lee mingwei's
"through masters' eyes"
May 15–August 1, 2004
LOOKING AT THE PAST THROUGH THE PRESENT

Stephanie Barron
Chief Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

For the past ten years, conceptual artist Lee Mingwei has been creating art installations that depend upon the exchange of intimate experiences—sleeping in the same room, sharing an artist-prepared meal, offering confidences in the form of letters, or escorting the artist on a personal one-day journey to favorite haunts. In his exhibitions, Lee’s presence was required during the first part or most of the presentation, and what remained afterwards was the documentation or remnants of the personal interaction Lee had with his collaborators. For the most part these installations sought to expose aspects of everyday life within the public context of a museum or gallery show.

Lee (b. 1964) grew up in Taiwan where he began a lifelong interest in traditional Chinese painting. From a young age he practiced Chan Buddhism by spending summers at a monastery where he lived with his master, tending the grounds and following daily rituals. As a teenager, he attended a California school run by Benedictine monks. After studying at the California College of Arts, Lee earned a masters degree in sculpture from Yale. Lee’s projects have included Money for Art (1997); The Letter Writing Project (1998); The Tourist Project (2002, 2003); and The Sleeping Project (2000, 2003), which have been shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Venice Biennale.

Through Masters’ Eyes adds a new dimension to these projects. Drawing upon his interest in historical Chinese painting, Lee creates an installation in which viewers are invited to closely examine a remarkable Chinese album of eight landscape images by the seventeenth-century master Shitao. While it is a work still based upon collaboration—in this case between Lee and the master Shitao, between Lee and other artists, and between the artists and the museum audience—Lee digs deep into his own heritage and intimately studies one of the albums that had long been known to him. In viewing Chinese albums or horizontal scrolls, only sections of the whole are visible at any one encounter, and the element of time is essential for the proper viewing of the entirety. It is that element of time that Lee concentrates on by selecting a single image as the focus of this project and orchestrating a process to enhance our own viewing. The artist is also a behind-the-scenes choreographer of artist and audience participation.

ENGAGING THE PAST

J. Keith Wilson
Chief Curator of Asian Art

Over three-hundred years ago, in the autumn of 1694, Shitao (1642–1707), a descendent of the imperial family of the fallen Ming dynasty (1369–1644) and a painter who took refuge in the Buddhist priesthood, finished a highly personal and autobiographical album of eight landscapes. It is has been in LACMA’s collection since 1960. Including moody images drawn from memory of sites he had visited over several decades, the traditional booklike work includes inscribed ruminations about places he knew and artists of his generation and the distant past.

One of the eight landscapes in the collection shows a distant view of Mount Huang in Anhui Province, a natural attraction that Shitao visited and painted often. The image features a mountain floating in isolation, a world unto itself. Halfway up its flank, two hikers pass each other on a steep path with no visible beginning or end. The poetic quatrain written by the painter in the lower right adds meaning to the enigmatic scene and connects the artist with the famous poet and painter Wang Wei (701–761), founder of the scholar-amateur school of painting almost one-thousand years earlier.

Casually I took ink mixed with raindrops on pear blossoms
And splashed forth [this image of] Mount Huang amid the clouds.
The purity and uniqueness of my brushwork
Can hardly be distinguished from the skill of Wang Wei.
—Written upon a sudden recollection of the thirty-six peaks of Mount Huang.

The combination of words and image suggests that the finished piece is the result of a personal encounter with specific scenery informed by an understanding of ancient masters. In Through Masters’ Eyes, Lee Mingwei, born in Taiwan but now living in the United States, transports the refined focus, intimate nature, cumulative structure, and contemplative intent of this and other traditional Chinese albums to the globalized, democratic world of today. Testing its generic appeal while reshaping its character, he has built a new album unlike any other in Chinese history. Inviting eleven artists to copy Shitao’s Mount Huang, Lee gave two artists an image of the original, while each of the rest were asked to work from interpretations by one of the others in a carefully engineered series of creative encounters that linked pairs of living artists.

Involving an international assortment of participants living in Taiwan, the United States, and Europe, the
A semiprivate situation encourages the exchange of intimate (viewing) experiences between strangers. In Through Masters’ Eyes, a single image from the Landscapes album of eight paintings was emulated by two sets of artists, one in Taiwan and the other based outside of Asia. As Lee originally described the project: “A high quality photocopy of the original will be sent to two skilled artist-copiers, who will be asked to copy the work and return their copies to me. I will send their copies to two different artist-copiers and obtain their copies. This process will continue through the copiers, producing two different lineages of copies containing five or six paintings each, with all but the last having an ‘ancestor’ and a ‘descendant,’ each an original in its own way, and each displaying subtle differences from the others.”

