

YOUNG-SE LEE

by Yvonne Tan

For much of his career, the artist Young-Se Lee (b 1956, Seoul), who now lives in France, has been dedicated to giving a contemporary spin to an art form that is deeply rooted in his Korean homeland. He has adapted traditional stamping techniques by using handmade *hanji* (mulberry) paper to intensify their characteristics. Nature is his primary source of inspiration as he contemplates the raw textures of water, earth, rock and bark, by emphasising their complexities. Moistening the paper in ink and water, he applies it on wood-blocked surfaces incised with granular impressions. The abstract, almost primitive motifs appearing on the paper's surface when it dries are complemented by using colour, natural ink, gouache and acrylic to create a new art form.

Young-Se Lee left South Korea for France with his family at an early age and was also educated there. When living in France, he became aware that to be an artist he had to be thoroughly at one with the French artistic tradition. Yet he was always conscious of his roots.

As a young boy, he had started painting with his father, the artist Ungno Lee (1904-1989), and was later introduced to stamping techniques derived from the ancient practice of copying carved inscriptions from stone stelae. Joining his father's studio in 1984, he began adapting them by honouring tradition while simultaneously embracing innovation. He has since been identified almost exclusively with this art form. Young-se Lee, who embodies the artistic traditions of both Korea and France, discusses the approach to his work from his studio in Vaux-sur-Seine.

Asian Art Newspaper: Why did your parents migrate to France?

Young-Se Lee: At the time, in the 1950s, it was quite normal for South Koreans to head for the US. That was my parents' original intention. They only transited in France because my father had been invited to Paris by the art historian and critic, Jacques Lassaigne, who later became the chief curator of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Museum of Modern Art, Paris) from 1971 to 1978. We arrived in Paris in 1958, before going on to Germany for a year. However, Jacques Lassaigne managed to persuade my father that our place was in France and that we should return and stay there indefinitely.



Reflets d'hiver (2022), ink, acrylic, vegetal and mineral pigments on hanji paper, 135 x 135 cm, courtesy Galerie Vazieux



Young-se Lee, courtesy Galerie Vazieux. Photo: Philippe Matsas © Young-se Lee



Detail showing texture of the work, courtesy Galerie Vazieux. Photo: Philippe Matsas © Young-se Lee

AAN: Do you remember your early childhood and whether it had any impact on your subsequent artistic development?

YSL: I was two when I arrived in France with my parents who were both artists. So I had my entire formal education, from kindergarten to college, in France. Through his connections with Jacques Lassaigne, my father had met Paul Facchetti, a gallerist who specialised in lyrical abstraction. In 1962, my father exhibited for the first time at the Facchetti Gallery. His collages were mainly composed from women's newspapers and magazines such as *Elle* or *Marie Claire* that he had collected. These newspapers were crumpled, mixed with Korean hanji paper made from the mulberry tree, and finally stuck on the surface. The practice of collage and crumpling interested me, and I spent long



Mer céleste (2022), ink, gouache, acrylic on hanji paper, 135 x 135 cm, courtesy Galerie Vazieux

Korean *Hangeul* alphabet. He was impressed when I managed to assimilate the entire alphabet in only one week. Almost immediately after, I started to learn Chinese ideograms. Then, I spent the rest of my time with an aunt of my father's family in the countryside, in Sudoksa, near Hong-seung, my father's birthplace. There I discovered the local craft such as the manufacture of thatch for roofing, objects for funeral rites, and traditional pottery, among others. All of these were of a prolific nature, which unfortunately have disappeared today. The discovery of ancient traditions, rites, and rituals left its mark on me, in the sense that I was made aware that being resourceful was part of everyone's daily life. We had to make or create objects with very little means. Today, unconsciously, I find these traits in my way of working.

AAN: In retrospect, how do you view those years in South Korea?

YSL: We encountered enormous difficulties during that time. My mother was released six months later, but my father was sentenced to death. Then the sentence was commuted to 15 years, and finally he served three years before being granted a pardon thanks to international pressure. Remembering only the positive aspects, the experience left me becoming acquainted with my Confucian heritage, as well as my origins and roots. My stay in the countryside and my discovery of ancient traditions, allowed me to reappropriate the rites and rituals of our ancestors, to finally apply them in my artistic creations, blending the two cultures, East and West.

AAN: What aspects helped you readjust to living in France when you returned?

