

## Lee Jin Young's Ambrotypes: Art and the Fullness of Experience

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*Memory of the Breeze* is Lee Jin Young's sixth solo exhibition showcasing variations of images of clouds and sky. Walking back and forth from these delicate images pressed against transparent panels it feels as though Lee has extracted the atmosphere of these black and white skies. The ten featured artworks are titled either *Sky Garden* or *Memory of the Breeze* so that viewers can share her experience of the space of the sky and the weight of the clouds.

*Art grows with the process of its making*

The process of creation is crucial in Lee Jin Young's artworks. Of course, this applies to all artists, in which the act of creating is formulating and physically producing an artistic concept through a specific method. In Lee's case, her conceptual vision is in a constant and intimate dialogue with her art-making process and the images produced are grown from it. This is how she tries to obtain a sense of fullness and familiarity of her own experiences to be projected to the viewer. From her photography of landscape, portraiture, and objects to installations, her creative process becomes an important and specific method of intervention that allows for complete visual and emotional perception.

Lee has been experimenting with many different ways of developing and presenting photography throughout her artistic career. She discovered that the effects of the wet collodion process suited her artistic inclinations the best, which is what she extensively explores in this exhibition. The wet collodion process is when the negative of the image is produced on glass, and is exposed in the darkroom where the entire process of coating to developing the image has to be done before the solution on the glass dries. During this time, there are naturally obstacles such as dust or dirt that gets caught in the solution, which are immortalized in Lee's final developed images. For many of the exhibited works Lee layers these images in twos or more, whilst others are simply enlarged negatives printed out on transparent paper. Having to work within the limits of the image development and having to accept natural accidents is what makes her art.

*Familiarisation: the subject matter becomes obscure*

Lee Jin Young speaks of her discomfort in taking photographs of people or places that she is not familiar with. She claims her art to be that of "trying to adjust to the surrounding environment", which involves the artist carefully studying and familiarising herself with the object to find an image that visualises the entire atmosphere attached to it.<sup>1</sup> As a result of Lee's act of familiarisation, the subject matter throughout her works remain simple and obscure. Her attention is never on the physical object but on the abstract whole. Although there is something clear-cut and definite lost in her obscure images, the perceptual focus on the whole is deepened. The lack of clarity in their physical shapes magnify their surrounding abstract atmosphere from which Lee's familiarisation grows. Especially in this exhibition, the artist's choice of subject matter does not vary, as her focus is on the abstract atmosphere of clouds floating in the sky. The images of clouds bring us to their own pocket of perceived time and space.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Jin Young, *Historia* (Kunstdoc Gallery, 2012), artist's statement

One of Lee's starting points in regarding subject matter came from her portraiture series *Retrace* (2009), where she took portraits of a young girl named Amelia using a scanner. Lee discovered that the scanner had ruptured the outlines of her face in waves and squiggled lines. Lee was captivated. The particular characteristics of the scanning mechanism were brought out, and at the same time naturally captured her little friend's childish inability to stay still. Lee realised that although in her own memory, Amelia appeared as a clear vision, the scanner had produced an entirely different image of her that was able to reveal a special aspect of Amelia's character in that portion of time. The art of the accidental had intervened Lee's perception of Amelia by capturing her in an 'image pocket' of imperfect reproductions.

In familiarising herself with the subject matter, Lee trusts natural accidents to complement the formation of her thoughts and memories. The visual evidence of scanning in the separation of lines in her portraits and the blurry riddles of watermarks, streaks and dust in her ambrotypes become a crucial context of the finalized image.

### *The whole sky in transparent frames*

The photographs in *Memory of the Breeze* come from the artist's two-week stay in the Gobi desert in Mongolia. Her companions were fellow artists from Korea and Mongolia. There, she experienced, for the first time, the immense silence of the desert, the kind that augmented all of her sensations of the natural environment: its wind, sunlight, clouds suspended in the sky. She recalls how she was particularly inspired by the way the clouds were casting shadows on the treeless desert floor in their delicate, floating state. These artworks are by no means supposed to be portraits of Mongolia. The priority for the artist is to rather project her experience of seeing and feeling the Mongolian natural scenery in its fullest.

