



Sarahs

My little brown
and white dog

SHUT UP

My dog

Empire State

My dog
has a black nose
and white fur, it's young

Empire State

To Mom
from your
little daughter

The ship
Dad and Papa
P

My dog
has a black nose
and white fur, it's young

My dog

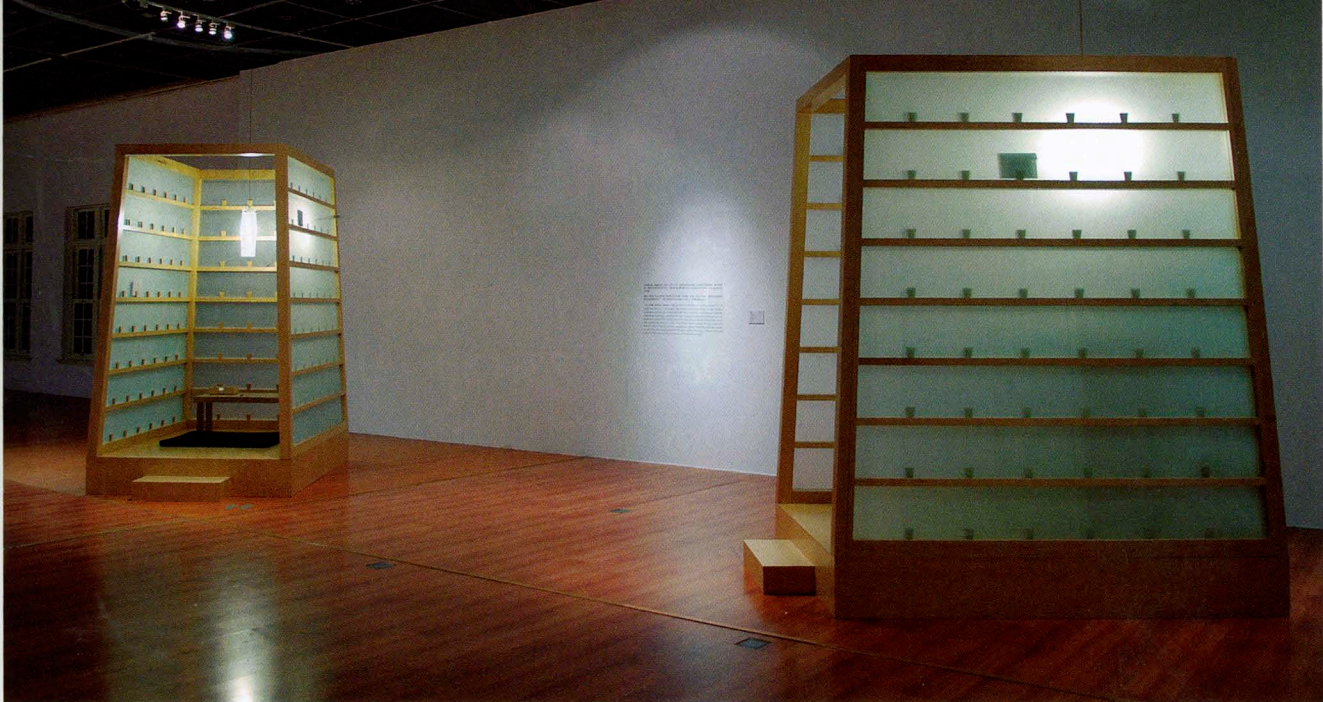
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Lee Mingwei

Beyond Labels

BY CHRISTINE TEMIN

The trapezoidal booths made of pale wood and translucent glass have the hushed atmosphere of small chapels big enough for just one worshipper at a time. They encourage you to enter reverently and purposefully, and once inside, you find materials to write a letter. When you're finished, you select a place on one of the rows of shelves lining the wall and place your letter there. If you address and seal the envelope, it will be mailed. If you leave it unsealed, other people are allowed to read it. Your thoughts will be there to inspire others. The letters tend to be on sensitive subjects: why you've lost contact with someone; why something has gone wrong—or right—with a relationship; how you have coped with a death. Perhaps it's the anonymity of the letters—signatures aren't necessary—that encourages the writers to pour out their hearts.

