

*The surface of a mirror*

**LEE KIT  
YEWON LEE  
KARYN NAKAMURA**

14 March – 20 April 2024

The remarkably handsome and enigmatic Jean Marais lies asleep/unconscious beside, and is reflected within, a sandy, muddied pool. Jean Cocteau, Marais' lover and mentor took the tender publicity shot in 1949 for his cinematic masterpiece, *Orphée*, an irrepressible image that re-surfaced on The Smith's equally classic 1983 7" vinyl, 'This Charming Man'. Clunk, scratch, hiss: The guitars jangle into life and the equally enigmatic and uniformly laconic Morrissey hits the front... The mere mention of which, for a particular demographic, instantly triggers the power of a synaptic YouTube broadcast: "*I would go out tonight,... but I haven't got a stitch to wear...*" I guess that's what societal mirrors do (oh God...the king is naked!).

With a gust of wind, Marais' image ripples, glitches and Orphée is left alone in the compound mud of the 'real' world. Cocteau wrote of the film: "*Orphée is a realistic film: or, to be more precise, observing Goethe's distinction between reality and truth, a film in which I express a truth particular [my emphasis] to myself*".<sup>ii</sup>

With touch, a reflection in water reveals itself volatile, a truth *particular* to self, fragile; similarly, with water inkstone becomes fluid. Becomes a brushstroke, becomes Yewon Lee's collage of 'indefinable creatures', a reflection not of a still object or person suspended in glass, but of all the cultural ripples and swimmings of a fluid consciousness. A bird with a worm. The hunter and the hunted. Creatures raging and creatures calm, caught and folded between abstract, watery brushstroke marks. A flow of greys and peeps of colour, a comic-fearsome tiger straight out of a *minhwa*<sup>iii</sup> painting and a teddy-bear-type cuddly rodent – go figure: Yewon Lee, a young Seoul artist employing traditional techniques in an irregular manner, rediscovering both heritage and themselves in London. Lee writes: "There is a difference between my identity defined and stipulated in Korea compared to London ... my identity, by which I define myself, is shape-shifting".<sup>iv</sup> Lee's 'truth particular' comes as an introspective fluid pool of action, in which the self refracts different shades of meaning and emotion with each passing moment. A monochrome-esque dune-scape of mutation, Orphée struggles as passing through liquid glass.

Intended as unseen, backs of ancient Chinese mirrors held etchings of the cosmos – the divinities that make and meld the universe with all its beings. One inscription reads: *the bright mirror, which reflects the figure, knows people's feelings*.<sup>v</sup> The mirror's enigma, all surface, glass, metal, paper-thin. Yet infinite, producing depth upon depth. Measuring up to it, the self seems at once far too expansive to be summed up neatly on so flimsy a material, and far too insignificant to be found among its endless translucent depths ... "*I would go out tonight...*"

Karyn Nakamura's extraordinary installation and performances, in the clothes of science – *temet nosce* – at MIT, Boston, find a way through the fabled *fabric of things*, towards the abstruse, removed, truth of art. Hard surfaces of redundant realities (obsolete equipment) dissolve into their own lack of purpose. Monitors, wires, tanks of water – water and electrics, *argh!* At MIT one unwitting spectator exclaimed 'oh God, that's me', as campus CCTV footage flits and splutters on one of Nakamura's screens.<sup>vi</sup> The pang of the moment is the recognition of a self, not as it stands whole, autonomous – its own prized possession – but of a self among the throes of other people. *So that is how I am seen when I am no longer looking at myself*. The king doesn't have a stitch to wear... An *untitled* Nakamura video sculpture shares liquids through distillation flasks, dropping clear fluid onto a severed video cable balanced in a wine glass on the floor. A momentary flicker of electrical recognition causes a glitched

message, akin to the reflex of the synaptic jukebox, to appear on a Jurassic CRT monitor. A small miracle of retro-action.

