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The Perception of Things: Recent Drawings and Photographs by Evan Lee

Evan Lee: Drawing/Photography
Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver
October 13 – November 19, 2007

Charo Neville

Since Vancouver artist Evan Lee's 1998 graduate project at the University of British Columbia in which he shifted away from his previous focus on painting and drawing and presented a durational "performance" that involved dismantling his 1970 Contaflex camera, the artist has been steadily investigating the photographic medium and its possibilities. In his 2006 exhibition at Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver, *Evan Lee Captures: Selected Works*

1998-2006, he presented an image that showed all the bits of his camera as one of a series of works created by placing various objects directly on a flatbed scanner and then reproducing the captured images as giclee prints, a process which abandoned the camera as the intermediary altogether. Recognized as among the next group of "Vancouver School Artists" who have been referred to as the "post-photography" generation, Lee has consistently explored the possibilities of photography through his experiments in "camera-less photography," in conceptual street photo projects, found still-lives, and straight documentary photo projects.¹ In his recent exhibition at the Monte Clark Gallery, *Evan Lee: Drawing/Photography*, Lee makes an unexpected shift in his work with a return to drawing. But this exhibition of eighteen pencil drawings and two large-scale photographs is not a complete departure from photography, but rather, a further investigation into the medium as a tool for his practice and a means for understanding representation.

This new body of work diverges from Lee's previous work in that it functions as a personal study of his own family and cultural heritage; upon entering the small space of the one room gallery, the viewer is immediately struck by a large-scale photograph (giclee print on paper) of the artist's grandmother taken shortly before her passing in 2004. In this photograph, Lee shares an extremely intimate and personal moment of a frail and tired older Chinese woman lying in her bed surrounded by photographs of her family. The petite-ness of her frame is evident even through several layers of clothing and her frailty is revealed in the thinness of the skin of her wrist and hand, which rests by her face. One of the framed photographs on the shelf, which could be a hauntingly youthful version of Lee's grandmother, is a startling contrast to the now much older woman before us. While Lee's portrait of his grandmother is almost uncomfortably intimate, the photographs within the photograph and the multiple drawings of elderly Chinese women which fill the walls in the rest of the exhibition suggest a contradictory intellectual distance through the



Evan Lee, *Portrait of the Artist's Grandmother*, 2007, giclee print on archival paper, 96.5 x 122.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver.

artist's self-reflexive reference to the medium he uses and in the repetition of his subject.

At the same time that Lee seemingly breaks from his usual formats, this project is a continuation of his investigation into questions of representation and social, historical, economical, and cultural subjects through the depiction of the everyday. The eighteen drawings presented in the exhibition are selected from a total of fifty-four, created from a series of photographs Lee took of elderly Chinese women in Vancouver. As the exhibition press release notes, "realizing the individuality and uniqueness of each woman was lost in the photographs, Lee chose to invest more of himself through the act of durational drawing. This time and medium allowed him to work more closely with his subjects, imbuing them with distinct personalities through their gestures, clothing and postures."² The direct connection of pencil on paper, in some cases showing traces of marks that have been erased and re-traced, and Lee's perseverance, recording single, sometimes coupled, Chinese women in similar, only subtly varying acts—sitting at the bus stop, waiting for the bus, or in most instances, walking with a cane and carrying grocery bags—reveal the artist's attempt to know his subject first hand. Yet, it would be simplistic to conclude that the drawing process retains a sense of individuality or uniqueness in its subjects that "is lost in the photographs." In William Wood's essay for the Presentation House Gallery exhibition catalogue, he starts with a quote from Roland Barthes' 1981 *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, which is worth reproducing (in part) here again. Barthes contends:

Photography never lies; or rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature tendentious, never to its existence. Impotent with regard to general ideas (to fiction), its force



Evan Lee, *Old Woman 03*, 2007, graphite on paper, 53.3 x 43.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver.



Evan Lee, *Old Woman 07*, 2007, graphite on paper, 53.3 x 43.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver.

is nonetheless superior to everything the human mind can or can have conceived of to assure us of reality – but also this reality is never anything but a contingency (“so much, no more”).³

Just as Lee previously elicited the question, “If I use a scanner, is it photography?,” in his attempt to get closer to his subject through drawing, he directly engages with questions about the effects of his medium. Here, he prompts us to ask the age-old question: is photography more truthful than drawing or painting? And what do we make of a drawing, twice removed, created from a photograph? In the process of drawing the individual features and postures of each woman, isolating them from any extraneous background information present in the photographs, Lee perhaps experiences a closer understanding of his subjects, but the resulting drawings appear remarkably void of individual characteristics or any “reality” or “truth” that would have been captured in the details of the photographs. As a way of understanding his grandmother’s generation and his own identity as a Chinese man born in Canada to an immigrant family, Lee traces the commonalities in his subjects by reproducing the stereotypes of this typology.

