

Mindful Sojourner 羈旅
The Art of Leroy Lee

An abstract painting with a textured surface. The left side features warm, earthy tones of orange, red, and brown, while the right side transitions into cooler tones of blue, green, and grey. The brushstrokes are visible and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth.

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Director's Preface

Knowing Leroy Lee is a delight, so is viewing his works. Whether carrying poetic titles such as *Prelude*, *Autumn Thoughts*, *Echoes in Eternity*, or left untitled, those beautiful paintings always remind me of classical music. Colors and light become flowing melodies on canvas, while energy and emotions are reflected through the balanced composition.

Presenting a gallery program focusing on contemporary Chinese art, I often ponder the definitions of “contemporary” and “Chinese art”, as they reflect our core criteria of showing an artist. However, when seeing Leroy's paintings, it appeared to me that there's no need for further justification. I believe Prof. An-yi Pan, guest curator of this exhibition would agree with me in this regard. While Leroy brings forth a Taoist concept of “the return to simplicity and truth (*fanpu guizhen*),” Prof. Pan often refers to *Zen* stories on drinking tea. They are all about letting go. Leroy's paintings would induce us to let go all man-imposed values, boundaries, -isms and movements, and return to the simple beauty of art.

With my gratitude to Prof. Pan, I invite you to view this exhibition, and I hope you will enjoy it as much as I will.

Edward Gui
May 2015



Mindful Sojourner: The Art of Leroy Lee

An-yi Pan, Cornell University

If life is a journey, art must be the core of an artist's life journey. As the artist moves about, or remains still, what he sees and hears, the cultural nourishments that he absorbs, his observation of people and happenings, though still in motion, those Asian and Western, those classical and modern, all become part of the life experience and inspiration for art creation. The essence of Leroy Lee's current artistic creations can be most appropriately summarized in this way.

Leroy Lee graduated from the School of Art at Culture University in 1993, during an era when Taiwan was undergoing drastic social and cultural opening and transformation. Most artists of his generation had been influenced by new Western trends and media. Installations and works containing social commentary had become the mainstream. Leroy Lee steadfastly stuck with painting as a means of expressing his character and style. In contrast to artists who highlighted the social function of art, Leroy Lee endeavored to study classical styles and explore emotional lyricism in art. He believed that the relationships between Man, nature and society belonged to an internal sphere, which did not necessarily need to be expressed directly. This internal contemplative exploration guided him from the classical art mode to the world of abstract art. It can be said that he is one of the truly special artists of his generation.

For any Asian artist from the nineteenth century onward, the confrontation between East and West cannot be avoided. Asian educational systems also offered multicultural synthesis as part of the academic experience. As a student, Leroy Lee became fond of classical art, from the Dutch painters Rembrandt and Vermeer to the versatile impressionist and portraitist John Singer Sargent of the United States, who were all models for him to study. In addition, works of the English Romanticist painter and watercolorist J.M.W. Turner provided an indelible inspiration for Lee's abstract art.

As an Asian artist steeped in Chinese culture, Chinese philosophy and

art were deeply rooted in Leroy Lee's upbringing and training, and these cultural roots became a foundation for his artistic creation. In the visual realm, he was deeply inspired by the texture strokes, dynamic movement and aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy and painting. Philosophically, he was inspired by the Daoist concept of *fanpu guizhen* (a return to simplicity and truth). The origins of Daoist cosmology and philosophy describing the fundamental principles of the beginning of the universe, are explained in the *Yi Zhuan* (Book of Yi) as, "Yi has the *Taiji*, which gave rise to Two Polar Directions, and the Two Polar Directions gave rise to the Four Phenomena, and the Four Phenomena gave rise to the Eight Trigrams." From this single origin came the dualistic world, which consists of movement and stillness, coldness and warmth, open and closed, day and night, and so on, as dualistic yet mutually complementary coexisting phenomena. In this environment, Mankind came to exist. Leroy Lee believes that the relationship between Man, nature and the universe is very close. Based on Descartes' notion of "I think, therefore I am" and the Buddhist concept of reincarnation, he revisits the influence of this philosophy on the essence of life and art. These ideas have naturally had a direct effect on his artistic development since his college years.

