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Li Lin Lee Interview

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*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Winter quarter 2010 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*  

**Artist Biography**  
Li Lin Lee is a self-taught painter who over the years has attended many exhibitions. Many of his earlier exhibitions had his group panel paintings while later ones displayed solo works. Born in Jakarta, Indonesia, he studied biochemistry at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania. He has traveled many places in Southeast Asia. Among his solo exhibitions: *Symbiology and Urban Archaeology* (ex. below) was displayed at Walsh Gallery in Chicago in 2001 and 2008 respectively.
How did you start your career as an artist, as in what made you want to become an artist?

It’s pretty much making art pretty much ever since I was a child. It seems quite natural to me. Even though I didn’t study art when I went to college and when I was in high school I had no intention of ever being an artist. But somehow, after college, it seemed very natural to turn to art making as something I knew how to do. I guess it was something I recognize, something I knew that I could do. When I came to Chicago, it was the point where I realized that you could actually become a full-time serious artist. I didn’t even know that it was possible when I was growing up. When I came here, and I went to the galleries and saw the shows, I realized that there were some very serious people working. That attracted me immensely. With a lot of encouragement from my wife, I realized that maybe I could give it a try, something that I have that I could offer. That’s how I decided to start painting. That was back at around 1983 or ’85.

What made you want to come to Chicago?

I came here mainly because my sister lives here. She was encouraging my wife and me to come here after we married. I was raised in Pittsburgh. We came out here just to take a look-see. I was just floored with how beautiful this city was and how everything about it was so exciting. It was all the amenities of a big city without the negative parts of it and a lot of culture. So we decided really quickly to move here.

Is there anything particular that influenced your work?

I’m not involved in the arts community in Chicago. Actually I’m not involved in arts communities anywhere. Mainly I was more influenced by European art or I should say I’m more interested in European art.

What is it about European art that attracted you as opposed to American art?
It is probably more cerebral, less in-your-face, less aggressive, more considered, more thought out. On contemporary American art, it’s very loud, aggressive, very much about courting fame whereas the European art is more philosophical about it. It is the philosophical approach to art is what attracts me. The inherent existential aspects of making art are what attract me. Since existentialism was invented in Europe, in France. I think the Europeans seem to have more of an understanding of those aspects of human existence. Americans are more; where it doesn’t surprise us that we would bring about a person like Andy Warhol. That kind of approach to art doesn’t interest me at all.

You’ve attended many exhibitions in the past, were there any exhibitions that you particularly liked?

No, I think I’m generally excited with all my exhibitions. To me exhibitions are just showing people that are interested in your work what you’ve been doing for the last couple years. That’s all I see it as. It’s kind of nice to be able to just almost like where you’ve been in inside hole or cave for a long time and you come out in light of day and you show everybody what you’ve been doing, and everyone’s excited and you go back to your cave.

What about works that you’ve enjoyed making over the years?

Well, I love being in the studio, that’s one of the things that I think the whole point of it all is. I love that life in the studio, it almost doesn’t matter what I make. The works almost birth themselves in a way. I try to be organized and think of myself as working on a project. But the fact is I noticed for the last twenty-five to thirty years that I’ve been doing this that really it just comes about, it forms itself. Sometimes I don’t even know how it happened. My main thing is that it’s the experience in the studio that makes the whole experience right there for me. Being in there every day, painting, creating this thing is so fascinating to me, and even after all these years I find that whole process so fascinating.

Did your background and all the places you travelled in Southeast Asia and anywhere else influence on your work?

Oh, huge, I think it influenced in a very big way. In fact, I think it never left me. I was born in Jakarta, Indonesia, and then when I was about three or four we moved to Hong Kong and lived there a couple years before moving to America. I don’t remember much about Indonesia, but Hong Kong had a really deep impression on me. I think Hong Kong kind of made its way to my heart, my soul. And even when I moved to America, growing up in the suburbs in Pittsburgh where there were absolutely no Asians, no Chinese restaurants, no Chinese people, we were completely alone. I don’t know if you grew in up Chicago, you grew up near Chinatown, so you grew up with this strong sense of self by being with these Chinese people, Chinese restaurant, Chinese food, Chinese culture, but I grew up with none of that, the completely opposite of that. And not only that, it was during the Vietnam War, so for me, somehow in my mind, I know a lot
when I was growing up, at that time, when I occasionally meet the occasional Asian kid, a lot of them had turned their backs on their heritage, their culture. That troubled me, puzzled me, my whole Hong Kong experience became my, you know, when a memory takes on a larger meaning, almost like a heavier, weightier meaning. That’s what Hong Kong was to me. So at that time in the late 50s in Hong Kong, Hong Kong was a cool place. Of course culturally it had the hustle-bustle of the city, it didn’t have that much art, but it had a lot of Chinese lifestyle-type things. The fashions, what people were wearing, their homes, the music that was in the air. It was a very international place; you could hear western music, music from America, music from Europe, lots of jazz. My parents were out a lot so I was exposed to the excitement even though I was very young at around four or five. There was great food. That just stayed with me because growing up in Pennsylvania there was covered bridges and Amish people. And my father was a Presbyterian minister so I grew up mostly in a church so it was very different. So Hong Kong for me became this magical or secret, almost, that I kept with me for my whole life. This is kind of funny because, you’d think that I would try to go back and make a life for me there but I never did. I visited there once. But that time, a lot of the stuff at that time influences all of my interests in things. So my art and the colors, people always tell me, “Oh, the colors are so unusual.” But I think a lot of those colors come from Hong Kong.