The five artists in Taiwan were trained or are very familiar with classical Chinese painting—either as artist, copyist, mounter, conservator, historian, or critic. Outside of Asia, most of the artists received training in Western art practices; they work in photography, painting, and video and installation art. The internationally-based emulators come from diverse backgrounds—a Taiwanese art critic, a Romanian installation artist, an American-born Chinese artist and scholar, a Pakistani-born artist who alludes to classical painting in her practice, a video-artist living in Luxembourg, and others—to respond to the work of the ancient master Shitao.

The five emulations from Taiwan and the six from the West are presented adjacent to the original album leaves. At a nearby viewing station, visitors may study a high-quality, bound reproduction of all the emulations, one page at a time, while being able to view both the original emulations and the original Shitao album in display cases. As Lee described it: “I chose this method of display because Shitao’s original album was created as a gift for a friend, Huang Lu, who lived in Nanchang, and therefore it was intended to be viewed privately. I also chose the method of highlighting an aspect of the artwork-audience relationship to Chinese art.”

Testing cultural distinctions between artists emerging from different creative traditions, Through Masters’ Eyes actually involved two separate activity chains, one in Taiwan and the other in the United States and Europe. For some in the “Western” group, this was no doubt a first encounter with Chinese painting materials, techniques, and style. For the artists who have studied Chinese brush painting in the classical manner (apprenticing with an established master), an understanding of tradition is of course blurred by international education and travel, individual histories of displacement, and the sheer force of modern art and ideas. Regardless of training, the structure of Lee’s album compelled all but the first artist of each chain (who had access to a color Xerox of Shitao’s Mount Huang) to see a seventeenth-century work of art through twenty-first century eyes. The joined issues of reproduction and transformation through copying are critically important in the history of Chinese painting. In China today, copying is still seen as the most effective way to learn how to paint. Not only beginners, but also established painters, expand their technique by reproducing the works of earlier masters. In this way, training is defined as an act that is based on models and bridges time. In such a tradition, artistic expression often evolved through an active engagement with received patterns, resulting in a search for new standards or a transformation of old forms. In either case, individual interpretations revealed their historical sources. Thus Lee Mingwei’s Through Masters’ Eyes touches the very heart of classical Chinese painting. Unrelated to matters of authenticity, the album of copies also represents the living power of an image and its ability to inspire incredibly diverse responses.
This work could not have been realized without the participation of the following eleven artists: Cristian Alexa, Arnold Chang, Hung Sun-hsin, Hsu Yujen, Lin Chuan-chu, Victoria Lu, Shahzia Sikander, Sergio Teran, Su-mei Tse, Jason Varone, Yuan Jai.

Viewing station designed by Stephan R. Freid with Lee Mingwei. Fabrication by Eric Sparks. The paper used for the album paintings is a generous gift of Wang Kuo-tsai of Taiwan Forestry Research Institute. Project courtesy of Lombard-Freid Fine Arts.

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0. Shitao (China, 1652–1707)
   Landscapes, dated 1684, Qing dynasty
   Eight-leaf album, ink on paper, ink and color on paper
   Los Angeles County Fund
   Phelan T: 2004 Museum Associates/LACMA

A. Arnold Chang (United States)
   Untitled (after Shitao), 2004
   Ink on paper
   13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. (34.9 x 26.5 cm)

B. Sergio Teran (United States)
   Discovering Art: Hung Sun-hsin (after Shitao), 2004
   Oil and acrylic on paper
   13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. (34.9 x 26.5 cm)

C. Cristian Alexa (Romania, active United States)
   Untitled (after Shitao), 2004
   Collage on paper
   13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. (34.9 x 26.5 cm)

D. Jason Varone (United States)
   Untitled at Forty Different Moments in Time
   (after Shitao), 2004
   Digital print on paper
   13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. (34.9 x 26.5 cm)

E. Su-mei Tse (Luxembourg)
   Untitled (after Shitao), 2004
   Woodblock relief print
   13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. (34.9 x 26.5 cm)

F. Shahzia Sikander (Pakistan, active United States)
   Untitled (after Shitao), 2004
   Graphite on paper
   13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. (34.9 x 26.5 cm)

G. Victoria Lu (Taiwan)
   Untitled (after Shitao), 2004
   Ink and color on paper
   13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. (34.9 x 26.5 cm)

H. Yuan Jai (Taiwan)
   Untitled (after Shitao), 2004
   Ink and color on paper, collage
   13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. (34.9 x 26.5 cm)

I. Hsu Yujen (Taiwan)
   Untitled (after Shitao), 2004
   Ink on paper
   13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. (34.9 x 26.5 cm)

J. Hung Sun-hsin (Taiwan)
   Untitled (after Shitao), 2004
   Ink and color on paper
   13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. (34.9 x 26.5 cm)

K. Lin Chuan-chu (Taiwan)
   Untitled (after Shitao), 2004
   Woodblock relief print
   13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. (34.9 x 26.5 cm)

All photographs except Shitao’s Landscapes are courtesy of Gary Lee.
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