To turn from the mirror and acknowledge that the image spookily remains, living-on independently, Lee Kit transfers inkjet prints from the pretence of reality, creating a mirror image onto the 'permanence' of cardboard paintings. Snippets of texts accompany, often from the synaptic cannon of pop lyrics; the trashier the better (according to Lee Kit), yet sounding like philosophic pronouncement. Silhouettes and shapes of figures caught between the transience of air and temporary permanence of their own self/reflections. In a memorable work from 2015, *Portrait of a boy*, a 4x3 format of pale filmic blue projected light falls over a crumpled paper-transfer-painting of an enigmatic young man. The viewer reads Lee Kit's imprint as perhaps a martyred politician, a lost leader, a figurehead of faith? A personal reality (?)... In fact, the "boy" is an anonymous model from an in-flight magazine. An accompanying broken light fitting emanates no light, a cupboard door has no cupboard, but idly rests on the floor. "Life is what you make it". (More philosophical pop<sup>vii</sup>). Layers on layers, cardboard stretched over a frame like a canvas, its seeming-infinite dimples exposed: segments of societal materials withdrawn, slowed-down, offering pause for reflection. As if the palest and most everyday of images – and the quietest of pauses – might flash up in a moment of profound recognition.

In the 2018 Lee Kit painting, *The surface of a mirror*, from which the exhibition takes its title, the face of a figure appears fleetingly silhouetted against what might be a window frame, a stranger on a train? Distance is good, change of focal length alters perception: *Life is better in Taipei. I'm able to have a clear mind looking at Hong Kong from a certain distance. I don't have to get mad about everything that's happening in Hong Kong; not just in the art scene, but the society in general.*<sup>viii</sup>

A mirror distances, shows the I to be another<sup>ix</sup> "...without a stitch to wear"

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<sup>i</sup> Look that one up on eBay (Mint condition) *This Charming Man*, 1984, Lyrics: Johnny Marr/Steven Morrissey. © Universal Music Publishing, Inc.

<sup>ii</sup> Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) poet, novelist, playwright, artist, impresario, dandy, socialite ...  
Published posthumously, 'The Art of Cinema', Marion Boyars Publishers, 1992

<sup>iii</sup> Pendergrast, Mark, *Mirror, Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection*, United States: Basic Books, 2009

<sup>iv</sup> Yewon Lee's artist statement, RCA2023, <https://2023.rca.ac.uk/students/ye-won-lee/>

<sup>v</sup> Pendergrast, Mark, *Mirror, Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection*, United States: Basic Books, 2009

<sup>vi</sup> 'A Gutted Pub at MIT has Been Brought to Life as a Cybernetic Performance Site', *Boston Art Review*, <https://bostonartreview.com/reviews/mit-pub-performance-karyn-nakamura/>

<sup>vii</sup> Baby, life's what you make it / Can't escape it / Baby, yesterday's favourite / Don't you hate it /  
Baby life's what you make it / Don't back date it / Baby, don't try to shade it / **Beauty is naked** /  
Baby, life's what you make it / Celebrate it / Anticipate it / Yesterday's faded / Nothing can change it /  
Life's what you make it...  
A song by the British pop band, Talk Talk, released as a single 1985, EMI – Parlophone

<sup>viii</sup> 'Interview: Lee Kit', *post-ism*, <https://post-ism.com/2013/06/14/interview-lee-kit/>

<sup>ix</sup> Rimbaud, letter to Paul Demeny, Charleville, 15 May 1871

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Karyn Nakamura

*Digging*

Distillation flask, custom USB drive, USB extension cable, media player, HDMI cable, HDMI-RCA converter, severed RCA cable, wine glass, water, CRT TV

Dimensions variable, as installed: 190 x 160 x 60 cm

2023

Yewon Lee

*A note for the forgotten ones*

Ink and charcoal on collaged Hanji

70 x 60 x 3 cm

2023

Lee Kit

*The surface of a mirror*

Acrylic, emulsion paint, inkjet ink and pencil on cardboard

61 x 52.5 x 5 cm

2018

Karyn Nakamura

*Projector (NEC MultiSync VT580)*

Disassembled projector, incandescent light bulb, wire

84 x 38 x 38 cm

2023

Lee Kit

*It does matter*

Emulsion and acrylic on cardboard with bronzed pins

55 x 46 x 5 cm

2019

Yewon Lee

*A new toy that spins straight #1 #2*

Ink and charcoal on collaged Hanji

125 x 90 x 5 cm (two parts, 60 x 90 x 5 cm each)

