded field" - a term introduced by the art historian Rosalind Krauss and widely employed in defense 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 recent 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, a refuge perhaps from the anxiety engendered by the tragic events surrounding 911 (both politically and militarily). It seems that one kind of sculpture -- namely that of Won Lee -- is moving toward the singular intimate space as a psychological response to these events.

This further implies that sculpture may depend more on permanence than on temporary forms of installation. Serra's torques and illusionist twisting canyon-like spaces may serve the purpose as well, but from the perspective of absence, thus allowing the viewer to encounter a sense of alienation in the process of being caught within labyrinthine curves.

Won Lee is less about absence and more concerned with embodying anxiety within the representational space of the sculpture itself. His approach is more indirect, more expressive, and seemingly contrary in approach to either minimalism or postmodernism. But this would only be the case if one saw postmodernism as a style rather than as a philosophy with which to cope with the

spiritual disintegration of human beings in a fragmented world. Won Lee is clear that his Deleuzian approach as a sculptor is about coping with the poststructural signs of spiritual disintegration, and not about conforming to a style that serves the superficial categories of art marketing. His bronze castings and stone carvings are less about marketing than about making an aesthetic decision in the rhizome field; namely, that one's choice of material offers the potential of presence in lieu of what some may read as a detached, or even cynical style of absence.

Won Lee's writings about his art are very specific in this regard, perhaps, even sentimental, but nonetheless specific with regards to the process in which he is involved at the moment of creation.

Here is an example:

A form emerges

accompanying me to the world of the primordial, to the world of sacred, where the primal desire roams free.

Artists have understood the connection between creativity and Dionysian abandon since the festivals of Bacchus and Diana, and probably eons before this. Although Lee's origins are Korean, his ties with shamanism suggest a structural affinity with Dionysius and with Bacchanalian rites of passage, although these rituals were probably unfamiliar to the inhabitants of the peninsula during the period of the Three Kingdoms in the early second and third centuries. Still, Lee considers his creative expression as a sculptor to be a manifestation of "the world of the sacred, where the primal desire roams free."

In 2004, the artist completed a series of bronze figures, dedicated to poets. These abstract figures appear rough on the outside, with a sleek planar cut moving vertically through them, like a beam of light. Poetry functions implicitly within the space of these forms. His desire is to make them appear as an embodiment of language through tactile realization and to encompass a sensuous earthly manifestation of the creative impulse. There is another verse that I find striking in relation to the earthiness that one may identify with the figurations of Won Lee. Here is a verse from the late San Francisco poet, Bob Kaufman, which shares a similar resonance:

The blood of the poet
must flow in his poem,
so much so, that others
demand an explanation.

The poet answers that the poem is not to be explained. It is what it is, the reality of the poem cannot be denied. (1)

For Kaufman, the poem represents a truth, a signifying power that emerges from language. Won Lee, in turn, looks toward the modeling process as he forms these humanoid presences - these physical statues and remnants -- to evoke a similar feeling, to express a fleeting interval of an eternal lyric that resides somewhere within the self.

Again the Maquettes from Mexico admit this quality. They appear as ruins on the aftermath of Classical Age where lurks the spirit of the Romantic. Here Lee combines bronze with wire amatures to give these upright forms a linear aspect, an elegance of poise, an ineluctable grace. The vibrating spaces between the figures suggest a lyricism within the space of absence, the interstices that beckon the eye inward and through the crevice of time, the maternal sense of well being transformed into a fierce Oedipal journey. While these works are possessed by simplicity, they are not entirely naïve.

The dark side equals that of the lightness. Somehow they reside in one space, as in *Salsa Dancer* (2007), *Ballerina of Guadalajara* (2006), or in *The Air of Sierra* (2006). In each case, there is a hidden irony within the lyrical absence, a sense of will and relinquishment, and a perennial lust that succumbs to silence, to an air of contemplation within the mist that enshrouds meaning. What is left, then, is the presence of the thing itself, the poise that alerts the senses that meaning is equivocal, but equivocal in the way of poetry, the way the language functions. Won Lee's syntactic energy reveals the placement of how and where the torso resides - the weight at the figure's central core. Here lies the pulse that engages renewal with the ritual of desire.

(1) Bob Kaufman, *The Ancient The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956-1978*. New York: New Directions, 1981, p. 69 (Quoted from "The Poet")