

# Formal Marks and Figurative Traces: Recent Paintings by Lee Yeol

Robert C. Morgan

Lee Yeol is an abstract painter and a resident of Seoul. His paintings carry a strong formal acuity with traces of figuration woven into their structure. In his formative years, he studied with two of the most important members of the monochrome movement, Park Seo Bo and Ha Chong-hyun. What sets Lee apart from these towering mentors is his continued dedication to the signifying power of the sudden gesture as a formal means in constructing a painting. His recent mid-career exhibition at the Kumho Museum in Seoul covered all four floors of the building offered a significant opportunity to study work of the past decade with concentrated attention. As is often the case, a cursory glance at these paintings may give one impression, while a more considered examination of Lee's work will open new "doors of perception" (to quote Aldous Huxley) that may not have obvious at the outset.

I would like to suggest that in relation to his mentors, Park and Ha, there is more evidence of a shamanist impulse in his work. But in the case of Lee Yeol, I see no conflict between shamanist content and formal structure. They are somehow wound into the fabric of his pictorial idea. There is no dualism in Lee's work. Rather there is a quite subsuming force that allows the viewer's entry into his paintings to become one of serene exaltation.

My initial impulse upon seeing Lee's work was to focus on the framing edge, which, of course, reveals his attention to how and where the gesture is placed within the marked edges of the painting. This suggests that the framing edge, more or less controls the manner in which the surface is being constructed despite the looseness of Lee's vibrant, primarily earth-hues brushstrokes. As example, I would cite the paintings shown primarily on the second floor of the Kumho Museum as having this quality. It is a definitive quality where the edges virtually define the spatial limits of the painting. In this sense, Lee Yeol works with an idea employed by the abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman where the vertical "zip" on the surface alluded to the painting's structural support

As with many Korean painters, the artist titles his paintings, not in terms of a specific work but according to the name of a series. Because the titles do not indicate a number in the series, it becomes frustrating to allude to a specific work other than through description. The paintings to which I refer are a suite of six medium-scaled works, painted with gestural earth colors. Each painting has marked bands along the edges that refer directly to the framing edge. The general title of these works is *Evolutionary Space – Variable*. Another large painting – not specifically part of the group of six on the second floor at Kumho – reflects a similar progress, again using earth colors, such as ochre, umber, and sienna, with black and white. The specific painting I would like to cite is from 2012. It is large with an asymmetrical balance. Most of the shapes on the surface congregate on the left half while the right half is essentially empty. The sustaining factor that holds the painting together is the network of stokes that cling to the four edges of the painting's surface. The repetition of these bars signals the painting's

evolution as it seeks to find a resolution. Within the causation of this evolution, however, is also the theme of shamanism, that is, figurations and portraits that are difficult to discern in exact terms, but nonetheless present.

Despite Lee's formality in his *Evolutionary Space – Variable series*, there is another aspect to his work that some observers may find more intriguing than the formal apparatus employed by the artist. This refers to the subtle references to figures and portraits enmeshed within the forms and gestures that appear to emerge from some kind of unconscious impulse. The large painting previously described has some of this as well as an earlier painting from the same series done in 2003. Another intriguing example would be the large pale blue form in a painting from 2012 in which a closer view reveals the appearance of repetitive spermatozoa, suggesting a pool of water in which future life is in the process of emerging. The optimism contained within this painting is inexorably present, which also suggests the vital aspect of the shaman's impulse – to offer the sign of life through painting.

What might add that this painting suggests a new direction in Lee's work, not simply as a formalist color field painter, but another way of constructing a surface that moved within the painting edge rather than cling to it as most of the work in this exhibition implies. Even so, there were some beautiful and resilient paintings shown at the Kumho exhibition, paintings that reveal a depth of thought and perception that moves through the layers of paint and the defining of forms, which manage to remain loose enough to allow the unconscious to emerge – both animal and humanoid

forms. This is what suggests the trace of ancestry in relation to the formal apparatus that Lee Yeol so diligently applies in his practice as a painter.