2023

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Lee Kit (born Hong Kong, 1978, lives and works in Taipei) represented Hong Kong at the 55th Venice Biennale, with 'You (you).' (2013). Since then he has exhibited extensively; notable solo exhibitions include: *Retain a desolate face*, Kuandu Biennale 2022, Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei (2022); *Lovers on the Beach*, West Den Haag in the former American embassy, The Hague, The Netherlands (2021); *Resonance of a sad smile*, Artsonje Center, Seoul (2019); *We used to be more sensitive.*, Hara Museum, Tokyo (2018); *Linger on, your lit-up shade*, Casa Masaccio Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea, Tuscany (2018); *I didn't know that I was dead*, OCAT, Shenzhen (2018); *A small sound in your head*, S.M.A.K., Ghent (2016); *Hold your breath, dance slowly*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2016). In 2019, he participated in the 15th Lyon Biennale *Là où les eaux se mêlent*, *Where Water comes Together with Other Water* and *To Make Wrong / Right / Now*, the 2nd Honolulu Biennial. Other notable group exhibitions include: *Rehearsal*, Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (2018), *All watched over by machines of loving grace*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2017); *Generosity, The Art of Giving*, National Gallery in Prague (2016); *Hugo Boss Asia Art*, Rockbund Museum, Shanghai (2013); *The Ungovernables*, New Museum, New York (2012); *Print/Out*, MoMA, New York (2012) and *No Soul For Sale*, Tate Modern, London (2010). Recent solo exhibitions include *A blank stare like a gasp* at ShugoArts, Tokyo (2023); *Disco in the Museum – I'll Take (A)* at Hong-gah Museum, Taipei (2023) and *The Last Piece of Cloud* at TKG+, Taipei (2023). Lee Kit installed his first solo, site-made exhibition, *Please wait*, for mother's tankstation, Dublin, in 2015 and installed his second solo exhibition, *Banal*, in the Dublin gallery in November 2018. Lee Kit will have a solo exhibition at Fridericianum, Kassel in 2025.

Yewon Lee (born 1994, Seoul, Korea, lives and works in London and Seoul) studied oriental painting at Seoul National University, graduating with a BFA and MFA. Lee gradually expanded her art from traditional painting to contemporary art and completed an MA in Painting at the Royal College of Art, London in 2023. In addition to a solo show, *The crawling turtles*, Gallery Dos, Seoul (2018), her work has been exhibited in several group exhibitions including the Nottingham Biennale, UKYA CITY Takeover Nottingham, Surface Gallery (2019). Yewon Lee has noted that the main purpose of her work "...is to redefine and explore my identity at every moment, which is not a static settlement but a combination of various records of my life. The enigmatic animals in my artwork depict myself constantly shifting and evolving...". Yewon Lee was shortlisted for The Gilchrist-Fisher Award and Sir John Hurt Art Prize.

Karyn Nakamura (born 2001, Tokyo, Japan, lives in New York) is a self-confessed "technologist" and recent graduate of MIT with a B.S. in Art and Design (2023). Her work has taken the form of large-scale technical installations; a 400ft-wide, ten-story building projection; a three-month video performance occupying an abandoned Frank Gehry pub inside MIT's CS building, filled with 60 screens and transformed into a performative stage; a live sculpture of disassembled music hardware and monitors encapsulating a New York jazz duo, inside DOMICILE; a boutique in Tokyo. Nakamura's work has been exhibited at Tata Bookshop, Tokyo (2023), Compton Gallery, MIT, Cambridge (2022); MAPP, Montreal and Same Gallery, Tokyo (2022).