

Lila: Unending Play

by Jane Lee



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Curatorial note by Ong Puay Khim

Playing with Paint

Paint is a substance comprising mainly pigments which provide colour, binders that hold the pigments together and solvents that maintain a liquid-like form for easy application. Thus, the production of paint involves binding together solid particles in a manner that allows them to behave like a liquid prior to exposure to air, upon which they harden into solid form. This composite of solid and liquid and their transformation from one state to another is inherent in painting.

This interplay between the states of matter is emblematic of Jane Lee's artistic process. Through playing with paint, the artist explores the varied characteristics of the material—how it responds to different tools beyond the brush, to different surfaces, to the force of gravity, its behaviour when "stacked" instead of mixed, or "weaved" instead of spread. How do these different ways of handling paint create different surfaces to make a painting?

One of Lee's best-known series is *Fetish*, which she started in 2009 and is representative of her innovative use of techniques and materials of painting. The artist shares:

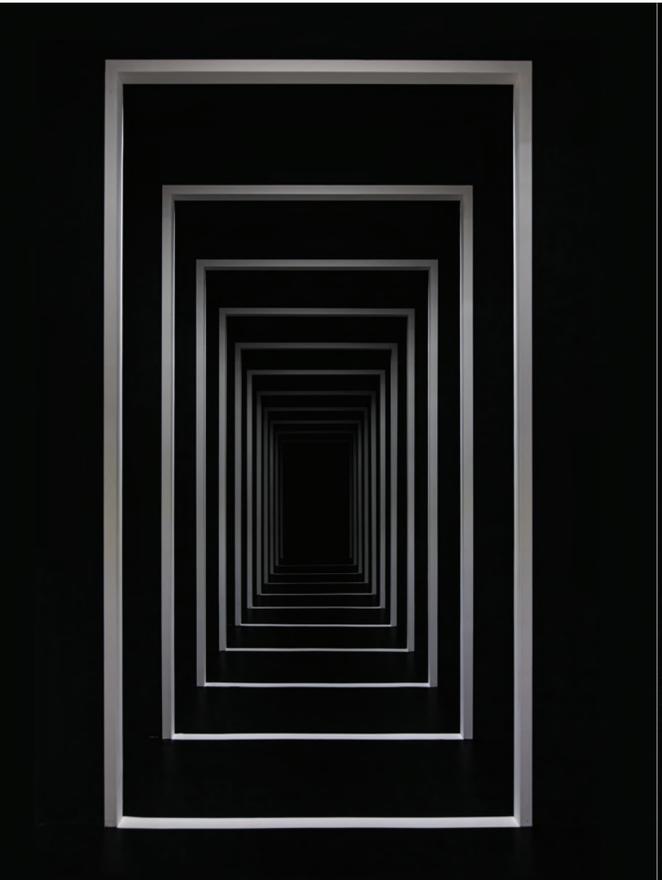
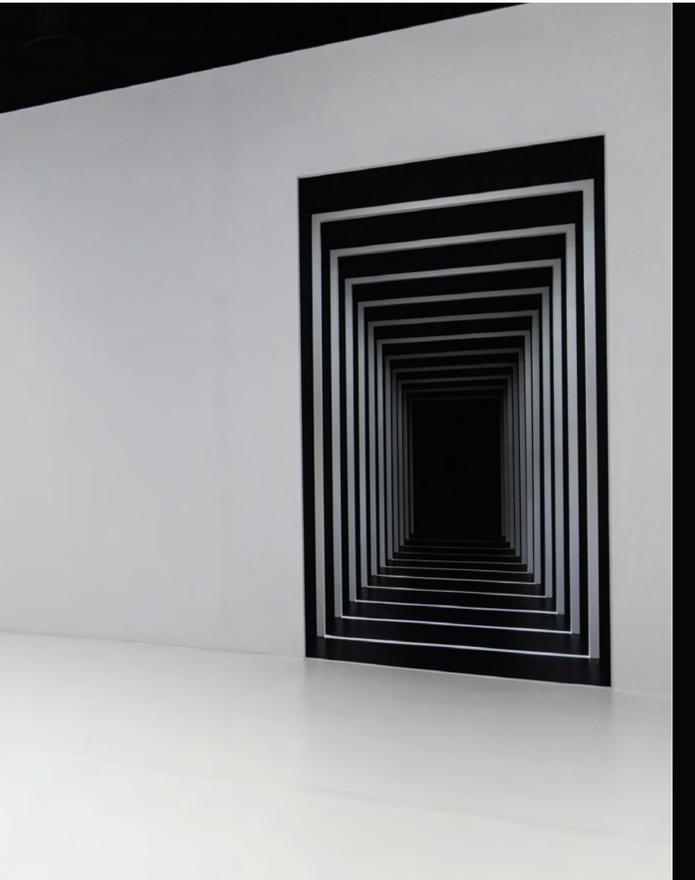
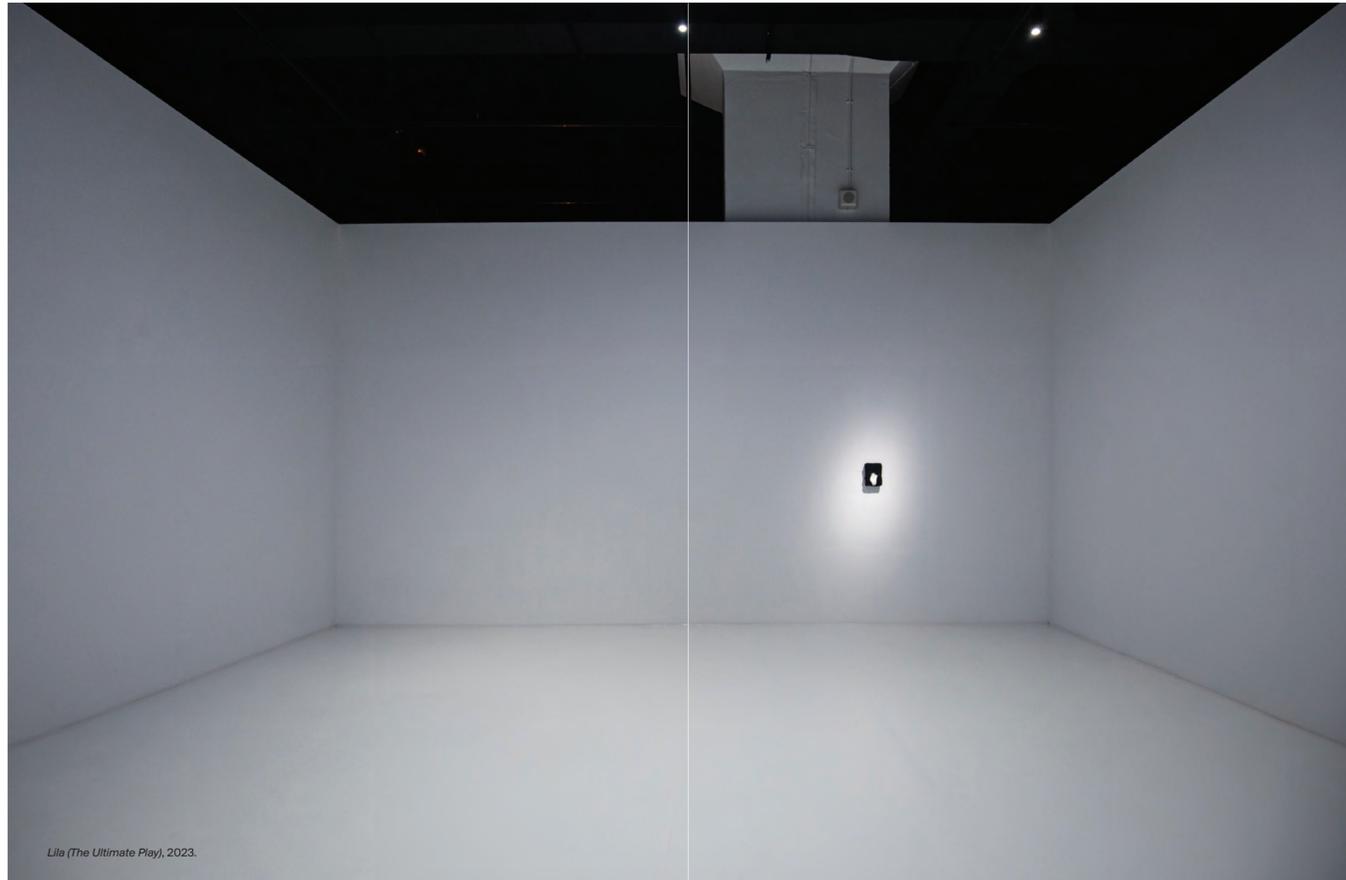
"Works in my *Fetish* series were created using dry paint skin, a discovery I made when I was cleaning my palette one day and managed to pull out thick layers of dry paint residue from my palette. I thought that was beautiful and unexpected. I later recreated the residue and rolled them into tiny rosettes, cut and slice them like onions, and reattached them onto the canvas. This is a process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction."