For artistic creation, Lee uses mixed media and multimedia, and for compositional aesthetic, he directly inherited the essence of Western classical art. He often uses the single vanishing point and the Golden Section as structure in his paintings. Though these points are not necessary in abstract art, Leroy Lee prefers to use these classical rules as the foundation of his abstract compositions, as a method of unifying the classical concepts with his modern abstract painting. One can find in his painting, for example, a single focal point, like fireworks on a dark night, necessarily the brightest area on the surface, while the background gradually fades away, a vignetting technique frequently employed by the Dutch master Rembrandt. Among contemporary classical masters who had direct influence on Leroy Lee is the realist painter and portraitist David

A. Leffel, who not only inherited the classical painting tradition from the era of Rembrandt, but also enjoys depicting Chinese ceramic pieces in his still lifes. Because Leffel's Chinese zodiac sign is the Horse, the three-color ceramic horses of the Tang Dynasty are a frequent Chinese motif in his paintings. For these multifaceted reasons, Leroy Lee has been drawn to Leffel's painting since his student days. Lee visited Leffel's studio, and through Leffel he inherited the classical spirit since Rembrandt.

If the focal point is the source of the "big bang," the origin of our multifaceted universe, then it must consist of the strongest contrasting values as the subjectivity and foundation for the counterbalance of the rest of the painting. This leads to multilayered expressions on the painting's surface. The focal point is typically given the strongest texture and sense of movement, and outward from this point the sense of contrast becomes subtler. This gradation is the method by which Lee controls the interplay of various elements in his compositions, such as the focal point and background, Heaven and Earth, brightness and darkness. By juxtaposing cool and warm hues, he generates visual impact through contrast and balance. When we approach the canvas, we perceive the subtle transitions and delicate layering of cool and warm, and we experience a psychological reaction. The way we interpreting philosophical concepts in art in turn depends on how we react psychologically to composition and colors. Like a musician, Leroy Lee communicates with his audience, and through abstract imagery he generates a shared psychological response.

The creation of abstract imagery is closely associated with Leroy Lee's special painting process. Oftentimes he must prepare mentally, and develop conceptual ideas and the general forms that he intends to express. He then applies acrylic gesso to the canvas as the first layer of textural expression. He mixes gesso with other media, such as artist's charcoal powder, marble dust, pumice, or other acrylic paints to form the layer of underpainting. He then applies colors across large areas to create blending

washes that decide the bright and dark areas of the composition, the solid and void spaces. To create the focal point, he uses impasto technique with oil paints to increase the thickness on the canvas that contrasts with the flatter background. He emphasizes these contrasts at the focal point to make it the brightest area of the painting. This technique is a vestige of the classical tradition. Lee mixes transparent and opaque materials to create multilayered surfaces, and emphasizes the interlayering of cool and warm colors. Through the glazing process and thick layering with colors, he enhances the chromatic variations and a sense of depth, while simultaneously enriching the surface textures.

Works in the “Mindful Sojourner” exhibition differ from his previous series, in that prior works generally had stronger color contrasts, and now his palette is more subdued. Lee explains, “The accumulation of life experience and the ‘letting go’ of values is something I have been pondering. I have accumulated a lot of experience with layering colors. It’s about time to let it go, to return to nature. This is something that I have felt deeply in recent years, which I had not considered when I became an artist.” This preparation has in fact been going on for some time. In his previous exhibition catalogue, Lee brought forth a Daoist concept, the return to simplicity and truth, as a way of realizing the Daoist philosophy of *wuwei* (“non-action”), while emphasizing that the color system is the essence of classical art. He not only aspires to honor these traditions, but is continually searching for something to dovetail the ancient with the modern that he can incorporate into his personal artistic style. Classical earth tones are his way to link Man with nature, and Man with society. This is a major part of the concept that he wishes to express. The mind’s journey that begins with earth tones, moves toward *fanpu guizhen*, and the accumulation of life experience, and letting go of accumulation, belongs to a philosophical sphere, and in art, subduing colors to an essential level has become his artistic expression of recent years.