This is Taiwanese artist Lee Mingwei's *The Letter Writing Project*, part of his recent retrospective at the Taipei Museum of Contemporary Art, which included installations from 1993 to 2007. The exhibition, the largest presentation of Lee's work to date, was called "Duologue," because he shared it with Tse Su-Mei, a half-Chinese, half-English artist who lives in Luxembourg and Paris and whose haunting videos have an affinity with Lee's work. Lee has become the most internationally prominent representative of an

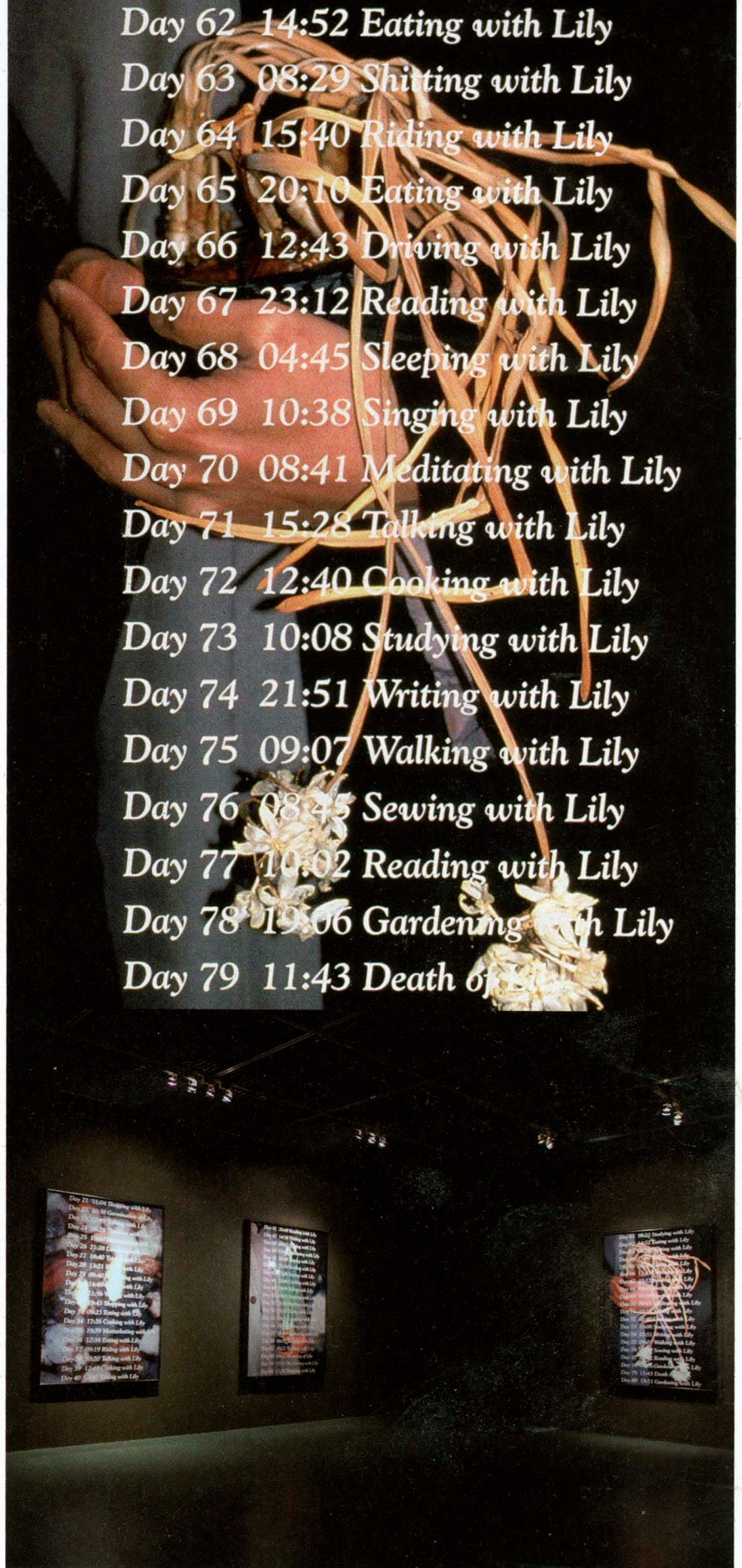
Opposite and above: *The Letter Writing Project*, 1998–2007. Wood, glass, lighting, and paper, multiple booths, 290 x 170 x 231 cm. Views of the work installed at (opposite) The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, and (above) at the Taipei Museum of Contemporary Art.

