

Lee Mingwei

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Lee Mingwei, *Luminous Depths* (detail), 2013, mixed media, dimensions variable.

The New York–based Taiwanese artist Lee Mingwei is known for his participatory installations that revolve around interpersonal exchanges during seemingly quotidian events, such as mending one’s clothes, having a meal, or sleeping. The artist speaks here about his latest project, Luminous Depths, which invites visitors to toss pots off a third-floor balcony of the Peranakan Museum in Singapore; the resulting shards will be collected and then used in the foundation of a new building for museum. The work is on view until September 22, 2013.

LUMINOUS DEPTHS BEGAN IN 2011, when Dr. Alan Chong, the director of the Asian Civilizations Museum in Singapore, invited me to make a project at the Peranakan Museum, which is under his administration. Once I began research on Peranakan culture, I found it quite fascinating, because it is a fusion, arising from Chinese businessmen who traveled south during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and married Indian, Malay, and other local women on the Malay Peninsula. I was also struck by the Peranakan Museum’s Victorian colonial architecture, particularly its atrium, which allows the sun to peer in. This reminded me of my maternal grandmother’s home in Puli, Taiwan, where she had a clinic on the ground floor and chickens on the fourth; it had an open ceiling and during typhoons, wind and water—even sometimes objects—came down together. That cascading of sound really struck me.

This project involves the entire museum. On the ground floor, participants purchase pots; on the third floor, where a platform faces a netted hoop within the light well, participants position themselves to toss the pots down. These pots, which look like disks or balls and are made of two cups or two dishes glued together, are based on five objects from the museum’s permanent collection. In this way, the work removes the functionality of these daily objects, making them more of what I think an art object is: something that doesn’t have an everyday purpose. When the participants toss one of these into the light well, the hope is that they will transform it into something useful.

Before approaching the platform, the participant is first invited to sit on a bench to take off their shoes and socks, creating what resembles a ceremony or ritual by shedding the familiar self. As one walks onto the platform, one of Schubert’s lieder, “Night and Dreams,” which has been playing throughout the atrium, stops. The resulting pure silence is the medium that signals the participant to toss the object into the light well. When finished, the participant walks off the platform and the song starts again, concluding the performance.

Recently, I had the opportunity to speak to one of the work’s participants. She was holding onto the pot for the longest time and it seemed as if she couldn’t destroy it because she had formed a bond with the inanimate object. The project’s destructive act functioned against what she was perhaps taught in her upbringing—not to break things, let alone touch them, at a museum. But I also felt her urgency, her wanting to destroy it. The tension of this work embraces this sense of conflicted responsibility that becomes quite overwhelming.

Luminous Depths has changed my memory of my grandmother’s home. Now, I cannot think of it without thinking of this project. Memory is a volatile living thing; it is not set in a fixed space and time. *Luminous Depths* and my grandmother’s home are almost like twins, yet born in different places, mutually and consistently influencing each other.

— As told to
Leslie J. Ureña