

THIS SERIES OF ESSAYS ON EMERGING CANADIAN ARTISTS IS SPONSORED
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[Spotlight]

Photography 21

EVAN LEE'S SCANNER PICTURES

by ADAM HARRISON

EVAN LEE'S WORK stems from his simultaneous skepticism of and acute interest in the medium of photography. For the past eight years, Lee has made photographs that work against the nature of photography. Each picture is suspended in an in-between space: between the banal and the fantastical, science and allegory, between photography and an undefined medium *related to* but not *exactly* photography.

In 1998, while a graduate student at the University of British Columbia, Evan Lee dismantled his camera. At this point, he was just beginning to seriously approach the medium, having previously done mostly drawing and painting. Every day, Lee would dissect the camera further; eventually it was broken down into its smallest parts. He considered it a quiet performance, but his real objective was to try to understand what photography *is*, in order to proceed with a practice that has since been concerned with what photography can be.

Shortly after this, Lee began making straight photographs of everyday places and things that, through being photographed, hint at the irrational or the otherworldly. In his hands, subjects such as oranges, dandelion spores, Christmas lights and boxes are imbued with a sense of oddity and tenuousness that highlights the transformative possibilities of representational art. These transforma-



*Still Life with Artificial Flowers
and Insects (\$9)* 2006 Giclée print
on archival paper 50.8 x 61 cm
COURTESY MONTE CLARK GALLERY,
VANCOUVER/TORONTO



tions are boundless in his pictures; boxes become little creatures, oil slicks on pavement resemble endless galaxies.

Many of Lee's pictures approach or resemble abstraction. Photography, of course, can never be truly abstract. It can approximate the look of abstraction, or, as in Lee's case, it can contort reality. Nowhere is this contortion so prominent and automatic as in Lee's scanner pictures, for which he employs a desktop flatbed scanner to "photograph" his subjects.

The first two series of works that he made in this manner were depictions of French-curve drafting tools and ginseng roots. For his *Stellar Curves* series, the mostly obsolete tools were configured on the scanner's glass in ways that suggested a space that is foreign, but somehow real. Somewhat anthropomorphic in nature, the curved objects appear as figures, seeming to float in outer space, the deep sea or somewhere else entirely. The pictures represent something actual and concrete but, in Lee's hands, they become so visually removed from our reality that they seem utterly fictitious.

The suggestive elements of the ginseng-root images are more subdued. They evoke Karl Blossfeldt's photographs of flowers, William Henry Fox Talbot's early photograms of botanical specimens and utilitarian catalogue photography. Close inspection reveals unexpected and delightful elements; each root takes on an individual form. It stands in for a human being or an animal, and is as unique and idiosyncratic as we are.

For his newest work, Lee has turned his scanner on its side and, instead of placing objects on it, he uses it like a camera shooting close-ups. Its flat, rectangular glass takes the place of the circular, convex glass of a traditional photographic lens. This is notable, because the scanner sees its subject in a way that is pointedly different from a camera. First of all, the objects are lit by the bulbs inside the scanner. Since scanners are used exclusively for digitizing objects placed directly on the glass, the light does not project very far, and so drops off almost immediately, as does the focus. Lee's pictures are forays into still life, and, more than any photographs I can think of, in their light and mood resemble 17th-century Dutch still-life paintings.

The history of the still life is somewhat complicated, as the genre has had at different times a strong relationship both to depictions of socio-economic class and to pictorial experimentation. Both are present in Lee's pictures.

The lushness of most of the works is belied by the nature of his subjects. The fruit, flowers, insects and feathers—all common features of historical still-life paintings—are in fact all facsimiles bought at a dollar store. Where patrons used to commission still lifes that would signify their wealth and the objects it afforded, Lee instead creates his abundant compositions from just a few dollars' worth of decorative kitsch. Somehow, through their translation, they become stunningly uneasy, displaying a

*Every Part from a Contaflex
Camera, disassembled
by the artist during winter, 1998
2006 Giclée print on archival
paper 1.27 m x 96.5 cm
COURTESY MONTE CLARK GALLERY,
VANCOUVER/TORONTO*

dichotomy characteristic of Lee's practice: his work is situated between classical and completely forward-thinking views of picture-making, continuing tradition while imbuing it with new ideas and possibilities.

Most of his still-life subjects are commonly found in vanitas painting, in which objects serve as allegories for time and the fleeting nature of human life. Lee's plastic surrogates are ideal for his method because the scanner requires a much longer exposure time than most cameras: the objects would have been ideal subjects for painting. Their non-perishable permanence effectively negates the nature of vanitas iconography. Their depiction thereby complicates and challenges our reading of these rather traditional-looking pictures in a way that only new forms or approaches to art can.

By the time of Cézanne, the still life had become more useful for considering the formal possibilities of depiction, and in this is another correspondence with Lee's pictures. To make his still lifes, Lee pushed the scanner's technological capacity for depiction to the edge, and this is perhaps the most important aspect of the work. As with Cézanne, Lee's desire to *see* his subjects is an ever-present aspect of his work, as is his attempt to see them in a new way.

Two recent works articulately summarize the dichotomy that marks Lee's work. The first is *Every Part from a Contaflex Camera, disassembled by the artist during winter, 1998* (2006), in which all of the camera pieces from his 1998 performance have been layered across his scanner glass. The work brings Lee's photographic practice full circle, using the form that he has found after eight years of experimentation to represent the action that marked the beginning of his investigations.

A Palette from the Artist's Studio (2006) acts as something of a companion piece, showing the underside of a transparent palette that he has used to make paintings. The brush strokes, though accidental, evoke Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg and several other abstract painters, but the palette could have been used for making any number of types of paintings. Once again we are confronted with a depiction of something related to the earliest forms of art via technology that opens up altogether new ways to depict the world. We are left with a picture that suggests not only the history of painting, but also the future of painting, photography and whatever might come next. ■



BY GARY MICHAEL DAULT