explosion of contemporary art in Taiwan, encouraged by the Taiwanese government. He was also featured in the impressive 2007 Asian Art Biennial at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Taichung. Before this success, Lee's father "wanted me to be a doctor," he says, sitting in an office in Taipei MoCA. If he had become a physician, it would have been easy to categorize him: surgeon, dermatologist, or another type of specialist. Instead Lee became an artist, a non-specialist who is difficult to label. His work spans sculpture, installation, and performance. His practice involves cooking for people, conversing with them, treating a lily bulb as if it were a human child, and pretending to be the first pregnant man.

He likes thinking of himself as an art world outsider. "I don't like organized groups," he says. "I don't see myself as belonging to any 'ism.' I don't go to see art shows. I don't even read art magazines." Asked if any other artists have influenced him, he responds, "I find Joseph Beuys really inspiring, when he planted the trees, his political work, the felt and fat." But he's quick to add, "I'm not a Beuys groupie. Most of my inspiration comes from classical music and contemporary dance. I'll go to anything at the Joyce Theater and the Brooklyn Academy of Music." These two venues offer avant-garde dance in New York, where he now lives.

Lee explains about the doctor tradition: "My grandmother was one of the first female physicians in Taiwan. She had four daughters and told them all that they had to marry doctors." (Oddly, not that they had to become doctors themselves.) Three of the four daughters—including Lee's mother—complied. The story of his parents' marriage resembles the Old Testament account of Laban forcing Jacob to work for him for 14 years to win the hand of Laban's daughter Rachel. "My parents," says Lee, "met when they were both working at a normal school [a teacher training institution] where they fell in love. My dad was a semi-professional basketball player and a physical education teacher. My mom

Right and detail: *100 Days with Lily*, 1995. 5 silver dye bleach prints, 15 x 166.5 cm. each.

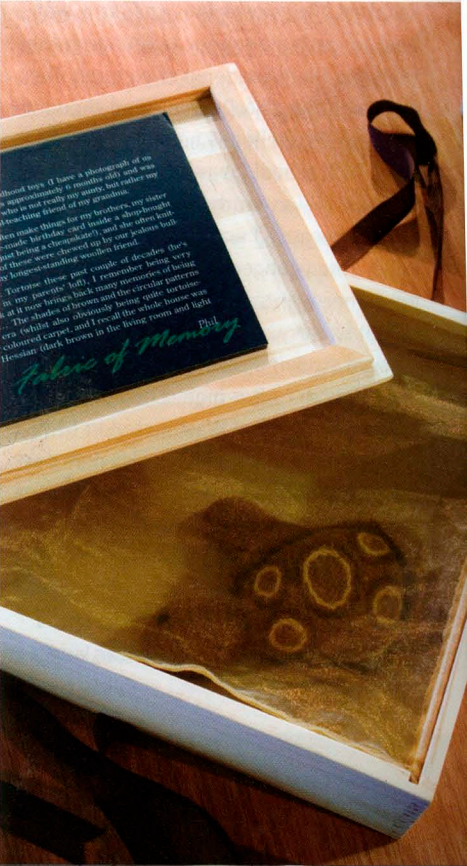


taught literature. They wanted to get married, but my grandmother wouldn't allow it because dad wasn't a doctor. He went to a 'cramming' school at night to study physics and chemistry so he could go to medical school. He was in his third year of med school when they finally got married."

While there wasn't a history of visual art in Lee's family, his mother "was always interested in Western and Chinese classical literature and in film," he says. "She was really into Hollywood at the time of Sophia Loren and Audrey Hepburn, all those glamorous icons, and she loves classical Western music." Lee himself "studied the violin from the age of four." But not the Suzuki method, "where you have 200 little kids sawing away in unison. My parents had a private tutor for me. But being a professional musician wasn't what I ever wanted." Does he still play? "Only when no one else is around."