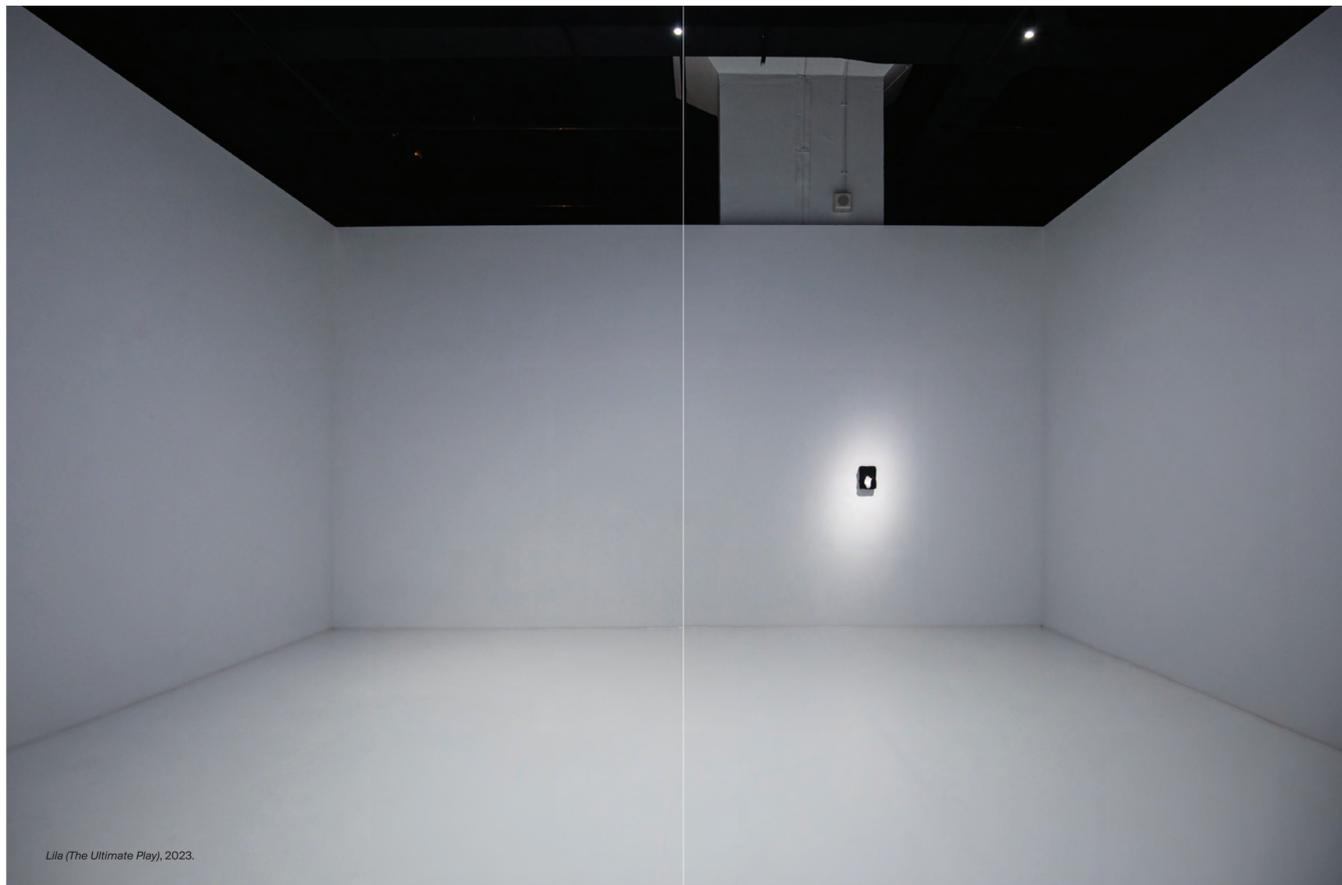
Painting involves the process of applying colour (typically in the form of paint) to a surface. This may seem simple but it becomes more complex when we regard it as a two-dimensional form of expression, one of the oldest forms of art.

