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KANG SEUNG LEE, *Untitled* (Tseng Kwong Chi, Bordeaux, France, 1985), 2021, graphite on paper, 51 x 51 x 4 cm. Photo by Paul Salvesson. Courtesy Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.



Portrait of KANG SEUNG LEE. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Hyundai, Seoul.



Hand-Body Connection KANG SEUNG LEE

BY GÖKCAN DEMİRKAZIK

Kang Seung Lee's practice could be considered the artistic equivalent of alchemy. While all artists conjure ideas, feelings, and perceptions in works of art, Lee's attempts at recreating historical photographs, artworks, and personal traces of predominantly queer artists' lives involve cross-media experimentations based on his rethinking of both the matter and the spirit of the original source. Once combined with the artist's conspicuous yet exactly conceived and executed sense of "touch," Lee's interventions reveal themselves to be no less magical than the transformation of molten alloys into gold.

Born in Seoul and now based in Los Angeles, Lee has taken the life and artistic legacy of Hong Kong-born artist Tseng Kwong Chi (1950–90) as the primary component of a recent body of work, spanning the series *Untitled (TKC)* (2019–20) and others. Tseng, a self-described "inquisitive traveler, a witness of [his] time, and an ambiguous ambassador," moved to New York in 1978 and mingled with the flourishing queer scene downtown, where he became quite close with Keith Haring, among others, and shared many of his peers' tragic fate when he died from AIDS-related complications in 1990. Beyond his photographs of Haring and their circle, Tseng's most well-known images belong to the playfully titled series *East Meets West* (1979–89). In these self-portraits, the artist wears a Zhongshan (or "Mao") suit and reflective sunglasses as he poses with a culturally significant or natural heritage site in the "West." Lee, for his series, takes these photographs and renders them in painstaking photorealistic detail in pencil, but with a twist: in almost all of the drawings based on *East Meets West* (and other photographs by Tseng), the subject has evaporated into thin air, rendered with gentle swirls of an unidentifiable, ether-like matter.

There are, however, significant exceptions to the figure's dematerialization in Lee's drawings. If Tseng is holding a shutter-release cable or has an ID picture attached to his left breast pocket in the original photograph, Lee leaves these elements behind. As both ostensibly relate to the practice of image-making, the objects' presence further marks Tseng's vanished body as absent. The exacerbation of the artist's disappearance from his own pictures is in keeping with the spirit of *East Meets West*: just as the global tourism industry has reduced major cities to a standardized tour of iconic landmarks (the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame in Paris, the Colosseum in Rome, for example) and mass-produced souvenirs, so the Chinese artist effaced

himself behind the cliché persona of "a follower of Mao" in the xenophobic, anti-communist "Western" mind—a relevant gesture today, given the resurgence of anti-Asian racism especially in the United States and Europe.

While Tseng may have sought to neutralize a kitsch vision of the "West" with an equally tacky vision of the "East," Lee returns the viewer's attention to the originator of the photograph and to the fact of his unintended erasure from art-historical chronicles of the time. Lee's formal gesture of disappearing Tseng's body from the photographs counters the late artist's historical invisibility by an almost curative process, unleashing a host of other symbolically laden associations. Tseng's vanishing from his self-portraits nods at the fact that AIDS is an auto-immune disease in which the body's system turns against itself. The gesture also laments the extended official invisibility of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the US, as for much of the 1980s, while the virus wrecked communities across the country, politicians including President Reagan looked away from the issue.

The fact that Lee has chosen drawing as his "medium of translation" is extremely consequential, as drawings more readily give away the "hand" of the artist. His recreation of Tseng's photographs implicitly acknowledges the sheer impossibility of the task: indeed, each time Lee transliterates a shaded area in a Tseng photograph into a series of hatchings and cross-hatchings, he exercises the agency of replacing what is indexically "there" in the photograph with an approximation modulated by his own hand, while allowing idiosyncratic flourishes that respond to the spirit of each image. In this way, Lee's works not only reassert marginalized figures or bodies of work from the point of view of history-writing into collective memory, but they also enter into a full-bodied creative dialogue with their subject matter.

This connection is clear from Lee's most recent works rooted in Tseng's oeuvre and those of other queer icons of the period, from Haring to photographer Peter Hujar. For instance, in *Untitled (Avram Finkelstein, Journal Notes, Sketches for Poster)* (2020), Lee recreates pages from the journal of one of the designers of the famous ACT UP logotype with the pink triangle, "SILENCE = DEATH." For *Julie Tolentino, Archive in Dirt* (2020), he exchanged drawing for a more unconventional medium by re-potting a cactus graft from the eponymous queer artist—who had acquired the "mother" cactus from the residence of the assassinated gay-rights advocate Harvey Milk—in a

ceramic pot he made out of clay harvested from queer filmmaker Derek Jarman's cottage in rural England and Namsan Park in Seoul, a storied cruising spot.

For his work shown in the 2021 group exhibition "Close to You" at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, in addition to intervening into Tseng's self-portraits with even more overtly kitsch motifs (such as a gigantic bottle of wine in Bordeaux), Lee focused on rendering the reverse sides of framed Tseng photographs, or on his self-portraits with friends such as Haring or former dancer and designer Shawn McQuate, or his sister Muna, a choreographer and dancer. In one drawing we see a handwritten name, "Juan Rivera," next to the typed label information from the back of Tseng's photograph *Monument Valley, Arizona* (1987) and in another drawing, an inscription in cursive that reads "For Keith and Juan/Happy New Year/1984" found on the framed back of Tseng's *Disneyland, California* (1979). These traces register Tseng's position in a close-knit network of queer kinship and creative exchange, as well as Lee's own desire to put himself in their proximity.

Lee's signature interventions take on a melancholy, grief-struck tone and resonate across other artists' pathos-filled excavations of a paradise lost to another epidemic a generation ago. Though, like some of his own peers, Lee treads the line of fetishizing the life and times of queer predecessors, his works are at their strongest when combining a self-reflexive, even whimsical attitude with his alchemical drive to transubstantiate artistic matter. To this end, *Untitled (Tseng Kwong Chi, Monument Valley, Arizona, 1987, detail)* (2021) reproduces and magnifies details like the name "Juan Rivera" in a way that admits to the irretrievability of personal relationships and physical intimacy—no matter how deep we dig.

The disappearance of the physical body over time is a point that Lee pushes further in *Untitled (SLUTFORART)* (2021), which isolates the T-shirt emblazoned with Tseng's motto photographed in Tseng's self-portrait. Lee transforms the garment into a black-and-white painting on a piece of wood cut like an old-fashioned street sign, without showing Tseng's head or the rest of his upper body. In keeping with Tseng's playful approach, Lee's *Untitled (SLUTFORART)* hardly comes across as a relic or an icon to be venerated. Instead, the work reminds the viewer that the passage of time may render an artist quasi-anonymous, but the desires that fuel their work, all but symbolically contained in the contours of a carnal body, will live on in the most unexpected ways.