Taiwan was under martial law, with one-party rule, until 1987. Lee was born in 1964. "I grew up with it, so I really didn't notice. But my parents worked for independence. They didn't want me to have to go into the military under a regime they didn't agree with." And that's how the adolescent Lee ended up in the Dominican Republic. "I couldn't get a visa to go to the States, so my parents sent me there instead." This hiatus lasted only nine months. The visa came through, and Lee was off to San Francisco. Back in Taiwan, he'd studied in a school run by nuns; in the Bay area, he went to an all-boys boarding school, Woodside Priory, run by Benedictine monks. "From kindergarten through high school, I was in Catholic schools because they offered such a good education," he says, adding that his family isn't Catholic: "They're Buddhist—not practicing, but we are spiritual."

Lee "stayed at the Priory from 9th through 12th grades. I had to learn Greek and Latin and French, Spanish, or German. I'd already studied English back in Taiwan." (His flawless English comes in handy in those projects involving conversation with other English-



Below and detail: *Fabric of Memory*, 2006–07. Mixed media, installation view.



speakers.) He says that “at first it was hard to learn a phonetic language rather than one that’s made up of pictures. Then one day I saw a McDonald’s and thought, oh, how it’s spelled is how it sounds.”

“In high school I was not into art at all,” he says. “I was studying biology and physics because I was the first son in my family [the younger one is a golf pro] and my father wanted me to go to medical school to carry on the family tradition. I enjoyed studying sciences, and I did very well in them.” After high school, he went to the University of Washington in Seattle where he majored in biology. He didn’t do art there either, but he remembers a Japanese market where he bought the ingredients for a special chicken broth: “I’d cook it

in my room and the whole dorm was filled with the scent. I shared it with my roommate.” Later on, sharing food would become an important theme in his work.

Art finally entered Lee’s life after the University of Washington, when he got a second bachelor’s degree at the California College of Arts and Crafts. He attributes at least part of the reason for his delayed focus on art to his early experiences in Taiwan: “When I was in the second or third grade, I was discouraged from making art by my teachers, who thought I had a learning disability because I was drawing people with five legs and pink trees with eyes. American art education is completely liberating. In Taiwan, I was just considered a disturbed child.” Not anymore. It amuses him that two of his works, *The Letter Writing Project* and *The Male Pregnancy Project*, are now included in Taiwan’s official art education syllabus for high school students. “They put *The Male Pregnancy Project* into the Virtual Reality section rather than Avant-Garde Conceptual Art Projects,” he says with a laugh. “*The Male Pregnancy* is a Web-based project (<www.leemingwei.com>) that I rarely speak about since it has not yet come together for me physically and emotionally. I have appeared in public with the prosthetic pregnancy tummy. The main purpose of the project is to provoke thoughtful conversations between genders about this particular issue, in a way to prepare for such an event in the near future.” It’s fun to imagine some guy turning up at a Lamaze childbirth class in Lee’s prosthesis.

After Lee dutifully fulfilled his parents’ desire that he major in sciences, “I told them my real interest was in art. When they realized that I had given myself a chance to be in medicine and did quite well but was still not interested in going to medical school, they allowed me to do what is really in my heart, which is art.” You could argue that

The Dining Project, 1997–2000. Wood, tatami mats, tableware, beans, and projection, installation view.



his art is particularly nurturing and helpful to others, which is, in a way, like practicing medicine.

Lee graduated from CCAC with honors in textile arts. Textiles form the core of *Fabric of Memory* (2006), a series of boxes in Lee's signature pale wood ("dark wood is heavy and dominating," he says), each with a piece of fabric that means something special to the lender, baby blankets and such, with a text inside the cover of the box explaining that meaning. *Fabric of Memory* has a ritualistic, participatory element. After taking off their shoes, visitors ascend a wooden platform and unwrap the dark brown ribbons on the boxes and open them. The solemnity of the exercise encourages a slow tempo. No one rushes through the ceremony of untying, looking, and reading, and while some people don't bother to re-tie the ribbons, most do. In each location where *Fabric of Memory* is installed, at the end of the show, Lee gives the owners back not only their textiles, but also the beautifully crafted boxes that were built to hold them. "It's a token of thanks," he explains.