Painting as Living

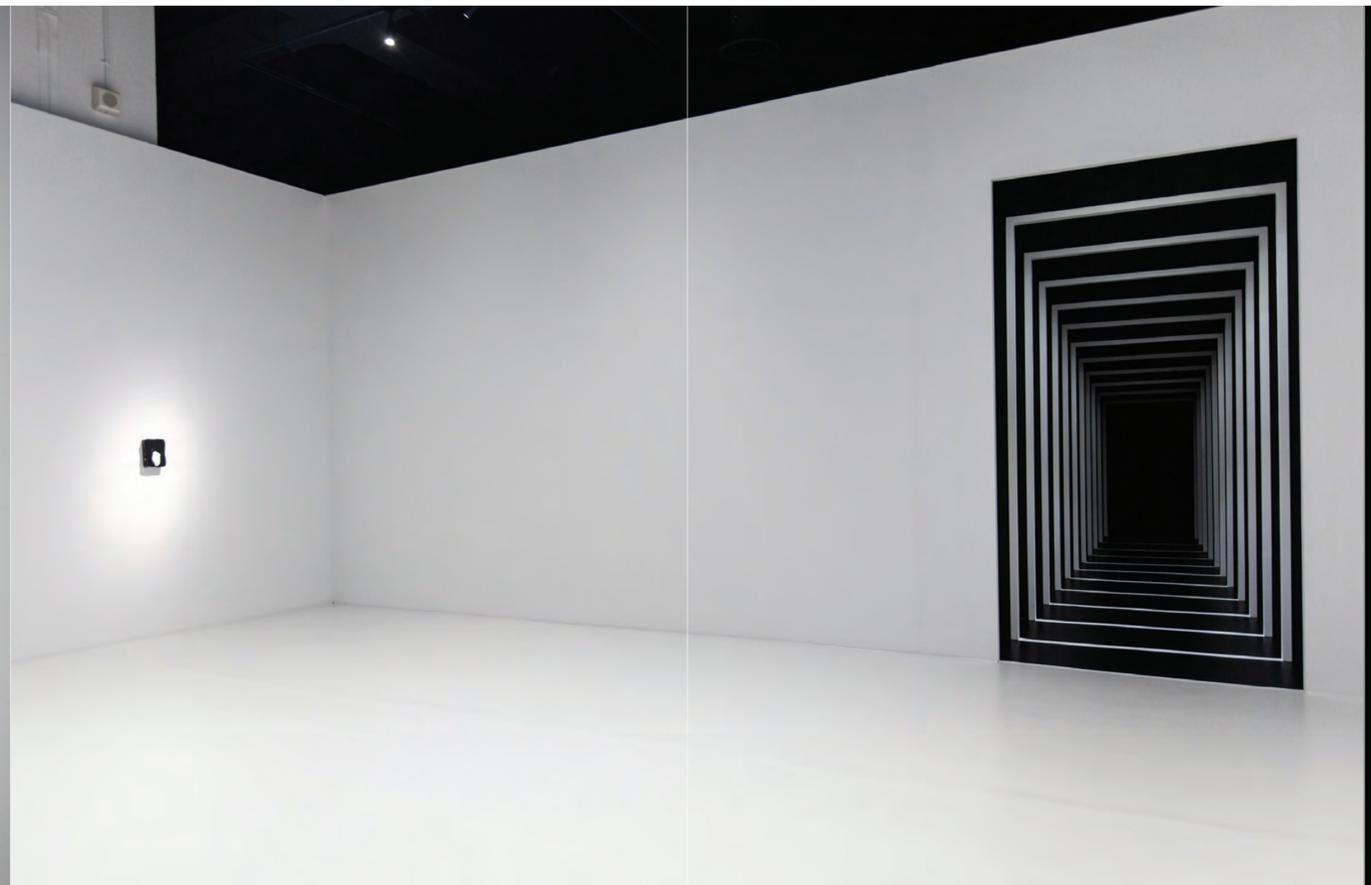
When we look at a painting, what exactly are we looking at? Or perhaps the question is: what exactly are we looking for? Is it a picture of the world we see or think we know, a representation of lives lived or stories of virtues and vice, an emotion, a proof of human intellect and creativity?

In Jane Lee's practice, painting is an embodiment of life. Everyday gestures are found in her works, in how she applies and shapes paint to form surfaces through spreading, lifting, slicing/cutting, rolling, squeezing, dripping, splattering and scooping; in how the different forms of her canvas hint at their treatment—torn, stripped, scrubbed, rubbed, wrung, draped, wrapped, stacked.





Lila (The Ultimate Play), 2023.



Life as Motion

Painting is a body. It is an extension of the artist's body going about her daily life, constantly in action.

Movement is core to lived human experiences, just as matter is made of atoms and molecules in perpetual motion. Movement occurs in space and shapes our orientation and subjectivities of the world. It represents vitality, a condition of being alive.

Jane Lee's paintings almost always seem to be in motion—they detach from the wall, fall off their stretchers, droop to the ground, tear or puncture their surface, or weave through and around walls. Her paintings breathe in the air and breathe out into the air, extending their presence into their immediate space (practically speaking, a painting needs to "breathe"—to be aired to extend its material lifespan and maintain its existence).