Earth tones appear to refer to landscape. Leroy Lee’s painting does seem to contain references to landscape, but also resembles cosmic imagery. One can even sense a connection to cosmic images generated by the Hubble Telescope, which convey the feeling and sensation of the moment of creation of the universe. Lee explains, “I still wish to return to the conceptual point that expresses the environment, the world, and the universe.” People’s visual impressions and perceptions are formed through conceptual studies that can be shared across different cultures. On the surface, however, Chinese philosophy and Western scientific study of the universe are progressing in pluralistic directions; the cosmic images generated by Western scientific tools, and the imagined universe generated by Chinese philosophy, are derived from two different cultural systems. In the end, there is common ground. In Lee’s paintings in this exhibition, viewers can simultaneously make connections to the “big bang theory” and associated imagery, and delve deeply into the artist’s spiritual pursuit of “returning to simplicity and truth.” The artist himself states, “This group of works is both Chinese and Western, but I think they reflect another philosophical level, which is formless and immense.”

As a “mindful sojourner,” Leroy Lee regards art as a lonely spiritual journey. The modern ink art master Liu Kuo-sung’s statement, “The artist’s studio is like a laboratory,” has had a profound impact on him. Lee stays in his studio to polish his skills, to ponder how he can base his work on the foundation and experiments that previous artists had gone through, to achieve a breakthrough. In this exhibition we can already see his achievement in surpassing his previous phases and letting go.

A “mindful sojourner,” Leroy Lee regards art as a lonely spiritual journey. During his college years, most of his friends had begun to pursue trendy installation art and works containing social commentary. Even the “painting is dead” doctrine had begun to infiltrate the Taiwanese art field through the introduction of postmodernism. Leroy Lee steadfastly believes that

painting by hand is the essence of art. “Not only will painting *not* die, but painting will forever occupy an important place in art. What is important is new creation and breakthroughs.” At the same time he contemplates how his painting can bring about a positive effect on society, generating subtle transformative effects on people. While he agrees with some critics’ viewpoint that, “If art cannot bring about some aspect of criticism of society, then it should not exist,” Lee nonetheless thinks that this attitude toward art is too violently intense. He believes in art’s undeniable transformative function. This is the artistic journey Leroy Lee has undertaken.

An-yi Pan researches *Buddhist Art with special interest in the relationship between Chinese intellectual participation in Buddhism and Buddhist painting, Buddhist architecture in relation to precepts, liturgical and spiritual spaces, and transcontinental blossoming of Buddhist teachings and art. He also devotes research to Modern Chinese art and Contemporary Taiwanese art, investigating the impact of colonialism and current geopolitical influence on Chinese and Taiwanese art from the late 19th century to now.*

Statement

Leroy Lee

“This world is but a canvas to our imagination”. – Henry David Thoreau

From his studies and life experiences, the artist interprets the world through his work. But what theme does he have in mind? In the stream of time, how will he convey the essence of his creativity? The images of *Mindful Sojourner* were created out of my continuous exploration into the connection between man, nature and society, in the context of metaphysics and duality. They were also the result of my observations, reflections, and thoughts while wandering in the world all these years.

My early interest and learning in art was rooted in Western classics, from Baroque to Romanticism to Edwardian. I was deeply drawn to the humanistic ideals and the spiritual elements in the classic artistic expressions. I learned the basic figurative painting techniques from the old masters of those periods. Later in college, I was influenced by Chinese brush painting, calligraphy, and philosophy of the Eastern and Western worlds, such as *I-Ching*, Metaphysics, Ontology, which delve into existentialism and the essence of the real world. All these morphed into my desire to try abstract art starting in the year of 2000.

The abstract art is a departure from the traditional art in that, rather than depicting reality, it emphasizes form and basic elements and making new representations without preserving the original order. It tends to focus on the expression of the artist’s inner feelings and spiritual thoughts. Although it seems to be dissociated from reality, its goal is to reflect the real world in different dimensions. I went through this transition at the early stages of doing abstract art. I let the imagination go wild, using bold colors to create dramatic contrasts. I’ve concerned myself with the interaction between man and nature; the relationship between the mystery of life in great nature, the human mind and thought, and the contrast and harmonious balance between stillness and motion. I examine the origin of life and recreate it on canvas, trying to depict the ever-changing feelings that humans experience

interacting with society and environment they live in: happiness or sadness, right or wrong. Technically, I try to consolidate the classic with the modern, the East with the West, the objective distant with the sparks of the intimate. In this style of creation, the artist's expressive instruments are well mirrored by the painting elements, such as composition (balance), focus and background (sky and earth), light and dark (day/night, good/evil), cool and warm colors (seasons), etc. I hope to fuse the athletic and techniques from both the East and the West, as well as the varied brush strokes, colors and texture to create the extreme contrast and yet harmonious balance, such is the wonder of our universe.