One of the many ways she achieves this fullness of experience can be seen in her installation titled *Memory of a Breeze*, in which Lee adds a three-dimensionality to her images by placing different ambrotypes of the sky between many layers of acrylic plates of different widths. The installation amounts to 1.2 metres in length and the varying widths of the acrylic allow for light to filter in different amounts and intensities. The transparency of the materials expose different forms and compositions of clouds layered on top of one another, capturing the intangible spatiality and infinite depth of the sky. Creating images in multiple layers is a relatively popular method in art. In my view, Lee's glass plate negative technically already contains layers, created from the passage of time. In the installation she augments the effect of layering by further adding acrylic plates in which the glass plate negatives are inserted. Lee also includes speakers playing white noise in the exhibition space to further immerse the viewer into her experience. These recordings comprise of different sounds from the nature collected by sound artist Kim Joon. Such artistic interventions transform the images into a complete and filled experience that surpasses the sensory confines of just one captured moment.

### *The spiritual kinship with Dansaekhwa artists: Inheritance and her own re-making*

The making of the ambrotype requires the artist to be mindful of the conditions of all the involved elements that are susceptible to subtle changes. The interlinked and interdependent course of working based on a series of non-standardized handiwork is at the heart of the final result of the work of art. Interestingly, in terms of the artistic facture, Lee Jin Young's methodology shares certain commonalities with the Dansaekhwa tendency of contemporary Korean art.

The main players of Dansaekhwa movement all emphasized the significance of personalized facture through which they believed that the artistic self and the material could be united. These two - the artistic self and the material - are often interpreted as the self and the 'world'. In my view, the Dansaekhwa artists unwittingly formulated a simple, yet genuine artistic process where the artist's physical and bodily engagement with the chosen material had categorical importance, and furthermore, the work of art produced through the individual method bore great perceptual potential, which they discovered to be a way of coming to terms with their own lives and the world around them.

Similarly to her predecessors, Lee primarily works through a highly personalized artistic facture. Lee made furtherance by proceeding to work on 'the unexpected' (the accidental elements) merged with something definite (the photographed subject). Ultimately, Lee carefully intervenes as she attentively let things go. Seen from a certain perspective, it is a risky undertaking. In a similar vein, Kim Taek Sang, who claims that his own work was strongly inspired by the Dansaekhwa artists (his contemporaries were taught by many of the Dansaekhwa artists) and "comfortably works in the danger zone between artistic control and natural evolvment given by the choice of materials and medium".<sup>2</sup> Kim dyes his canvas in many overlapping layers of coloured pigments and lets natural elements such as the wind, sunlight and gravity be a part of the drying process for every layer. The result is a glow that is emitted from within the layers of colours. Both Kim and Lee's art intimately employ natural elements to bring their image together. In this way, there is an art historical correlation between Kim's choice of working with 'the uncontrollable' and Lee Jin Young's working with 'the unexpected'. Not only do her and Kim's work thrive in this "danger zone", but the aesthetics of their art and artistic consciousness grows and builds from this kind of process.

Curiously, it is the effect of the 'indefinite-ness' in Lee's works that viewers are drawn to, which primarily grows from the blending of the natural and accidental aspects into the work. Bringing the result of the merging of the accidental with the original subject matter into visualization gives Lee's work its delicate and indescribable sense of beauty. The artist works within these aesthetic principles to realise the intensity of her experience.

We all look at a scene in front of us and whatever captivates us about it is because of how we perceive it in that moment of our lives, which coincides with a moment of the natural world outside us that we cannot possibly control. We may be able to control our thoughts, memories and emotions, but it is absolutely impossible to control that particular scene from happening in front of us. Lee Jin Young makes this phenomenon - her visual and emotional experience merged with chance - into art. Intangible elements like the sky, air, light and wind hold and fill Lee's perceptual experience in the transparent layers of her ambrotypes. Their blurry delicateness is what Lee portrays as art; it completes our perception.

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<sup>2</sup> Ilgen, Fre, *Artist? The Hypothesis of Bodiness* (Ernst Wasmuth Verlag GmbH & Co. Tübingen, 2013), p.194