Movement as Spatiality

Spatiality is a social construct, encapsulating our engagement with the world external to our bodies and involves a negotiation of the relationships between people and things and the conditions of their existence. Movement occurs within this space and where there is "exterior space", what is in motion is more than our bodies. For even when we are stationary, our eyes roam and seek out our surroundings, constantly registering information to situate ourselves amongst others.

It is this perception of physical (measurable) space versus lived (sensed) space that is explored through Jane Lee's works. Her paintings don't just occupy space—they inhabit it.

"Play like a child," says the Artist

For Jane Lee, the process of painting is spontaneous, intuitive and at times, meditative. In her exploration of painting's potentials and possibilities, there are no limits to what may constitute a painting, or what a painting can or is expected to do, or where a painting may begin or end. In this exhibition, paint, light, reflection and shadows are all mediums for creating surfaces—all forms can make a painting. Experience is at the core of our encounter with Lee's works, and we are invited to become acquainted with paintings: as surface, object, body and an interplay of spaces and sensations.

"There is an old Sanskrit word, *lila*, which means play. Richer than our word, it means divine play, the play of creation, destruction, and re-creation, the folding and unfolding of the cosmos. *Lila*, free and deep, is both the delight and enjoyment of this moment, and the play of God. It also means love. *Lila* may be the simplest thing there is—spontaneous, childish, disarming."

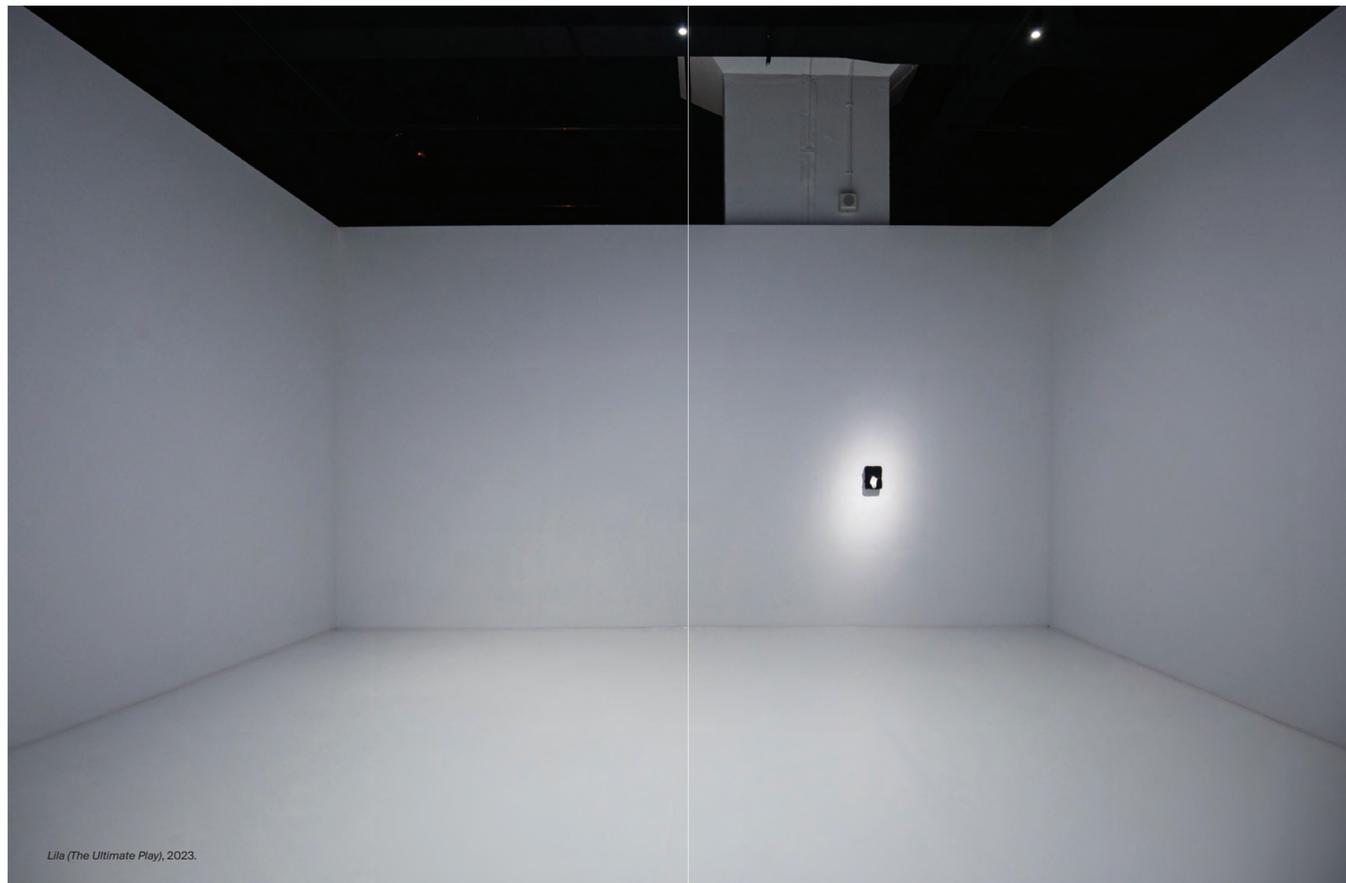
—Stephen Nachmanovitch,
Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art
(G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1991)