In America, after migrating from my native country of 20 years, in this not-all-too-unfamiliar culture, I was inspired by the new life, and all the study and work experience. And the activities in all this time provided more ingredients to my art: movement, transition, multitude, and staying still. Like what I try to say with the *Reminiscence Series*, faced with events positive or negative, intermingled, extending or distracting, and the temporal existence of humans in this perpetual universe, I realized that every memory and experience is the culmination of the past, the passage of the present, and the conveyance of the future. Parallel to this, I learned the technique of addition and subtracting in the creation of art, like the black and white in colors, and adding and subtracting of intensity in colors. So, in the *Earth Tone Series* (2008) I tried to present, visually, a sense of returning to one's native self, blending with the eternal ascetics from the classic artistic tradition. Then, in 2014, following the same quest for essence of elements, I tried to capture the wanderings of the mind, the ephemeral, and the distilled, in the *Mindful Sojourner Series*. I will continue to use my art to interpret the various colors of human life and explore the cumulating of experience and shedding of certain values.

(Special thanks to Raymond Ku for translation of this statement)



Plates



1.
Mindscape, 2015
Oil with mixed media on canvas
48 x 108 in.
previous spread

2.
Prelude, 2014
Oil with mixed media on canvas
48 x 48 in.





3.
Echoes in Eternity, 2014
Oil with mixed media on canvas
47 3/4 x 71 3/4 in.

previous spread

4.
Inner Thoughts - Reminiscence Series, 2014
