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Material man

Lee Kit says his work has a habit of fading into the background but the self-effacing artist's painted cloth series has found favor at home and abroad

By Victoria Ip
Photography by Andrew Tang

Fifteen years ago, when he was in secondary school, 李傑 (Lee Kit) was something of a 文藝青年 (“literary youth”), he says. He spent most of his time painting, playing the guitar, listening to the music of British indie groups and reading the novels of Milan Kundera – not always, he admits, with complete understanding. He recalls being much impressed by his art teacher, who told him art is part of culture, so before becoming a good artist, “you should become a good human being first.”

Lee seems to have managed both. The 31-year-old’s admirers say he is a fine human being, and there is no reason to doubt them. He has also become a successful artist known for his unique hand-painted cloths that can be displayed or used around the home in all manner of ways. Still, he is uncomfortable with the artist label. “I don’t think I’m an artist. Artists are people who are prepared to go the extra mile and handle pressure gracefully. My friend who has his own business raised his staff’s salary since he wanted to help them in the midst of the financial crisis and maintain a good relationship with them even after they leave the company. He’s an artist because he is ahead of his time.”

Friends call Lee “laid-back” and he thinks of himself that way too. One of his favorite childhood memories is simply playing with an orange, spending a lazy afternoon basking in the sunlight as it streamed through the windows of his family’s 29th floor flat in Kowloon Bay. As a man, he tries to bring a laid-back attitude to both his work and his life. Recently, inspired by Frank Sinatra’s super-relaxed version of the *Casablanca* hit, *As Time Goes By*, he did nothing but cook all day. Lee, who is pretty good at passing time, is still puzzled as to why it made him want to cook.

One of his friends, 林東鵬 (Lam Tung-pang) observes, “He’s always very busy, but works hard to have quality time.” Lee defines quality time in many different ways: “Sometimes making and drinking coffee, or washing clothes by hand, or bathing, or wandering around my studio, or simply sitting there looking at something. Watching television with my parents, or if I am lucky enough, going for a walk in the autumn with an iPod.”

Lee has a penchant for disappearing when the mood strikes. At the opening party of the 《路易威登：創意情感》 (*Louis Vuitton: A Passion for Creation*) exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of Art last May, Lee, one of seven local artists in the show, frequently excused himself to take cigarette breaks outside. On occasion, he can appear to

be a docile spectator of his own life. This “come-what-may” attitude has charmed the art world. He has been chosen three times to participate in the Hong Kong Art Biennial (2001, 2003, 2005) and his work can be seen at Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst in Belgium and the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

His pieces of hand-painted cloth are unassuming. They “vanish” as their users get used to their daily presence. “When attention deficiency is the rule, it’s cool to garner fame with works that ‘disappear,’” Lee says, adding, as he is inclined to do, “And you know, there’s nothing special about me as an artist.”

He has been developing his painted cloth series since 2003, his last year as a fine arts student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). He began attracting international attention four years later and is now one of the few Hong Kong artists who exhibit abroad frequently.

“I never thought about getting famous for my hand-painted cloth series. I work on it whether it will be exhibited or not – it is a necessity to me,” he says. It is literally a part of the fabric of his life – apart from using the cloths as pillow cases, bed sheets, curtains, tablecloths or picnic blankets at exhibitions (the fabrics, adorned with food and drink stains, are showcased alongside photographs capturing moments during their “practical” life), he also uses them in the pantry, living room, bedroom, washroom and storage room at his studio.

Asked what attracted him to fabric, Lee says, “It just happened.” Fabric is more compatible with daily use and looks more down-to-earth than canvas. Fabric is washable, and the highly practical artist even suggests that people who own his “paintings” wash them. He uses acrylic, and at times, ink, red wine and bleach water.

Though Lee says “there’s nothing special about me,” he was a finalist for the Sovereign Asian Art Prize 2009. His works represent accessibility as one can actually consume them, his art feeds off life. He doesn’t want his art to be observed with reverence; he wants people to breathe new life into it by committing the “crime” of staining it. “The audience can participate in Lee’s work easily,” says his friend, comic artist 江康泉 (Kongkee), who was two years his senior at CUHK.

