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REVIEWS NOV. 01, 2011

## Lee Bae

NEW YORK,  
at Nicholas Robinson

by Richard Vine



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“Mastery” is not a term one hears much in the West these days, but it still names a life goal for many Korean artists. At 55, Lee Bae, who moved to Paris in 1990, is now in full command of his formal esthetic and his technical skills. Witness his second New York solo (the first was at White Box in 2009). For this show, the independent curatorial team Art Reoriented (Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath)—organizers of the eye-opening “Iran Inside Out” exhibition at the Chelsea Art Museum in 2009—selected a balanced mix of paintings, drawings, collages and sculptural installations (all works 2010 or 2011).

One gallery wall bore a suite of 48 graphite renderings that each depict, with photographic clarity and an astonishing finesse of touch, a different shriveled persimmon—a fruit common in Lee’s long-lost hometown of Chung-do. All the other works are charcoal-based and abstract. The paintings capture splatters, daubs and bold, swift brushstrokes in a creamy acrylic medium. The collages turn charcoal chips into rippling mosaics. The ominous-feeling sculptures consist of large charcoal blocks bound upright with cord or worked into rough skull shapes and mounted on the wall like grim trophies.

Lee originally chose his principal material for two reasons: because it was cheap enough for the struggling émigré artist to afford in large quantity, and because it put him in touch with his cultural roots. In Korea, charcoal is traditionally used both as the first layer of a house’s foundation and, hung on a rope, as the announcement of a child’s birth. Moreover, it is a key element in art training and similar in its effects to materials used in ink painting and calligraphy.

Lee Bae was for many years an assistant to Lee Ufan (the Korean-born founder of Japan’s postwar Mono-Ha movement), whose retrospective filled the Guggenheim Museum rotunda this summer. The work of both men has visual affinities with Western Minimalism, but its underlying concept is, in contrast, additive rather



than reductive. Sparseness of painterly incident here equates to a cumulativeness, a fullness. All that the artist has previously thought and experienced, all that he senses in the immediate environment and the moment, is brought to bear in a gesture, a stroke—sometimes unique, sometimes serially repeated with variations as subtle as the pulses of feeling.

More than two decades ago, when Lee Bae began his signature use of charcoal, his primary subject was the human body, tightly coiled. The abstractions that followed are, in effect, a release of that energy and a transmutation of that form into pure expression. Lee begins each day without a preconceived image, making dozens of spontaneous brush-and-ink sketches, until he finds the movement, and the trace of the movement, that he wishes to replicate in a larger, one-go charcoal work. Charcoal, he notes, contains energy—which can be liberated by fire or by art. All one needs is a discipline, both physical and mental, so thorough as to appear *paradoxically effortless*.

*Photo: View of Lee Bae's exhibition, showing two untitled sculptures, both 2010, and an untitled painting from 2011; at Nicholas Robinson.*

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