

PLATFORM 26



myoung ho lee

PLATFORM 26 Myoung Ho Lee: *Tree...#2*

The Art of Advertising Nature

In 1965, Claudia Alta “Lady Bird” Johnson, the First Lady to President Lyndon B. Johnson, set out to beautify the United States by removing billboards and rubbish from alongside American highways (Fig. 1). She believed that deinstalling outdoor advertising would enhance the environment, better display the natural splendor of the U.S., and improve the mental health of Americans. The Highway Beautification Act of 1965 eventually passed through Congress and was signed into law by President Johnson that October. Lady Bird had cemented her legacy as a protector of America’s beauty.

One look at South Korean photographer Myoung Ho Lee’s series *Tree* and *Tree Abroad* shows that he, like Lady Bird, also values the inherent beauty of the natural world. But where Lady Bird viewed billboards as detrimental to vistas across the United States, Lee values the blocky shape for the way it can reveal the natural beauty that is already there. Instead of trying to sell a product with his oversized backdrops, Lee stages them behind isolated trees to enhance their graphic nature and focus the viewer’s attention on color, size, and form. Subverting the billboard’s usual commercial role, Lee uses the same shape and scale that Lady Bird condemned to highlight



Fig. 1



the natural wonders of South Korea and Mongolia. In a further twist, Lee's already-large-format photograph *Tree...#2* has been further expanded to a monumental scale and displayed on an actual billboard in deCordova's Sculpture Park (**Cover, Fig. 2**).

A True View

The connection between nature, art, and advertising does not start with *Lady Bird*, of course, nor does it end with Lee. Landscapes in Korean art date back millennia and have continuously evolved over the centuries, culminating in "true-view landscape painting" (*jingyeong sansuhwa*). After invasions and assimilation with other nations, Koreans started to look inward at their own history, culture, and sublime natural scenery. During the late 1700s artists started to depict in precise detail the mountains that dot the skyline of Korea. These works offer a historical record of how the landscape looked then and an assertion of Korean identity that was inextricably tied to their surrounding land.

Landscape paintings from across history often take a macro approach to the natural scenery they depict. Sweeping expanses of hills, mountains, and valleys try to capture the overwhelming feeling that comes from experiencing pristine

settings that have not been deforested for resources or plowed down for cities. Lee chooses instead to focus on individual or small groups of trees. His images do not ask the viewer to consider miles of coastline or acres of foliage. Instead, they offer controlled attention and contemplation. When Lee started photographing trees in his signature style, he opted for a subject that was intertwined with his own history, a sawtooth oak tree at his alma mater. While common across Korea, this tree was wrapped up in Lee's memory, tinted with nostalgia for his time as a college student. As this body of work has evolved and he chooses trees for less personal and more aesthetic reasons, his photographic prints have become larger, revealing the edges of the blank white canvas backdrops and the expanses of land that surround his subjects.

A Sheet in the Wind

As he traverses South Korea and Mongolia, Lee continually scans the landscape for trees that might suit his purpose. Whether due to their shape or the color of their leaves, they must stand out from their surroundings. Lee often only makes three or four finished photographs a year, and a significant part of his work involves travel, research, and extensive logistical planning. It is not enough for him to be inspired by a tree and decide to take an impromptu photograph. He hires a crew,



Fig. 3

determines how he can hang the backdrop, and uses a large format film camera, which limits him to a finite number of pictures (**Fig. 3**). Once back at his studio, Lee digitally edits the photographs to remove the cranes, ropes, and workers that hold up the massive background, though he leaves traces of their presence in the ripples of the fabric, shadows of figures, and a stray hand or foot. These details both reveal and conceal the performance involved in the photoshoot. While we may be aware that behind every fashion shoot and advertisement are lights, backdrops, and crews of workers, the goal of the photographer and the studio is to make the viewer forget that anything exists beyond the subject. Lee's conceit is that his work is only possible because of the usually invisible labor of workers and unseen assistants. By giving us traces of their presence and showing the edges of the white canvas, Lee's photographs exist as a balance between a performative event and its later erasure.

