



Still Lives in Transition
Sangmin Lee

When Still Life Doesn't Sit Still

Ho Won Kim

The sculptures of Sangmin Lee navigate the delicate balance between the transient and the timeless. These works, in their varied shapes—from flowers and vases to the ornate chandeliers and wrought-iron Victorian fences—evoke the rawness of freshly cast concrete with their palpable immediacy. They also suggest artifacts from a bygone era, relics unearthed within abandoned dwellings. The walls, adorned with floral motifs in watercolor hues, stir a sense of longing and nostalgia, reminiscent of the charm found in aged, sun-bleached wallpaper. This interplay of creation and decay invites viewers to ponder the ephemeral nature of objects that surround them.

The essence of Lee's work is encapsulated in the title of both the exhibition and its central installation, *Still Lives in Transition*. Moving beyond the static compositions typical of conventional still life, Lee's still lives animate the exhibition space, fostering a dynamic flow along walls and floors. This kinetic presence expands the narrative of everyday objects,



encouraging viewers to consider their own place within the cycle of time and being. *Still Lives in Transition* not only underscores the transformative qualities of objects but also illuminates the stories that emerge from their existence.

Raised in St. James Town, Toronto—a densely populated urban area known for its utilitarian architecture and cultural

Still Lives in Transition, Sangmin Lee, 2024.

diversity—Lee’s background deeply influences his artistic perspective. This minimalist, yet culturally vibrant setting, led him to explore the interplay between one’s living environment, personal belongings, and the memories they hold. Drawing inspiration from his surroundings, as well as his heritage, Lee has integrated a variety of objects into his practice. A notable example is Chaekgeori, a traditional Korean still-life painting style that flourished from the late 18th century. Chaekgeori, meaning “books and things,” typically features a meticulous arrangement of flowers and fruits, alongside an assortment of ceramics and bronzeware, many of which were imported to Korea from overseas. In his sculptures, Lee weaves together these historical narratives of trade and cultural exchange using modern materials, mirroring the constant flow of individuals and goods across borders. This blend also reflects the varied amalgamation of residents and their belongings in St. James Town. Thus, Lee’s work provides insight into the broader socio-economic elements that shape his community and the impact of these dynamics on the cultural and physical landscapes of urban spaces.

Lee displays these works by either interlinking and suspending

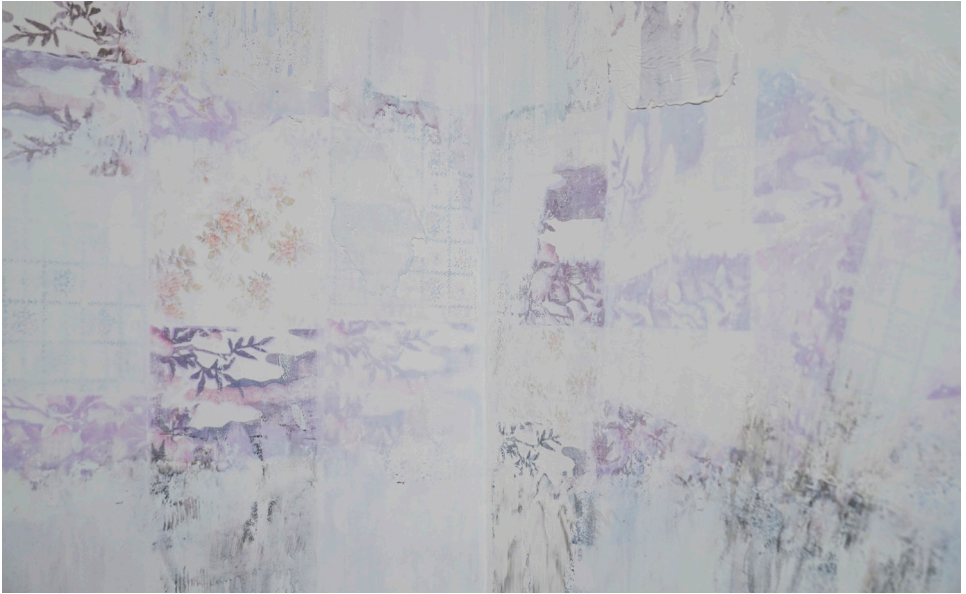
them from the ceiling, or protruding them from the walls. This method echoes another traditional Korean artwork: a 20th century screen painting titled *Sea, Cranes, and Peaches*. In this painting, cranes and peaches are depicted against a seascape backdrop, symbolizing wishes for longevity and prosperity. Historically, such screens served decorative purposes in both royal and everyday settings. Lee references this visual not only through specific examples—like peaches scattered across the exhibition space—but also as inspiration for the multifunctional design of the display. His installation functions not only as a stage to showcase his sculptures but also actively enhances the space, acting as dividers or mobiles and casting fleeting shadows that underscore their versatile nature.

Characterized by their adaptable forms and multifaceted functions, Lee's sculptures stand as a testament to his deep engagement with the transformation of objects. He meticulously selects materials—joint compounds from recycled printer paper, white glue, pigments from repurposed inkjet prints, and pliable tie wire—for their capacity to transform. This deliberate choice enables the sculptures to



Still Lives in Transition, Sangmin Lee, 2024. 5





embody the very essence of change—fluid in their formation, dismantling, and reassembly. Furthermore, they encapsulate the liminal states that Lee’s works occupy—realms that are neither entirely one thing nor another, reflecting the objects’ passage through various temporal and spatial dimensions.

This focus on flexibility extends naturally to the logistical aspects of Lee’s artistic practice. His sculptures are portable,

Still Lives in Transition, Sangmin Lee, 2024.

designed to be compact enough to fit in luggage. They are also modular. They can be connected to each other, built to directly respond to the exhibition space. This adaptability is reflective of his transitory work between cities such as New York and Toronto. More importantly, it illustrates his artistic exploration into the fluidity of an uncertain future—a theme that arises from both his own journeys and those of his belongings. This concept was prominently explored in his 2021 exhibition *How to Unfold a Home*, at OOD Gallery in Dawson City. There, the shipping crates were repurposed as integral components of the installation, effectively transforming them into a room-like setting for his sculptures. This strategic use of packaging and handling materials continues Lee’s exploration of the different functions of objects, as well as the evolving stories and memories enabled by their perpetual crossing of physical and conceptual boundaries.

Returning to the exhibition title, *Still Lives in Transition*: the term “transition” highlights the constant state of change: Lee’s objects are not static. They are ever-evolving. This evolution pertains not only to their physical form but also to their meaning and function, whether practical or aesthetic.



Lee's "Still Lives" delves into the dynamic essence of existence, emphasizing the perpetual flux that characterizes both the objects and the environments they inhabit. Through this perspective, Lee invites viewers to explore uncertainty that resonates with their own journeys, reshaping their connection with everyday objects.

Still Lives in Transition, Sangmin Lee, 2024.

Writing: Ho Won Kim
Copy Editing: Sanaa Humayun
Documentation: Sangmin Lee
Design: Sonali Menezes
ISBN: 978-1-926454-28-3



HAMILTON ARTISTS INC.

155 James Street N
Hamilton, ON
L8R 2K9
<http://theinc.ca>

Hamilton Artists Inc. would like to acknowledge the generous support of its funders, donors, sponsors and programming partners.



Canada Council
for the Arts
Conseil des arts
du Canada



Hamilton



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario



For more information, exhibition documentation, and extended biographical notes on the artist and curator, please visit theinc.ca/exhibitions/.

Cover: *Still Lives in Transition*, Sangmin Lee, 2024.