Jane Lee is best known for her material and conceptual explorations of the practice of painting. Her works are often richly layered and possess physical and visual heft, making them akin to sculpture. Moving beyond the usual painterly gestures and tools, everyday movements and processes are embodied in her works. Many of her paintings seem to be in motion: they fall, unroll, hang or slide. To Lee, painting comprises not only of paint applied on surfaces and within defined edges but also what permeates into the space surrounding it. This interest in the spatiality of painting has led her to experiment with new materials of painting, including clay, cement and stainless steel.

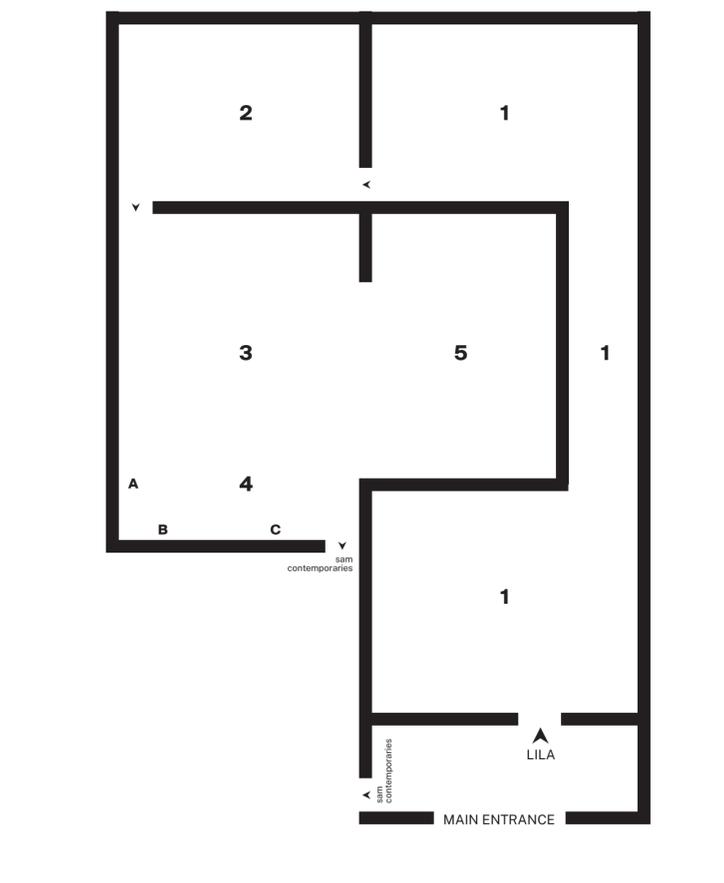
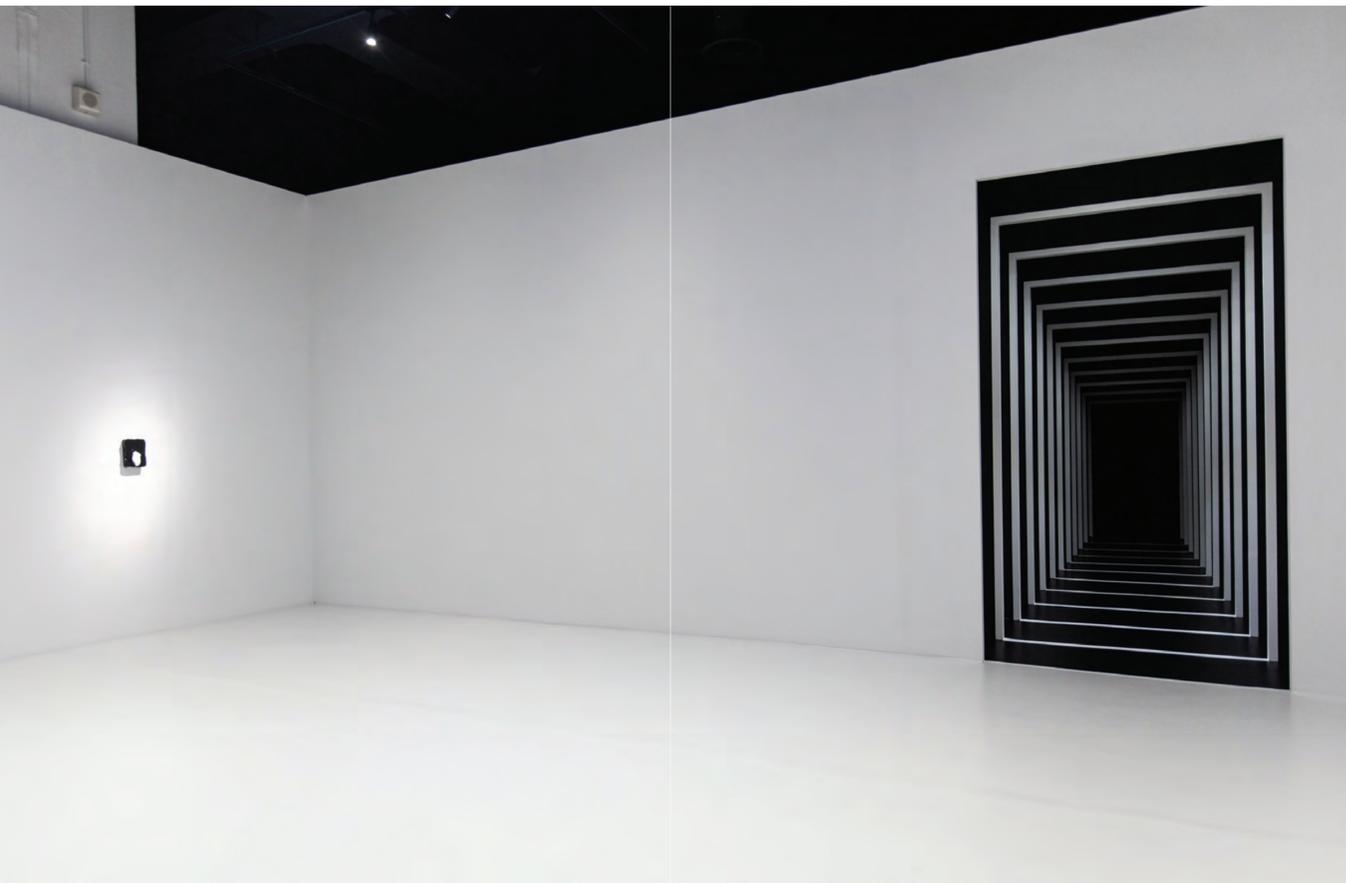
Lee's monumental painting installation *Raw Canvas*, shown at the 2008 Singapore Biennale brought her international, critical attention. She has won several awards, including a Celeste Prize for painting in 2011. She was a finalist for the 2007 Sovereign Asian Art Prize and was the first recipient of the Singapore Art Exhibition International Residency Prize in 2007. She has exhibited widely in museums and galleries in Asia and Europe including at the Vilnius Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania (2009) and in the