The white backdrop of Lee's *Tree* series is long associated with studio photography, from department stores to high fashion. Among the most iconic examples in fine-art photography are the works of American photographer Richard Avedon, whose studio portraits eliminate the distractions of backgrounds and props to focus attention solely on the sitter. Avedon's signature white background helped cement him as a leader

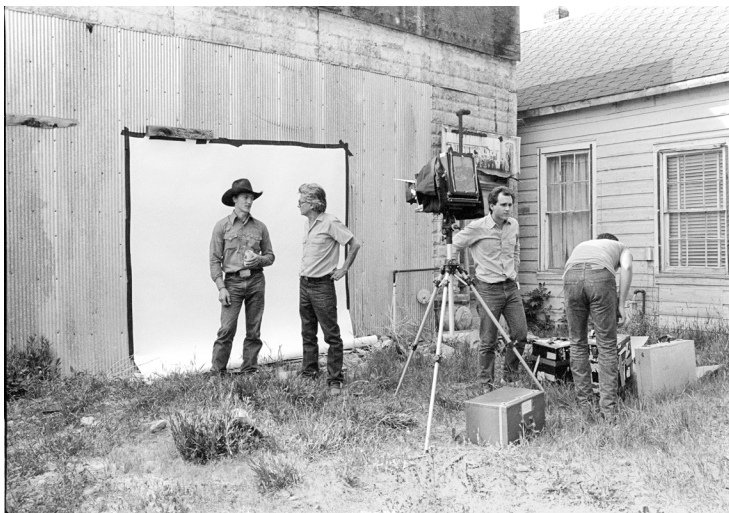


Fig. 4 Photo by Laura Wilson

in fashion and portrait photography. He purposely leaves out the edges of a backdrop, making us believe that his subjects exist in a vacuum—one with perfect lighting and featureless surroundings (Fig. 4). Lee also employs the white canvas to draw attention to a singular form and uses Photoshop to erase some of his support systems, but he goes beyond Avedon's deceptions. By showing the edges of the backdrop, Lee transfers the inherent performativity of photography from outside to inside the picture plane.

From Up Above to Down Below

Lee describes his trees as "if [they] unite all: the ground, the sky, and man in between. In East Asian philosophy, the universe breaks down into three parts: Chun-Ji-In. Chun means the sky, Ji means the ground, and In means human. Since a tree connects all three, I feel very much that a tree is like a universe."¹ By isolating trees in his photographs while still showing their environment, Lee focuses on this notion of a tree as a unifying yet unique presence in the world.

Through his photography, Lee re-presents nature to us in the most direct way. His billboard-like images are not selling us a tree or a scene but rather encouraging us to reevaluate our relationship to the nature we tend to overlook in our everyday

lives. By repackaging the trees into graphic images that waver between being removed from their environment and deeply embedded within it, he asks viewers to return to the flora around them with the same curiosity and care that he exhibits. Through his alterations of scale and location and subtle incorporation of photography's artifice, Lee reframes what is commonly in front of us, slowing us down for just long enough to tap into an innate sense of awe.

Elizabeth Upenieks, Curatorial Assistant

FOOTNOTES

I: Object label for Myoung Ho Lee, *Tree...#2*, 2011, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/117242/>.

CAPTIONS

Cover: Installation view of PLATFORM 26: Myoung Ho Lee, *Tree...#2*, 2011/2020, digital print on billboard fabric, steel, 10 x 20 feet. Courtesy of the Artist. Photograph by Julia Featheringill, Boston.

Fig. 1: *Curve in highway with assorted billboards*, 1953. Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685-2009, Record Group 21, National Archives at Kansas City. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, photo no. 283530.

Fig. 2: Myoung Ho Lee, *Tree...#2*, from the series *Tree Abroad*, 2011, archival inkjet print. © Myoung Ho Lee, Courtesy of the Artist and Yossi Milo Gallery, New York.

Fig. 3: Myoung Ho Lee and crew setting up a canvas for *Tree...#3*. Courtesy of the Artist.

Fig. 4: Laura Wilson, *Richard Avedon Photographing in Augusta, Montana*, 1980. Courtesy of the Artist.

BIOGRAPHY

Myoung Ho Lee (b. 1975, Daejeon, South Korea) is based in South Korea. He earned a BFA in 2003, MFA in 2006, and PhD in 2008 from Joong-Ang University in Seoul, South Korea. His photography has been displayed in exhibitions internationally, including at the Zaha Art Museum, Seoul, South Korea; Yossi Milo Gallery, New York, NY; and the Venice Biennale. His work is held in collections such as the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Hermes Collection, Paris, France; and the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, Gyeonggi, South Korea. He is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Photography/Film at Kyung-Il University, Gyeongsan, South Korea.

PLATFORM

PLATFORM is a series of one-person commissioned projects by early- and mid-career artists from New England, national, and international art communities that engage with deCordova's unique landscape. The PLATFORM series lets artists expand their practice and visitors experience new approaches to contemporary sculpture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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