YSL: Actually, I had spent more than 10 years in France before our move back to South Korea. When I returned to France in 1969-1970, having made progress in the Korean language (thanks to my grandfather), I was able to communicate better with my father (who was 50 years my senior), which was not the case before. I felt that I could no longer live in South Korea, because the customs and the ways of thinking there are so different from those in the West. Nevertheless, I remain attached to my roots: I use Korean hanji paper, as well as vegetal and mineral colours in my artwork. And from that time, I never stopped being interested in painting. Those years in South Korea taught me to appreciate that everything is possible.

AAN: How did you immerse yourself in the French artistic tradition on your return to France?

YSL: When I was seventeen, I attended a private school, the



Aube Sereine (202), ink, acrylic, vegetal and mineral pigments on hanji paper, 95 x 95 cm, courtesy Galerie Vazieux

Ecole d'Arts Graphiques (School of Graphic Art), MET Penninghen in Paris, which teaches the various drawing techniques as well as poster art, design, decorative and fine art. Still life, Western calligraphy, interior architecture were also part of the curriculum. Moreover its students are trained to pass the entrance examination to the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Appliqués et des Métiers d'Art (School of Applied Art and of Arts and Crafts), Olivier Serres. I gained admission in 1975, going there primarily to improve myself. Among its disciplines, I was drawn to interior design, but it did not suit me. I then attended the engraving workshop to perfect dry point and chisel techniques along with mezzotint techniques. I was also drawn to lithography and serigraphy, as I often accompanied my father to the prestigious Imprimerie Mourlot in Montparnasse to assist him in making lithographs. The master printer at the time, Fernand Mourlot (1895-1988), was – and still is – synonymous with reviving lithography as a painter's medium of expression and was much sought after by Chagall, Matisse, Léger, Giacometti and Picasso, among others.

Meanwhile, I was practising wood engraving and wood sculpture with my father; an 'apprenticeship' which allowed me to compare the various Western and Eastern engraving techniques. In my mind, I retained the eastern vision of the world, based on the concepts of emptiness and fullness, Yin and Yang. The Western view of the world of challenge and response was not so remote after all. Ultimately, for me personally, the two cultures came together, only the mode of expression and the use of materials differed.

AAN: Then you headed for the Académie de la Grande Chaumière?

YSL: Yes. The Academy had opened in 1870 and was thriving at the beginning of the 20th century. Its golden years were between 1910-1940. However, it was taken over by the Charpentier family in 1957. It houses two workshops, one for painting and the other for drawing. It is distinguished because well-known and contemporary 20th-century artists such as Pierre Soulages, Tsuguharu 'Leonard' Foujita and Zao Wou-ki had attended. I spent two years improving my drawing and sketching techniques that are essential for painting, engraving, and sculpture. I was also preparing for the entrance examination to the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (School of Fine Art).

AAN: What was your impression of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts?

YSL: I remember a comment from a member of the jury at the interview. Upon seeing my work he said 'I am asking you one question; why do you want to study at the Beaux-Arts?'



Rosée Matinale (1989), ink, vegetal and mineral pigments, gouache on hanji paper, 194.5 x 190.5 cm, courtesy Galerie Vazieux

I responded by saying, 'I still have a lot to learn. I know that I have much to learn'. That seemed to be a satisfactory answer. Actually, I wanted to learn more about the history of art and of engravings. The basics of drawing were very important to me because I knew that as an artist I had to master the many different techniques of Western painting. The training in the applied arts there also provided technical aspects. Later I spent more time drawing and sketching and in the engraving workshop, as well as in the amphitheatre to take art history lessons.

AAN: What happened after your stint at the Beaux-Arts?

YSL: Around 1984, I joined my father in his studio to share a new way of expressing myself. I began to sculpt my first totems and also embarked on my early experiments with stamping. At the same time, I started to learn Chinese calligraphy and began slowly returning to my Korean heritage artistically. My first works of art were therefore between east and west. Oil paintings, watercolours, engravings, representation of the female nude, still life and paintings.

AAN: How are your stamped works different from your father's?

YSL: My father used a cotton or wool pad soaked in ink or colour and applied it on the paper by friction, by rubbing. The relief that appeared was very subtle as the method was used originally on funerary stone stelae to capture their carved inscriptions. However, I came up with the idea of using a wooden block for stamping with moistened and coloured hanji strips of paper.

I would run through the entire surface with a brush to obtain a relief until it intensifies and leave it to dry. My paper is mostly mixed with gouache, and very often I incorporate Korean vegetal and mineral colours. These are pigments that are found in the shape of sticks which can be diluted on a palette as one can with watercolours. The colours also feature in traditional, classical Korean painting. The mixture of pigments gives an unexpected hue to the finished work by adding an infinite variety of colours. At the finishing stage I may use a small amount of acrylic. I have been practising this technique for almost 40 years. Over time, I tried various expressions, sometimes with a little relief, sometimes more.