exhibition *Frontiers Reimagined*, an official Collateral Event of the 56th Venice Biennale (2015). Lee held her first mid-career retrospective, *Red States*, at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 2018.



Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Yogya Art Lab.



Lila (The Ultimate Play), 2023.



1 *Lila (The Ultimate Play)*
2023
Mixed media
Dimensions variable
Commissioned by Singapore Art Museum

2 *In Praise of Darkness*
2023
Acrylic paint, acrylic heavy gel on wood
200 x 300 x 12 cm
Commissioned by Singapore Art Museum

3 *Hollow and Empty*
2023
Mirror-finish stainless steel, polyurethane paint, wood, acrylic
240 x 360 x 74 cm
Commissioned by Singapore Art Museum

4A *The Object I*
2011
Mixed media on wood
165 x 123 x 13 cm
Collection of Singapore Art Museum

4B *The Object II*
2011
Mixed media on wood
161 x 125 x 16 cm
Collection of Singapore Art Museum

4C *Fetish - White II*
2011
Acrylic paint, acrylic heavy gel on canvas
180 x 180 x 8 cm
Istana Art Collection

5 *Status*
2009
Mixed media
420 x 537 x 144 cm
Collection of Singapore Art Museum
Acquired with the support of BinjaiTree Foundation in honour of Chia Yew Kay

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Lila: Unending Play by Jane Lee*, at Singapore Art Museum, 18 May - 24 September 2023.