Earlier you said that the studio was great part in your making your art, so you’re thinking of the colors, and thinking about Hong Kong.

Well I mean, I don’t think about Hong Kong, at least I’m not consciously trying to bring Hong Kong into my work. But I think Hong Kong is always in my heart. I don’t know if you’ve ever saw this movie, I saw it recently, a friend just recommended to me, it’s called In the mood for love by Wong Kar Wai. I met Wong Kar Wai a couple years ago actually here in Chicago. He had just made that movie and when I saw it, it takes place in the early 60s in Hong Kong. It’s a love story, but it’s very unusual, typical Chinese love story. But the visuals! When I saw that movie, it just brought me back. I remember all the dresses the women wore, I remember the music, and I remember this and that. And I realize, I think about that stuff all the time! I didn’t realize that I think that much about it. Even to this very day, even my musical choices are informed by that experience there. You could hear American rock and roll, but you could also hear Brazilian samba music, European jazz, Chinese music of course; classical Chinese music as well as pop Chinese. And it’s even more amazing, even more stimulating that New York even.

You have said your art has a more randomness, or how it flows out while you’re in the studio, so it doesn’t have a particular direction that you want to visualize.

No, not an intellectual direction and not like a game plan. That’s another thing about today’s art; a lot of the artists today make it from a very premeditative way. They already know what they are going to do and they do it. And of course part of the reason why they do it that way is because lots artists nowadays uses computer to make art, either by actually using the computer to make it or getting ideas from the computer and so this makes the work really premeditative, very
planned, very staged. While I think that produces some very interesting things I have no interest in that. I am more interested in the mysteries of art. I think when you make art that is mysterious is when it really interests me. When you make art premeditative, when you preplan it, you take all the mystery out of it. So for me it is very important to keep the mystery in place.

**Do you have these times when you have a writer’s block, where you can’t decide what to paint next?**

Making art for me is not a fast process, it’s a very slow. It is very difficult for me. There are times when it takes weeks to make one art, or one form, so given that that’s how I work anyway it’s almost like I’m constantly working on a writer’s block. It’s an uphill struggle for me. Even though I’m essentially by nature, an optimistic person, for some reason, it’s very difficult, philosophically difficult for me to make art. Art is a very profound, like I said earlier, like a very existential proposition. It’s mysterious, it’s full of doubt and yet it’s the ultimate human expression in a way. In the way you’re writing, or painting, drawing, or whatever, even photographing it’s like the ultimate human expression. So all the human questions of humanity come with that, while I’m making it, what does it mean while I’m making it? What does it mean for us to be alive? What’s the point of everything, of anything? These questions are in front of me when I’m making work. I think that’s why it is so difficult for me. Because I’m optimistic essentially, I always come out of it you know, with something like, “Well I made it through this time.”

**In your biography, it said that you decided to switch from the group panel artwork to solo pieces. What made you decide to make that shift?**

Well the critic made a bigger deal out of my switching than it was. I basically just do whatever and wherever it takes me so it’s not really like I’m one of these artists that are like, “Oh my god…right now I’m doing this everybody”, it’s not like that, It’s just like you pedal around with something studio for a long time and that’s what you have to show. I’m usually working on many pieces simultaneously, some large, some small.

**How do you decide on the names of your pieces?**

I don’t know, people have always asked me that. I think that part of it is the picture itself. My pictures are thematic; they’re not representational pictures really. After I’m done with them, I look at the pictures and then whatever it is that they kind of remind me of, that helps me name the picture. But I also keep this little journal of what I call word poems that I’ve been writing for 15 years and I get a lot of the titles from that. From my word poems and those usually come from very abstract haikus.

**So that’s another form of art you’re working on?**
Yea, well I don’t know if it’s art. My brother’s a poet and he writes poems. So I’ve always been hesitant to consider them poems, I don’t know if they are. Oftentimes they’re just verbal expressions and I like to bring some of that into the painting itself so I title the paintings provocatively so that people can read the titles. The titles kind of make you think about them more.

**Most of your work is on these boards, no sculptures or other mediums?**

Right now I’m painting on these panels but generally I paint oil on canvas.

**What do you view art as, is it a visual representation of a statement of some kind?**

Making art, for me is raising questions and not really answering anything. After many years of working on art, it is a perfect way in searching for yourself. But for me too, the longer I make art, especially the way I make it is so special, so personal, I’m making an art that is not so much as a personal identity but a collective identity as a human being. It is not for the expressing of political ideas or a personal statement for expressing myself as a Chinese, American, husband, or father. It is none of that. This collective being question is a personal and intuitive question on what is the collective identity as human beings.

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