

Between Red

by Katie Kitamura

I.

The Demilitarized Zone - known as the DMZ - cuts across the Korean Peninsula, acting as a buffer zone between North and South Korea. Sometimes referred to as the last front of the Cold War, it is a supremely ghostly landscape - a mountainous range that is seemingly untouched by civilization, and yet is also one of the most symbolically loaded landscapes in the world.

It could be described as the most natural and the most denaturalized landscape imaginable. While it is devoid of the usual markers of political ideology - monuments to present and past regimes, the likenesses of political leaders - the whole of the landscape is, in a sense, subtle testament to the pervasive power of one of the most stringent ideological narratives of our time.

Korean artist Sea Hyun Lee locates his work in this setting. In his paintings, Lee endlessly reconstructs and reconstitutes the landscape of the DMZ. Reworking fragments of terrain, blocks of land and water, he creates a world that functions according to the logic of its own terms. In this sense, it is a world that is entirely hermetic - appropriately so, considering that the territory Lee depicts is defined by the very impregnability of its borders.

Lee works by using a manner of construction that is akin to collage, a constant shuffling of recurring fragments. And indeed, the series *Between Red* is at first glance overwhelmingly simple. A series of landscape paintings is rendered in delicate washes of red. Large swaths of unmarked white meander between islands of crimson land. The blank spaces are harshly set against the carefully detailed fragments in red - nonetheless, they cohere into the flawless totality that is created by each painting.

It is the fragmentation behind the landscape's seeming totality that is operating at the core of Lee's paintings. It is due to that fragmentation that these seemingly simple landscapes are able to evoke multiple dualities, a vast landslide of inconsistencies and fissures. This fundamental gesture of splitting, alongside its contrasting totality, is the uncanny tension that animates Lee's paintings, and that makes them compelling both on a conceptual and a purely aesthetic level.

Lee tells a story that is in many ways lodged at the core of his ongoing *Between Red* series:

When I was serving my mandatory military service, I would be in a tactical area at night, close to the border. I would wear night vision goggles, which coated everything in red. The forests and trees felt so fantastic and beautiful. It was unrealistic scenery filled with horror and fear, and with no possibility of entering.

What Lee describes is an effect that is recreated in his paintings. The night vision goggles alter the whole of the vision, creating a hypertrophied, denaturalized effect. The effect is one of beauty and alienation, and uncanny temporal displacement - a sense of stepping into a different temporal continuum that is apart from history or the present. That complex nexus of sensations and ideas is almost effortlessly carried in each of these paintings, and is communicated in a visceral and immediate manner.

But beyond that immediate - indeed, almost physical - effect, Lee's reuse of the visual effect of military night vision goggles indicates the way in which he integrates the political into the aesthetic,

a key theme given the subject and manner of his work. In Lee's paintings, the political is so seamlessly embedded into the aesthetic that it is difficult to perceive; the referenced ideologies are everywhere and nowhere at once.

This, of course, is the larger message of these paintings. The wash of military red illustrates the manner in which political ideology functions, not simply within the logic of Lee's paintings, but also in the world beyond it: as a subtle but pervasive wash of color, one that exists neither outside nor inside the concrete elements of each image, but as a literal filter across it.

Ideology is visible not in the specifics of the landscape and what happens in it - that landscape is, Lee suggests, so many shuffled fragments - but rather is located in the vision of those who find themselves inhabiting it. It is so difficult to shake off precisely because it is already lodged in our very vision, like a screen through which we perceive the world.

Political ideology is not necessarily located in a concrete message; instead it can be characterized as a way of seeing. Lee's paintings illustrate the reasons why painting - and art more universally speaking - is perfectly poised to deliver a political message, or at least an insight into the manner in which the political functions. Lee makes no separation between politics and aesthetics, and understands that if aesthetics is about constructing a way of looking, then so too is politics.

In this sense, many - if not all - of the key elements in Lee's paintings function both on a political and an aesthetic level. The symbols employed in his work - whether it is the wash of red or the way his imagined landscapes combine elements of both the North and South Korean mountain ranges - set the visual terms of his paintings, while also delivering a concise political message. It is a kind of sparse utility, and a virtuoso efficiency, that is at work here.

II.

But Lee's paintings are unlikely to strike the viewer as either political statements or aesthetic calculations - and indeed, they are neither and not even simply both. They are primarily deeply personal works that reference Lee's own sense of the past and its losses. Here, Lee tarries with two familiar ideas: nostalgia and utopia. But he avoids approaching either with mere simplicity or mere skepticism. Instead, his paintings are infused with a sophisticated sense of nostalgia, and a wry idea of utopia.