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Where is the Painting

Lawrence Lacambra Ypil

I wanted to be a painter, once. And then I did not.

I wanted to be a painter, once, imagining a stroke could conjure first, a flower, and then a scene, a face and then a feeling; then I realised I could not really imagine face, nor feeling, nor scene.

Besides, a painting was always an elsewhere, yes.

Or is it just because this week the workmen are giving the building I live in a fresh coat and the patio table has specks of paint I only notice now and also tiled floors, the potted plant, even a leaf, so I say—oh no— or do I tsk—or I look up.

A painting is always a somewhere else, I guess, that drips or flicks.

Or pours. Or stains.

Or stays.

Or here in Jane Lee's *Lila: Unending Play*, in this mostly empty afternoon, past and into its rooms, away and towards its walls where a painting may or may not be—I look.

And then I find. And in between the looking and the finding, I sigh that sigh of sweet relief of finding it: this minute figure on the wall. This lip and petal or is it mouth or aperture that finally makes this room a room?

My body breathes. My face relaxes. I break into a smile. I almost touch.

Perhaps a painting is a room where a painting might be found until we find it.

I forget that with painting one needs to wait: for the paint to dry, for colour to deepen, that things congeal, or melt, or break and in due time. The patience painting implies.

Words by far seem easier. Once found, a turn of phrase falls, a poem into place. Voilà! But perhaps the best writing needs time too, painting reminds. Pacing around a table, I leave a thought midsentence while I wipe the counter. Uncertain where a story is going, I stay sometimes sitting by the bed. The answer might unravel if I fold a towel. Is this what Jane implies? That I wait and once the world hardens into shape, I might bend.

A friend once described my writing "painterly", which may have meant I write in strokes. Brush and thought. The shade of sunlight on grass. The profile of a face. No scene constructed in the end other than the world in fragment, in shape. A vision made by looking. The paint of painting.

Jane might call this play: this surrender of the self to the world. The way we might twirl the yarn for hours, or be fascinated by the shade a crayon makes, that pleasure of attention to texture, colour, shape. One word follows another. Perhaps a painting is what is made in accumulation, dispersal, arrangement, bliss: to let that deep red deepen, to twirl that congealed drip, to rip across the frame, across the page.

Or perhaps a painting is a room where a painting might be found until we find ourselves.

Where is the painting? I ask in the room of scale that is as much my finding as the painting. Or at the foot of the petal-aperture turned mountain with the scales reversed I am humbled by into sitting, writing, a visitor asks me: are we meant to enter? She is ready to kneel in obeisance. I want to tell her yes, yes, we must enter.

As I write:

Texture. Temperature. Temperature. Tongue. Tell me again. There is a nowhere else. You know.

Temperance. Tenuous. Tesseract. Test. I have passed it. But what exactly?

Passage is a way the tongue rolling out of a mouth. Suggests a speech but what.

Testy. Tenet. Telomere. Tundra. Terrarium of the Telescope.

Timbre and Torn. Tita Telly. I watch. Sitting sentimental on a stool. I can tell you about.

A mouth in a way I could not while I was standing. Tentacled. Tillate. Terrestrial. Toll. The tool it takes. This looking.

The longer I look into the light, the longer I know it will be to find my way. Into the dark. And in this way, I find a way again.

Or in the dark:

The company painting gives. Instead of speaking, I sit. I become the company a painting needs. I am the painting with.

Or memory: The only painter I knew growing up, wasn't a painter of paintings but a painter of houses. He was from my parents' hometown and he came to our house in summers, when there were weeks of no rain. And he spent a few days with us, walking on our roof at noon, sleeping in the extra room at night. His name was Aldo and he liked to sing. His name was Aldo and he liked to drink. And he knew how to tell a story to a group of us who were kids, where to throw the punchline with wink. I don't know how much he got paid, probably not much but he had that way men from small towns have, holding their pride of labour with a swagger. The flecks of dried paint on his trousers. The flick of his shiny, gelled hair. The last time I saw him, he was telling a story on the side of the road, tipsy, funny and he waved at my father from across the street and called out to him and me.

The painting has found me.

Hollow and Empty, 2023. Detailed view.

From left: *Fetish – White II*, 2011; *The Object II*, 2011; *The Object I*, 2011. Exhibition view.

From left: *Hollow and Empty*, 2023; *Status*, 2009. Exhibition view.

Hollow and Empty, 2023. Exhibition view.