“The more you get to know Lee Kit the more you understand him and what his artwork stands for,” says Sarah Van Ingelgom, manager of Blue Lotus Gallery in Fo Tan. “It very much reflects his attitude towards life. It’s very often about how beautiful boring things in life can be or how

看在藝術的份上，甚麼都可以原諒。這個當然，如果你是畢卡索。否則的話，你大概只可以做一個只有脾氣最似藝術家的藝術家

boring beautiful things can be. He is now very popular and extremely busy, but he is still very much the same nice, interesting guy I first met.” Lee was one of the first Hong Kong artists she got to know well.

Lee lived at the Blue Lotus Gallery for several weeks during the group exhibition *Lala-land* which ran from December 2008 to January 2009. He installed a bed and made pillows and curtains. “We were very used to having him around and missed him when he was away,” says Van Ingelgom. “Sometimes he would be buried under his pillows and we hardly knew he was there. And he would always disappear when there was too much of a crowd in the gallery.”

When Lee first started the series, the hand-painted cloths of various soft colors were mounted. But he thought it was a better idea to keep them un-mounted and folded up when not in use. “At first I thought I was doing something I liked but later on began to think it was about the possibility of an individual doing something according to his own taste, as a way of life. Maybe it’s like a model for some kind of attitude towards daily life, and it seems nostalgic and static,” he explains. At the group exhibition *Inside Looking Out* held at Osage Singapore in August 2008, he took one of his works off the wall and used it as a tablecloth for dinner with his friends.

Photographs of Lee and his friends using his hand-painted cloths line the walls of his spacious Fo Tan studio. A folded bed with another of his cloths sits in the corner. An unfinished oil painting by one of his students stands next to a big wooden table where he teaches art in his spare time. Although he likes to blog, he calls his blog a notebook because some of the entries are ideas for new works. He would like to write longer entries, but says he is not very good with words.

“I can only come up with one-liners,” he says, “but I love checking it out and trying to make it look beautiful.”

Upstairs, a band is vigorously practicing for an upcoming performance. Lee will jam with them

once in a while (he still plays the guitar), but he has declined the band’s invitation to see its show because he does not want to go out on Friday night. “I’m like my parents. I’m a couch potato.”

Lee still hangs out with friends from his days at CUHK. “Drinking, smoking, making works of art and reading . . . it’s like our uni life is still going on as a lot of us have studios in 火炭 (Fo Tan).”

He used to share a studio with several friends, including 白雙全 (Tozer Pak Sheung-chuen). “He exudes elegance and is very good at making friends,” Pak says. “As much as he loves to talk, understanding his work is the best way to know him. His works show his inner depths. His painting speed, choice of colors and lyrics, and mode of representation all add up to an air of laid-backness.”

Lee chanced on the idea of documenting his work with photographs at a picnic in 2003. “I had a camera with me and suddenly thought of taking some photos. Then later on it became a kind of means to record what happened with the cloth. I mean, how the cloth was used, as a picnic blanket or as a tablecloth. Almost all the photos are snapshots, not necessarily taken by me,” he says.

As his classmate at CUHK, Lam Tung-pang is well placed to trace the evolution of Lee’s hand-painted cloth motif. “He was already good at managing painting techniques at school, which I think is a disadvantage as it can make people feel self-satisfied. But painting is not about that. He then tried to escape from the format of painting by applying pigments to canvas mounted on a stretcher. But he then realized the importance of putting his attitude towards life into his work, which I think was common among our year.”

Lam turned Lee’s photo of a picnic with two friends – curator 梁展峰 (Jeff Leung Chin-fung) and artist 關尚智 (Kwan Sheung-chi) – into a painting called *The Last Paradise* (2008). Lam also used to share a studio with Lee. “He always went to sleep early in the morning when I came to the studio, and started working when I left the studio at night. I don’t think he had a good night’s sleep for years but luckily we each have our own



studio now!”