Oil with mixed media on canvas
48 x 48 in.



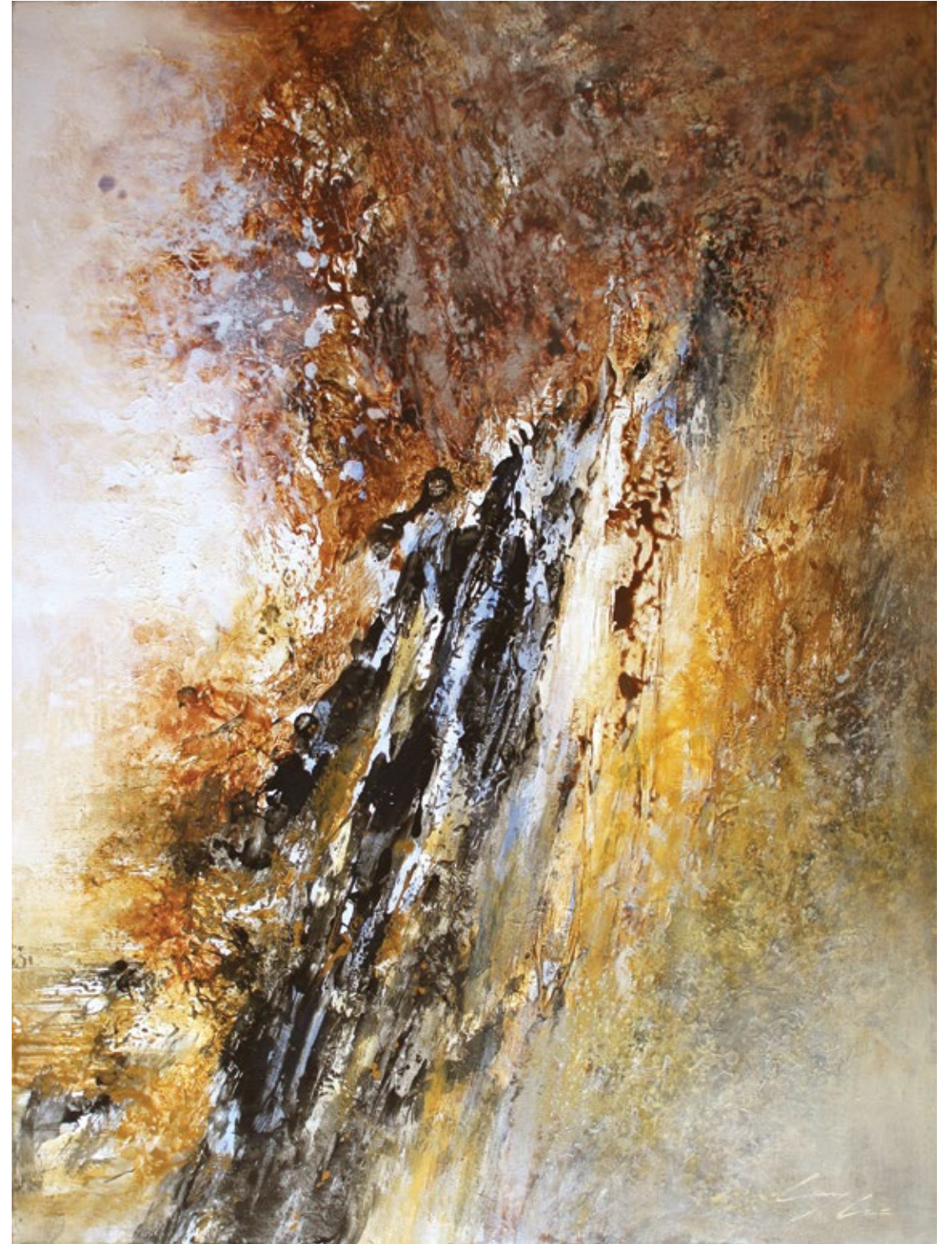


5.
Symmetrical Life (Diptych), 2014
Oil with mixed media on canvas
Two panels, 40 x 30 in. each
previous spread

6.
Concerto, 2014
Oil with mixed media on canvas
48 x 48 in.



7.
Rhyme, 2014
Oil with mixed media on canvas
48 x 36 in.



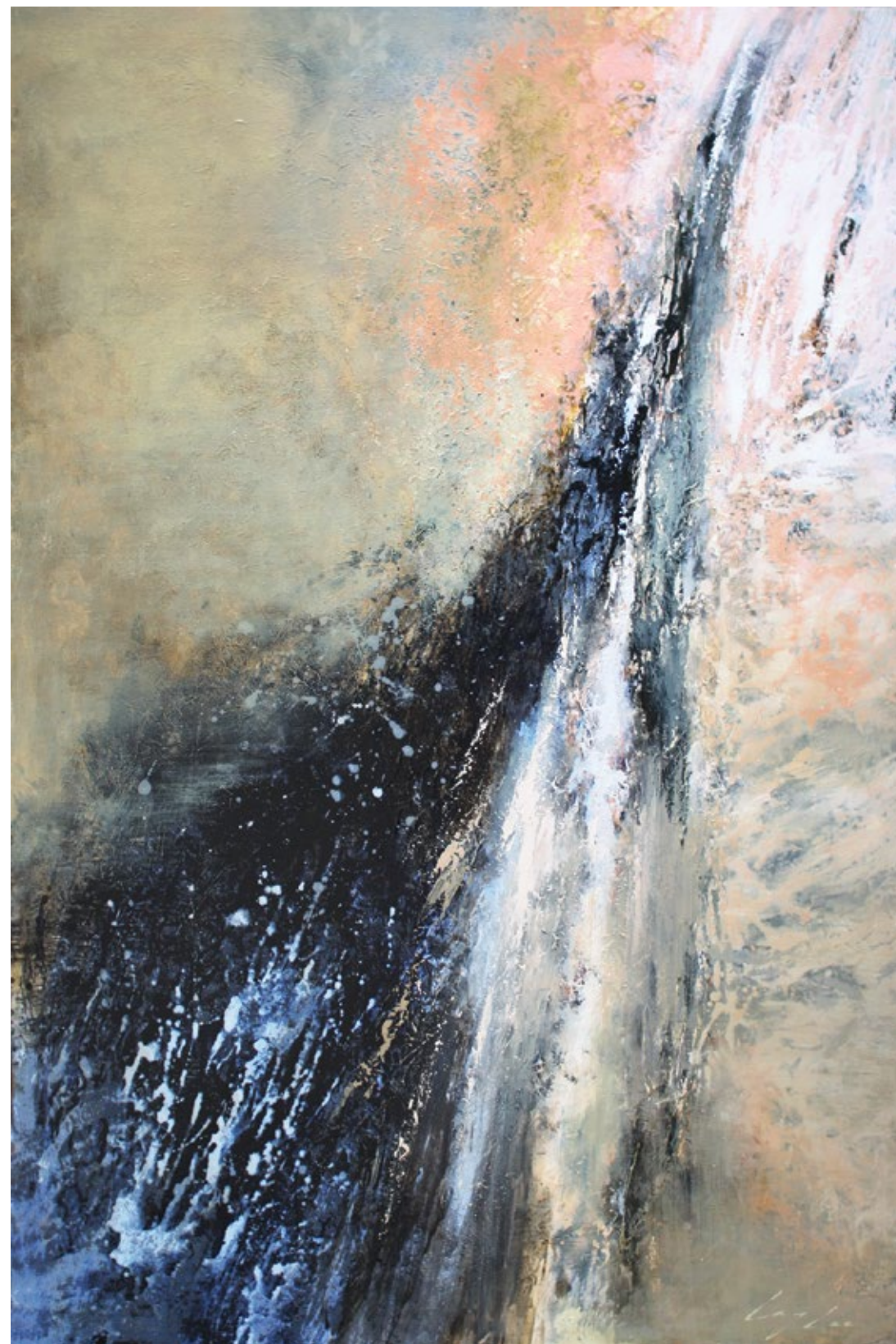


8.
Limitless Expanse, 2014
Oil with mixed media on canvas
40 x 60 in.



9.
Autumn Thought, 2014
Oil with mixed media on canvas
48 x 48 in.

10.
Energy Flow, 2014
Oil with mixed media on canvas
72 x 48 in.





11.
Peaceful Mind, 2014
Oil with mixed media on canvas
36 x 48 in.

12.
Serene Movement Series 5, 2015
Oil with mixed media on canvas
40 x 30 in.





13.
Moment, 2015
Oil with mixed media on canvas
48 x 48 in.



14.
Surging Vision, 2015
Oil with mixed media on canvas
48 x 72 in.



15.
Untitled, 2014
Oil with mixed media on canvas
72 x 96 in.



Leroy Lee 李佳駿

Biography

Leroy Lee (Chia Chun Lee)

Born in 1969, Taipei, Taiwan Lives and works in Los Angeles

HONORS and AWARDS

- 2014 Federation Nationale De La Culture Francaise - Distinction: Toile D'Or De L'annee 2014 Avis De Nomination, France
- 2013 Salon d'Automne | Grand Palais, Champs-Elysées, France
- 2012 LICC London International CREATIVE Competition, London

EDUCATION

Instructed by world renowned artist and teacher of classical painting David Leffel.

University of California, Riverside UCR.

Bachelor of Arts, Fine Arts, Oil Painting Specialization, Taiwan-Chinese Cultural University.

Enlightened under the guidance of reputed artists, Mr. Te Lee and Mr. Cheng-Yen Wu. Mr. Wu is a diligent disciple of Mr. Xu Beihong, the distinguished artist of the early years of Republic in China.

