

Quinn Latimer

NOORI LEE Welcome Back

Noori Lee's newest series of paintings offer an adroit distillation of his regular methods and mores. In the artist's luridly psychedelic palette, myriad forms, figures, and architectures come into focus: Baroque bedrooms laden with tiger pelts and diaphanous drapery; pouting, pornographic female figures; curvy, concrete Modernist buildings; loose and layered abstractions. If Lee's subjects at first glance appear unrelated and remarkably far-flung, what ostensibly ties them together is the artist's singular style, which melds the smooth, surreal surfaces of photorealism with the drips and thick, gestural brushwork of Abstract-Expressionism and Neo-Expression. Also uniting the paintings, however, is the fact that most of their subjects are sourced from the photographic images that constitute the artist's vast visual library of newspaper and magazine clippings. This dependence on photography brings Lee's painting practice—which, with its emphasis on figuration, and its multitude of traditional themes, can initially appear somewhat retro—startlingly and stirringly into the present.

Lee's utilization of photographic source material also points to the obscure ethics at play in his paintings, which offer their subjects—here, a nearly naked woman in the clichéd, come-hither pose of a pornographic advertisement, there a Modernist architectural masterpiece—as a kind of nonhierarchical catalogue of contemporary visual culture. Each subject appears equally fetishized for the familiarity of its appearance, and then just as equally discarded, as the ever-prolific painter moves on to his next work. Lee's methodology of titling his works emphasizes their serial and mundane nature: each painting is classified as either a “room”, a “house,” or a “figure,” then additionally given a number and a vague parenthetical aside that connotes some sort of individuation. See, for example, *house34 (systems)* (2010), which features the famous exterior of Oscar Niemeyer's Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói, in Rio de Janeiro, with its sweeping red-carpet-like ramp, and hovering, UFO-like cupola. Lee bring the source photo's colors into flagrant focus, thus the clay-colored ramp becomes the cherry-bomb hue of a hot rod car, while the sky takes on the cerulean splendor of the Caribbean.

Not all the source images are so monumental, however. *Room8 (taxidermist)* (2010) presents a burnt-yellow wall mounted with two bucks, their curving antlers eerily reflected in ropy shadows behind. In the wide, empty space between the two deer, the representational painting transforms itself into a dexterous abstraction: a waterfall of pink paint drips to the bottom of the canvas, while wide, fast brushstrokes of goldenrod yellow arch across the middle ground. *Figure17 (welcome back)* (2010), meanwhile, is both a departure and something of a homecoming. In this eerie self-portrait, the artist holds up a wavy, watery hand, limned by a wedding ring. The painting is a kind of coda to one of Lee's first works, a small, spectral painting of a photocopy of his face, which emerged out of the canvas's shadowy violet and blue tones like a photogram. The new self-portrait is infinitely less cool. Its enormous face is roughly rendered, then further roughed up by long striations of dripping paint. The work's dark currents belie the sunny optimism of its title, encouraging viewers to take a long, hard look.

Born in 1977 in Seoul, South Korea, and educated in Switzerland and Germany (where he studied with Thomas Bayrle at the Städelschule in Frankfurt), Lee now divides his time between Basel and Jeonju. To that end, it is perhaps not surprising that the artist synthesizes both Western and Eastern contemporary influences in his paintings: from Switzerland's design-conscious formalism, to Germany's omnivorous painters like Bayrle and Gerhard Richter, to Asia's bright, stylized pop and pornographic imagery. Nevertheless, Lee's deft and complicated paintings manage to hew to none of these influences too closely; they are inextricably, and indelibly, his own.

Basel im September 2010