Lee himself avoids trying to define his art – he regards it as a nuisance. “My work is open to interpretation. Those who understand my work say it’s about daily life and offers a range of perspectives from which to look at things. Some of them simply say they are touched, which makes me feel so good. Others feel uncomfortable since they don’t understand what I’m doing. Do they want to be entertained or is it just that they need to know everything? It’s as though they are scared to interpret my work.”

Lee participated in 16 exhibitions in 2009 and 20 in 2008. “It’s like I’m a busy preacher. I suddenly got very caught up working on exhibitions in 2007, which is the opposite of the laid-backness that my work suggests. But I try to embody the attitude – as an artist, it’s my mission to set out a living model and try my best to tell people that life can be a bit slower and less complicated.”

When pressed to find a “statement” to sum up his art, he chose something uncomplicated – lyrics he borrowed from the song *Worrywort* by Radiohead: “It’s such a beautiful day. Go on and get some rest.” And that only because he was required to provide a statement for an exhibition in Sweden last year. “There are many lengthy artists’ statements around, so I chose lyrics as mine,” he says. “I also figured that more people would read my artist’s statement as it’s printed on sugar packs.”

Lee uses song lyrics on some of his works, such as the cloths he hand-paints for pillows – but with a twist: “I use lyrics at odds with the meaning of the songs. For instance, I culled ‘I wake up in the morning and I wonder why everything’s the same as it was’ from Skeeter Davis’ song *The End of the World* since people wouldn’t guess it’s a cheesy love song.”

Lee is a fan of the work of the late rock star, Ian Curtis of Joy Division. When Lee was eight or nine, his sister was given some of the band’s albums by her boyfriend. She used to play their music every night and it seeped into Lee’s subconscious. A few years later, she ran away from home and the albums became his. “I started reading Joy Division’s lyrics and got hooked. My birthday coincides with Ian Curtis’ date of birth (May 18), so I feel a special affinity with their music.”

At times, Lee’s work takes on a political dimension. His living room for the Louis Vuitton exhibition, which freed him momentarily from the routine of making cloths, is a visual commentary on IKEA, the low-cost home-

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It’s very often about how beautiful boring things in life can be and how boring beautiful things can be

furnishings retailer. “The brand suggests how our apartments should look with its display rooms so my room is my way of telling IKEA what my idea of a better life is. IKEA advocates efficiency while my room is the place where time stands still.” Lee says the fun part of creating the piece was trying to duplicate the sound of a running bathroom shower; his first attempts sounded like vegetables being stir-fried, but, he says, he finally got the sound right.

A video Lee created for the Louis Vuitton exhibition – *Filling up an Ashtray* – also had an edge. Lee said it was “dedicated to my ex-neighbor, the solitary artist 關晃 (Jerry Kwan), who passed away at the age of 74 last year. He was a heavy smoker too. Although he’s a very important artist in Hong Kong – on top of teaching fine arts at CUHK, he also held solo exhibitions at 1a space, Cattle Depot Artist Village and Grotto Fine Art in his last few years – the Hong Kong Museum of Art has never held an exhibition of his work. I find that disrespectful.”

Lee, who used his cloths as a banner and flag in the massive pro-democracy march in Hong Kong on July 1, 2004, says he would not have taken part in the Louis Vuitton exhibition if he had known beforehand that the government would allow the company to “brand” the museum so heavily. “I think the government sold Hong Kong Museum of Art out to Louis Vuitton. I didn’t know that the place was being ‘branded’ by the label until the opening of the exhibition. If I had known beforehand, I would have said no to participating in it.”