EXHIBITION

- 2013 Salon d'Automne | Grand Palais, Champs-Elysees, Paris
- 2013 LICC, London International Creative Competition Award - Circular Reflection, London
- 2013 12th Artist Fair Taiwan, Taipei / Tainan
- 2013 Segerstrom Center For the Arts - Adoration and Sacrifice - The ReRite Of Spring, Celebration of The Rite Of Spring Centennial, Costa Mesa, California
- 2013 Linus Galleries - Emanation, Pasadena, California 2012 Linus Galleries, Motion Artist - Serene Movement, Pasadena / Long Beach, California
- 2012 Segerstrom Center For the Arts, Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, ART Inspired by Beethoven's 9th Symphony Exhibition with Pacific Symphony orchestra - Beethoven's 9th Symphony performances, Costa Mesa, California
- 2012 Marietta / Cobb Museum of Art (MCMA), Metro Montage XII Annual Juried Exhibition of Artists, Marietta, Georgia
- 2012 The Haggin Museum, 57th Stockton Art League Exhibition, Stockton, California
- 2011 Art Exhibition of the Centennial Celebration of the Republic of China, Chinese Daily News, Los Angeles
- 2010 Art Exhibition of Leroy Lee and students, Culture Center of Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Los Angeles
- 2007 Joseph Thomas Galleries, Fall Wine, New York 2006 One City Place, White Plains, NY 2005 Joseph Thomas Galleries, New York
- 1995 Ministry of National Defense R.O.C, Taiwan 1993 Taipei Cultural Center, Graduation Exhibition, Taipei 1992 Fine Arts Department of Taiwan-Chinese Culture University, Taipei 1989 Taipei City Hall, Roadsafe, Taipei

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