After CCAC, "I worked for an architecture firm in Berkeley," he says, "but after two years I found architecture as a practice to be too restrictive." So he migrated yet again, this time to Yale, to earn an MFA. "The first year, I was so lost," he says. "I didn't know anyone. I wanted to meet people like you do in Taiwan. A soy milk shop is where you strike up conversations with people. I went to a café in New Haven and asked a woman if I could share her table. She said, 'Why don't you sit over there?'" Undaunted, he "put up posters all over New Haven, asking for people who wanted to have an introspective conversation over dinner. I wanted to be generous and to belong to the community." The posters, which

included his phone number, resulted in many calls: "First I called people back and invited them to my studio so they wouldn't think I was weird. They were surprised that I didn't want anything from them. Some of them became good friends."

This was the start of *The Dining Project*, an ongoing event that re-surfaced at the Taipei show. In its current version, the "set" consists of a pale wooden platform covered with tatami mats and surrounded by black beans. It is spare and elegant, like most of Lee's pieces. *The Dining Project* as installed also includes a video of two people eating, which plays on one wall during gallery hours. The faces of Lee and his guest are hidden. You see only the table setting and the diners' hands. "Privacy is important," Lee says. "It's a performance without an

The Living Room Project, 2000–07. Mixed media, installation view.

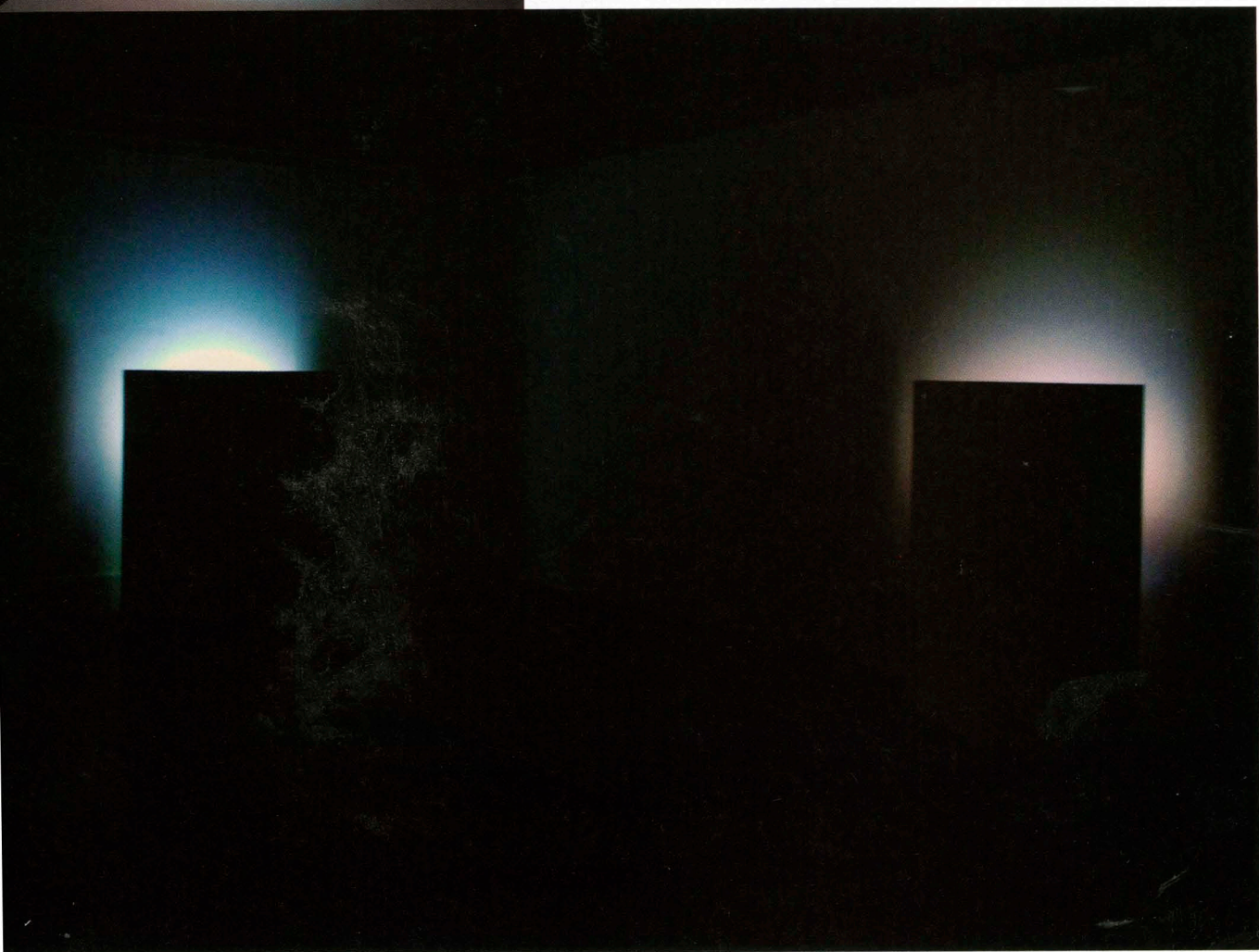


Below and detail: *Quartet Project*, 2005–07. Mixed-media, interactive installation featuring Dvorak's String Quartet in F, Op. 26, 2nd movement.



audience." At each museum where *The Dining Project* takes place, Lee has one meal taped. The dinners take place after museum hours, when Lee and a chosen guest eat Italian, Chinese, or another sort of cuisine that Lee has prepared. He prides himself on his cooking. "When my family goes to Hawaii for our annual reunion, I'm the cook. I bring Chinese, Italian, and other cookbooks. My sisters are the sous chefs. They're not such good cooks as I am."

Much of Lee's work starts with a conversation. In the case of *The Tourist Project* (2003), created for New York's Museum of Modern Art, the initial impetus was his seven-year old nephew, who was living with his mother in Rome. "He wanted to take me to see the Forum," Lee says. Instead of a conventional guided tour, "he showed me where the various litters of cats lived." This inspired Lee to ask people to give him tours of the places in their cities that meant the most to them. For the MoMA incarnation, a request went out on the museum's Web site. A curator picked 20 people, and Lee spent half a day with each of them, learning about various New York neighborhoods. "One woman took me to a Hasidic Jewish community in Williamsburg," he says. On each of his blind dates, both Lee and his guide had a camera: "We took pictures, collected objects, and recorded the sounds on the sites." All of this material went into a gallery at MoMA, arranged as a science experiment would be, in a cabinet of Lee's design. *The Tourist Project* is another example of how Lee recycles the same piece in different venues. It also appeared at the Schirn