With his anti-government views (he thinks the current chief executive should step down), it is little wonder that when Lee wrote to Chief Executive 曾蔭權 (Donald Tsang) in 2007, he received no reply. Lee was inviting Tsang to lunch with him and a couple of artist friends at Victoria Prison where they were taking part in a group exhibition, 《監獄美術館》 (*Prison Art Museum*). The theme was the prisoner’s lack of choice, and Lee’s friends 梁兆基 (Eric Leung Siu-kee), director of the Artist Commune, and Jeff Leung Chin-fung, asked him to help set up the exhibition



每一件藝術品，
裡面都有一個赤
裸裸的藝術家。
你看得懂他的作
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藝術家保留至今
的浪漫想像

and write the invitation to Tsang. Lee also painted a cloth used to cover a table for the lunch that Tsang never joined.

Lee hasn't had a full-time job since his solo exhibition, *My pillow seems like a bed, a pillow seems like my bed*, held at CUHK in 2008. But he says he is making a decent living. He says an alternative lifestyle works better for him than the nine-to-five routine – although he is still contemplating teaching full time. “Sometimes I feel that my ‘loose’ way of life is going to spiral out of control.”

“His work is about an individual creating a lifestyle that works for him within the social context. That mirrors his own lifestyle more and more, and also increasingly reflects social values,” says 胡昉 (Hu Fang), artistic director of Vitamin Creative Space, an alternative gallery in Guangzhou. He learned about Lee's work from their mutual friend Pak. “When I first met him in his studio, I found him humorous, dashing, and determined.”

In April 2009, Lee performed at the opening of the group exhibition *Portrait of Self-Exile (Part 1)* at The Shop gallery in Beijing, run by Hu's Vitamin Creative Space. The exhibition showcased works inspired by the artists' everyday experiences and Lee's performance consisted of making and downing coffee for four hours. A tape of songs and sounds, such as cooking and walking, played in the background. “Nobody knows what he was thinking when he was making and drinking coffee. Maybe he wasn't thinking about anything in particular, which is

His painting speed, choice of colors and of lyrics, all add up to an air of laid-backness

very interesting,” says Hu.

Despite exhibiting frequently abroad, Lee has lived overseas only briefly. He had a residency at Enjoy Public Art Gallery, in Wellington, New Zealand from December 2007 to January 2008. He stayed at one of the oldest cottages in Wellington, which was next to a cemetery, and collected items from second-hand shops that helped paint a picture of a city and its people, both those alive and those in the cemetery. “I like the used merchandise and the smell of second-hand shops, which set them apart from shops at malls. Different objects from different times and places are gathered there.”

He assembled his solo exhibition (*Ready-made Everyday*) at Enjoy Public Art Gallery by himself – apart from installing the works and painting the walls. He also designed the poster. At the end of the show, he gave all the works to different people in Wellington, even strangers. “All I have left are photos documenting my works. I felt like a tourist and now it feels as though the residency never happened.”

During the residency he was bombarded with the slogan, “Absolutely Positive Wellington,, which he found a bit overwhelming. “I am not

a fan of overt positivity in government slogans – they are fake. If a place or a person is truly positive, they won’t broadcast it. If I’m too positive I won’t be able to accomplish anything. Being a bit pessimistic makes me more in sync with reality.”

When Lee was brainstorming for a karaoke-themed solo exhibition held at Osage in November, he listened to oldie classics like *The End of The World, My Way* and *As Time Goes By*. “The lyrics are much more straightforward and personal than lyrics nowadays. For instance, ‘I wish that I could turn back the clock.’ You can’t get more literal than that. They remain pregnant with honesty after all these years.” Lee said he is curious about why people deal with the aftermath of breakups in similar ways, such as drinking themselves into stupors. “Are they imitating the behavior of the heartbroken they’ve seen in karaoke videos?”

After years of exuding a Zen-like ambience in his works, Lee says he is ready to reveal his emotions. “I used to think that it’s a big no-no to display sentiment in my work. But now that I’m older I think it is okay to do that, hence the karaoke-themed exhibition. I’m working on a publication project about the hand-painted cloth motif. I’ll be writing about my recent past and putting a lot of myself out there,” he says, stubbing out another cigarette in his cluttered ashtray ☐

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