

Lee Kit at Venice Biennale

Posted: 24 Apr 2013



Here are eight things you didn't know about artist Lee Kit, who's representing Hong Kong at the Venice Biennale. Interview by **Edmund Lee**.

Lee Kit has established himself as one of our city's leading artists with his meditative take on time and memory (and hand cream). Ahead of his month-long preparation for the exhibition, the Hong Kong representative at the upcoming Venice Biennale gives *Time Out* an update on his art practice.

1. Lee thinks his show at the Venice Biennale will mark a change in his artistic direction. But he seriously doesn't want to talk about the transition. "I wouldn't say I was looking for a change in my artistic direction – because it sounds so dumb," says Lee. "It'd be like those people who announce to the world they're looking for a boyfriend or a girlfriend."

2. It's a convoluted process how Lee decides on the direction of his exhibition. It began with ruling out what he didn't want to show: his recent series of cardboard paintings and, perhaps, even the earlier form of his signature hand-painted cloth. After spending a whole month listening to old songs and watching old movies from Hong Kong – a research process that he'd never gone through in the past – the artist came up with a few keywords that are marginally connected to our city. "The keywords of 'love' and 'hate' form the horizontal axis [of my approach for the show], while those of 'in the

moment' and 'letting go' provide the vertical one. My works used to be more subtle but it may be more extreme this time."

3. Lee envisions his Venice presentation to look like 'an impressionistic house'. While he has yet to decorate the space (which consists of a courtyard, two rooms and a washroom at the back, which will unusually be incorporated as part of the show this time) and is set to create much of the work on-site after he flies there on May 1, the artist is 'treating the space as if I'm painting there'. "When I was looking for the right carpets [for the exhibition space], for example, it was like finding the right paint to establish the background [of a painting]. The process was very important to me: to look for a carpet of the right colour and texture." Lee also confirms that he'll place a guard booth in the courtyard: "It's an image that's been inside my mind for a very long time."

4. Overall, it's going to be visually similar to his older works. "You can tell immediately that it's a domestic space, with tables, chairs, carpet and television – but maybe presented in a different way," he says. "A description of the installation may sound a bit silly, but I truly believe that the end product will be able to evoke the feeling I'm looking for. The feeling is that of waking up – not in the way that the work wakes you up from sleep but, when you're inside the installation, you'll be faced with yourself. It's mostly comprised of items from daily life."

5. When Lee says he doesn't know how to talk about his work, he means it. "My work may appear to be conceptual, but if you look closer, it's not what you'd strictly define as conceptual art," he says. "There's not much concept behind it. It's simply about how you sense or feel about something, and it's consistent with my thinking: if I could articulate clearly with merely my words, I didn't have to actually create the works. Why would it mean anything if I place a cup in a certain way? It's impossible to tell. I could only place it there to make sense."

6. For his art practice, Lee used to rely on a certain atmosphere offered by a closed setting. He has however kept that mental state with him ever since he moved out of his Fo Tan studio to live in Taipei last June. "When I travelled frequently last

year,” says Lee, whose ever-growing stature saw him represented at 24 exhibitions in 2012, “I started to realise that I had internalised the state I had in my Fo Tan studio. I’m always in hotel rooms and I love them – they’re such strange spaces, at once private and public, claustrophobic and restrictive but also very liberating. I sometimes have the same feeling on the flight, or when I lock myself in the bathroom at an exhibition that I didn’t want to go to, I have the same feeling too. Sometimes I feel that way even when I’m on the streets.”

7. Lee loves to thank his ‘team’ for making the Venice show happen – and he means, like, four people. “I made it sound like a team of 30,” he says jokingly when asked to clarify the ‘team’ he’s always referring to. The four includes lead curator Lars Nittve, curator Yung Ma, who’s sitting in on our interview, and two other technical staff at M+. “It’s the biggest team I’ve worked with. I used to work with only one person: myself.”

8. He is not exactly what you’d call an optimist. When asked to consider what his participation at the Biennale will mean to his career, Lee deadpans: “This could be my [career] suicide – if I don’t do it right.” Yung, bewildered by the comment despite being a close friend of Lee’s, now whispers: “Are you really saying that...?” Lee then straightens up and starts again formally: “I’ll do my best, so that I can achieve the best outcome.” Both burst into laughter, before the artist continues: “But objectively speaking, if I don’t do well even with such a great team and nice venue... I’m going to feel *really* bad.”

Online exclusive:

9. Lee has been splitting his time between Taipei and Hong Kong. *Although he gave up his Fo Tan studio and moved to Taipei last June, the Hong Kong native does come back to his hometown every other week for work, without even counting the unannounced trips back just to see his parents. “I’m coming back so often that I’m beginning to question whether I’m based in Taipei,” says Lee, who first lived in the place of a longtime friend, the China-born, Vienna-raised artist Jun Yang, in his early days in Taiwan, before moving out to live on his own. “I’m currently living in an apartment that feels very much like my work,” he adds.*

10. He didn't move to Taipei to advance his career. *"If I did," Lee says, "I'd have moved to Beijing, London or New York – especially now that I'm represented by a New York gallery. If I move there, they'll be more than thrilled." But why not? "It's a bit far," he chuckles. "None of my considerations has anything to do with my career. I want to stay close to home so I can come back in case anything happens in my family. To put it even more crudely, I'm just looking for a place to hide [in Taipei]. I love Hong Kong but I can't stand it anymore."*

11. Sometimes he has only one meal per day. *And not because he's a suffering artist. About a year ago, around the time that he more or less moved to Taipei, Lee was suggested by a friend to adopt a detox diet because he 'smokes and drinks too much'. While being very flexible with his eating plan, he usually has only dinner or a late lunch nowadays. "It was terrible in the first week but it's fine after that. I could feel how I can really concentrate," recalls the artist, who finishes three glasses of wine and four cigarettes during our hour-long chat.*

12. He has already been to the Venice Biennale once... as a tutor. *Back in 2007, Lee, who studied for a Master of Fine Art degree at the Chinese University of Hong Kong but never finished it, led a group of over 20 undergraduate students to the 52nd edition, at which Hong Kong was represented by Amy Cheung, MAP Office and Hiram To. It also happened to be the first time Lee ever visited Europe. "It's funny for a guy who'd never been to Europe to lead a tour," he says.*

Lee Kit's solo exhibition **You (you)** is at the 55th Venice Biennale (Castello 2126, Campo della Tana, Arsenale) from **Jun 1-Nov 24**. For details, visit labiennale.org.