Kunsthalle in Frankfurt earlier in 2008. Lee travels constantly, partly because the performative element in his work requires his presence, at least at the opening of a show, after which he delegates his role to others. In 2008, he has had solo shows scheduled in Australia, New York, and New Zealand, and in 2009, he'll do projects at the Edinburgh Festival and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington.

Rhythm and meter are important in Lee's work, possible legacies from those childhood violin lessons. *The Quartet Project* consists of a darkened room with four barely visible screen-like shapes emitting a mysterious, pulsing light and a recording of the second movement of Dvorak's "American" String Quartet. The temptation to get close

Between Going and Staying, 2007. Sand, lamp, and sound, installation view.

to the screens and peek behind them is irresistible, but when you do, it's like unveiling the Wizard of Oz. The music and lights switch off until you move away, then they resume.

Lee's works all share simplicity. "That refinement," he says, "was a conscious decision. If the work isn't clear and clean, it provokes a different reaction from people." He gives the example of *The Sleeping Project*, in which he invites a total stranger to spend the night with him in a bare-bones setting: "Imagine if [it] had a 'plush' design with brass bed frame, leopard-print silk comforter, and red and black night tables. It would certainly provoke a sexual and naughty reaction from the participants. When my design is simple and clean, the aesthetic touches the gentle and kind nature of human beings. I hope." He laughs at the idea that his work carries on a general serenity in Chinese art: "China had 14 different dynasties. The Tang dynasty was almost baroque, with loud colors. The Song dynasty was the other extreme—muted and subtle. My aesthetic comes from that."

Lee's most recent work, which debuted in Taipei, is *Between Going and Staying*, the title taken from a poem by Octavio Paz. It's a departure from earlier works in that neither the artist nor the audience participates. The piece consists of five tons of volcanic sand shipped from Hawaii, the amount calculated to last the six weeks of the show. It falls from a ceiling-hung light that looks like a broken eggshell. Is the sand going from heaven and staying on earth? "It's a piece that I'm still not clear about," Lee says, sounding confident that eventually he will be.

Christine Temin is a writer living in Boston.