Lee is of course concerned with vanishings; these are paintings of a lost past, of disappearing landscapes and eroding memories. "The landscape no longer exists, and so I have to paint it," Lee explains. But his paintings are never simply about the longing to recover the past. They are, instead, about the very process of reconstitution itself. They are concerned with a trauma that is not necessarily located in the past, but that is perhaps instead located in the endless attempt to recapitulate the past.

This is, of course, what makes the *Between Red* paintings at once deeply nostalgic, and also acutely contemporary. And while they seem to hint at the possibilities of utopia, they in fact deliver a message that is far more ambiguous. Rather than images of union and healing, these are images of fissure and rupture. They chart a complex territory of contradiction and variation, and their seeming totality is always threatening to give way.

Beyond memory's mechanism of ideal reconstitution, there are countless irreconcilables. The *Between Red* paintings are representations of that underlying inconsistency. Lee's paintings lull the

viewer into a state of near passive hypnosis with their compelling visual flourishes. But gradually their perfection gives way to schisms of vision, multiple perspectives and an almost jarring level of visual and psychological distortion. Inconsistencies and illogical repetitions occur, and the eye struggles to resolve those visual gaps.

That effect is operating at the very heart of what fascinates in the *Between Red* paintings. It is a distinctly physical effect, one that is achieved through the manipulation of perspective. The paintings often incorporate two perspectives - one that is in the Asian tradition of flat landscape painting, and another that employs traditional Western perspective. Often these are mixed together to uncanny effect, with individual patches of perspective landscape set against a larger stretch of flat, non-perspective landscape.

There are any number of interpretations to be drawn from the elegant blending of these two perspectives, particularly given Lee's recent tenure at London's Chelsea College of Art, and the fact that Lee often refers to his nostalgia for what he perceives to be a lost Korea. But that dual perspective illustrated in Lee's paintings produces an effect that is separate to - or perhaps simply beyond - meaning. It is of less interest for the cultural clash it implies, and more interesting simply for the startling effect it creates, and the psychic inconsistency it depicts.

That inconsistency is brought to particularly strong effect in *Between Red 45*, a large painting in which rows of peninsular landscape are stacked, one atop the other. Each individual fragment of land is painted in perspective, but the painting as a whole is flattened, with the fragments organized without regard for perspective. The eye travels across the painting and is unable to reconcile the fragments; the effect is one of profound destabilization.

But then in other paintings in the series, the fragments cohere into a single totality that is so definitely posited that it becomes in itself artificial. In *Between Red 44*, the image resolves into the clear outline of a circular moon, with what might be a delicate ruffle of clouds; the painting implicitly draws attention to the artifice of the landscape, and the manner in which its fragments have been manipulated, shaped, and situated.

This is, of course, much the manner in which we constitute our own ontological experience, and in particular our sense of the past - alternating between moments of perceived totality, and moments where various cracks appear to rupture that constructed sense of the world. Individually, but particularly as a body of work, Lee's paintings inhabit a curious space between wholeness and fragmentation. In this way they reveal both the disruptions and inconsistencies that mar our sense of reality, as well as the totality we evoke in order to keep that disorder at bay.

This is where the emotional power of Lee's paintings resides - in their depiction of trauma, but also in their depiction of the devices we use to refute the fact and the evidence of that trauma. The human compulsion towards narratives of wholeness and totality is rendered with an acute awareness of its futility, as well as its potential to achieve a kind of grace. Lee represents both the landscape of fragmentation and the restored landscape of completion in equal measure.

That those attempts at restoration are often extravagant (as in the case of *Between Red 44*) is simply part of what makes these paintings so pleasurable. And these are deeply pleasurable images - deeply nostalgic, visually lush and instantly mesmerizing. But Lee's work points out something more subtly complex, which is the possibility that our pleasure is itself rooted in fragments and essentially inconstant, and that totality and fragmentation, pleasure and trauma, are inextricably linked.

Lee's utopia is one conceived in a direct, but remarkably sophisticated manner. He is constantly aware of the fact that utopia is never more than several paces from dystopia, and that desire is chiefly fuelled by absence and impossibility. What is remarkable is the paintings' ability to nonetheless produce such affect of dread and longing; while Lee may understand the mechanics of the desire that fuels his work, he remains more than capable of succumbing to their fascination. The result is keenly self-aware work that never lapses into irony or cynicism - and as such never loses its magic.