The “type” is vividly familiar to anyone living in Vancouver; each woman wears a similar loose button-up top or cardigan, pants that are slightly too short and appear to have once been part of a man’s suit, and Velcro running shoes or inexpensive foam or plastic slippers with an open toe. Some of the women wear Tilley-style hats or ball caps with extra-long rims. Lee conveys a sense of monotony or sameness in their day-to-day activities as well, evident in the grocery bags they carry and the depiction of each woman, except one, walking in mid-stride. It would be an oversimplification to describe the women Lee depicts as entirely alike since his drawings are all created from photographs of actual individuals (including a particularly humorous portrait of a Chinese woman sporting a bouffant hair-do), but each woman is of a certain age, class, and ethnicity. Through this series of drawings, which could be considered studies, and the only other large-scale photograph in the exhibition of an anonymous Chinese woman in a typical East Vancouver backyard garden, with its make-shift trellises and well-tended vegetable beds, Lee seems to be undertaking a similar kind of conceptual project as his work *40 Armoured Cars*, which he produced from 1998 to 1999. By presenting slightly different images of the same subject, in this case, a sheet of forty black and white thumbnail images of street scenes featuring armoured cars, Lee acts as an observer and reporter, directing our attention to larger questions of surveillance, security, and privacy. In his drawings, Lee invites the viewer to contemplate the social through the personal. Positioning himself, Lee states: “Having been born in Vancouver in 1975, I have seen what I would describe as a certain type of elderly Chinese woman all my life. I believe they uniquely belong to a particular time and place. I believe that the changing economy and the changing nature of immigration might mean the end of this type, and, as such, I hope that this work serves to document their relation to their community as well as my own relation to them.”⁴

There is a sense of veneration and mourning in Lee’s images. Since the first and second waves of Chinese immigration to Vancouver, when Chinese communities first began to put roots in this region, we are now seeing a shift in the original Chinese neighbourhood east of Abbott Street and south of Hastings Street and the increasing gentrification of the nearby residential neighbourhood of Strathcona. There is currently an organized effort to revitalize Chinatown as businesses are suffering, in part due to the competing pressures of the social and economic problems that pervade the Downtown Eastside and the ever encroaching gentrification process of condominium developments, which are now replacing historical buildings formally home to Chinese benevolence societies. The decline in Chinatown’s vitality is also due in part to a shift in living patterns as

younger, more affluent Chinese people in Vancouver, as well as those who have more recently immigrated here, choose to settle in Richmond or elsewhere in the Greater Vancouver area; changes which, Lee points out, coincide with larger shifts in global capital and immigrant patterns.

In Jeff Wall's Presentation House Gallery catalogue essay, he contends that "Lee is working somewhat against the grain of photography, which depicts the visible world concretely, specifically and accurately...he adds (or subtracts, it is hard to say) an emphatic double sense to depiction... [which] suggests a restless relation to depiction, and so a restless bond with photography as the art of depiction."³ In Lee's conversation with the photography tradition, he has sought metaphoric meaning in the everyday details of the world around us by focusing on finding something extraordinary within the ordinary (a discarded box at the foot of a tree, weeds, oil slicks or ginseng roots), or what Clint Burnham has referred to as images that "reveal the world we cannot see, either with, or without a camera."⁴

Lee continually de-stabilizes our sense of "knowing" the world around us and the artist's role in illuminating these so-called "truths." For instance, double-readings are evoked in a snapshot from a 1996-2000 series showing part of the artist's face and his camera in the side-view mirror of his car as he takes a photo of a Safeway grocery store from the parking lot, with the manufacturer's warning "closer than they appear" made clearly visible. Through the use of technology, his glossy scanned images of a painter's palette or plastic drafting curves paradoxically recall paintings. In his drawings, Lee addresses questions of inherent "truth" and "reality" by directly representing his subject, over and over again, as a way of knowing his own history and as a way of inviting the viewer to contemplate women we may not normally pause to consider. In Lee's conscious return to drawing, in his use of the photographic image as his source, and in instances where he draws oval frames around two of his close-up renderings of the women (suggesting the familiar matting of a family portrait), he persistently questions the effects of his representational choices. Do we actually gain a better understanding of the subject through Lee's studies or does the repetition of this typology have the opposite effect, of making these individuals appear all the same? It seems that both experiences are true. Just as Lee played with traditions of the *memento mori* in his transformed, glossy scanned images of cheap dollar items, "creating pictures of wealth as an illusion," in this body of work, Lee again points to our perception of things.⁷ It is through the act of representation, by way of pencil on paper or the click of a shutter, that Lee continues the deconstruction process he began in his early graduate project.

Notes

¹ See Clint Burnham's reference to other Vancouver artists Steven Shearer and Geoffrey Farmer in "Art 'Unhiding the Hidden,'" *The Vancouver Sun*, February 4, 2006, F3 and Victor del Rio's reference to Roy Arden's term "post-photography" in "The Vancouver Case" *Lapiz International Art Magazine*, 230/231, Feb/Mar 2007, 160.

² Monte Clark Gallery, press release, October 2007.

³ William Wood, "Levity," in *Evan Lee Captures: Selected Works 1998-2006*, ed. Bill Jeffries (Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery, 2006), 23.

⁴ Monte Clark Gallery, press release, October 2007.

⁵ Jeff Wall, "Forward: Photography as Proposed — Conditionally — by Evan Lee" in *Evan Lee Captures: Selected Works 1998-2006*, ed. Bill Jeffries (Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery, 2006), 9.

⁶ Clint Burnham, "Art 'Unhiding the Hidden,'" F3.

⁷ Rosemary Heather, "Evan Lee Monte Clark Gallery," *Flash Art International*, Vol.39, No. 251 Nov/Dec 2006, 126.