AAN: What is the 'wood matrix' that you often refer to?

YSL: It actually resembles a mould. In the beginning, I tended to favour oak and pine beams. I also like old, discarded carved doors found primarily in demolition sites because they make good matrices. Because the wood is old, it has a certain patina and character enabling me to obtain an interesting worn or polished look over time. Ultimately it enables me to wed the ancient and the contemporary in my work. Each time it is a journey of discovery, both for me personally, in the end, it will be a long inner quest, so it is necessary to keep only the essentials.

AAN: Your hanji paper presumably comes from Korea? How is it made?

YSL: Hanji paper is made from the mulberry tree, which is called *dak* in Korean. *Dak ji* means mulberry paper made from the bark's fibres

which involves a long and tedious process. First, only the tree's strongest branches are selected to be skinned and dried. They are then washed and cleaned before being bleached in the sun. These branches have been cultivated throughout the year, but are only harvested in the winter as the summer heat and high humidity in Korea might cause them to ferment. They are boiled by steaming, to remove the black bark from the branches in order to retain only the insides. A second boiling is necessary with the plant ashes being washed away in running water to whiten the fibres. Then the material is pounded and mixed in large rectangular tanks. It is finally filtered by means of a sieve and then dried individually – sheet by sheet. It requires a lifetime to perfect the process of making *dak ji* which attests to its enormous cultural significance in Korea.

AAN: Are there different *dak ji* formats?

YSL: *Dak ji* is highly durable, its texture, quality, and thickness being the result of great craftsmanship. There are a large number of formats ranging from medium to very large which can support thicknesses varying from very thin to thick. The format I often use measures 145 cm by 75 cm, but occasionally I might go for the larger 200 cm by 150 cm version. What I ultimately select cannot be too thick but it must have a certain resilience, yet be malleable enough to react to the pressure exerted on it by my brushes to render the underlying reliefs.

AAN: How do you achieve the textured effects on the surface of your paintings?

YSL: As mentioned I had been practising wood carving with my father. By the late 1980s, I was experimenting with various geometric shapes in my stamping techniques. *Rosée Matinale/Morning Dew* (1989) belonged to a series called *Villes/Cities*, evoking dense urban landscapes whose impressions were created by using wooden sculptures, totems and trellised panels for reference. It was actually painted in homage to my father who passed away that year. I wanted to express the resurgence after death. It was also an ode to joy.

AAN: What are your art forms intending to say?

YSL: It is not easy for me to comment. In general my art works speak for themselves. For instance, *Aube Sereine/Calm Dawn* (2021) was part of a series made for the Art Paris Art in 2021. This particular work is characterised by the dominance of Prussian blue gouache, a blue vegetal colour I usually use to make traditional paintings. I attempted to express the encounter between East and West, to alert the viewer to tiny features in black and white within the overall blue monochrome. This was a process that I had experimented on already in the 2010s. *Mer Céleste/Celestial Sea* (2022) represents the reflections which are the mirror of the soul. The deep blue, almost black, background expresses the abyss where light – in white specks of acrylic – gradually appear. I use gouache and acrylic and not much ink for my vision of the universe, veering towards that conceived by the west. However, the earthly forces calling out are mineral desert and sand dunes in *Reflets d'Hiver/*

Flashes of Winter (2022). As one way to reinterpret nature, vegetal colour is spread over an earthen ochre ground. I ask if there are oases or villages appearing here and there? The gradations of space along the sides are calculated to shift the focus to the centre and accentuate this effect.

AAN: You have been working from your studio in Vaux-sur-Seine for almost 30 years. Why did you choose to have your studio there?

YSL: For almost 10 years – since the 1980s – my family had been looking for a studio in the Yvelines, on the hillsides of the Seine Valley in the north central part of France. By a combination of circumstances, an architect friend living near Vaux, helped us to discover the house of Emilio Boggio (1859-1920), a Venezuelan painter, who lived there from the late 19th century. We liked the place, because it was artistically and historically significant – it was where the impressionists had previously settled. Moreover the views of the Seine from the studio were amazing. My mother finally acquired the property in 1992. Then she decided to ship a traditional Korean house from South Korea! After the entire house arrived – dismantled – it was built on-site, following the rules of geomancy, in only four months. In 2007, the architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte, whom we had met in South Korea, rehabilitated the smaller house of the janitor upstream. Two years later, the construction of the downstream workshop began. The inauguration took place in 2014 and since then we have had a little piece of Korea in France.

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