

Lee Young Rim at Cotton Seed, 2015

A flippant description of Lee Young Rim's installation at Space Cottonseed would be that it is like an explosion in a DIY store or sawmill: all the wood panels have been sent shooting out through the door.

Yes, it is like an explosion, but it is a very slow and quiet one.

Now, that sounds like a paradox.

Indeed, it is so and it should be noted that Lee Young Rim's work often seems paradoxical: things that are in fact large and heavy seem light and delicate; surfaces that are blank and apparently devoid of interest gain distinction and even some personality when looked at slowly; that which is complex seems simple and that which is simple seems complex. Very often, as here, her paintings, show drastic shifts in scale, but yet remain harmonious. The work has so much energy, but once the shock of seeing it subsides, one sees that the energy is in fact contained or held in stasis. Her work contrives to be both complicated and calm, tense but harmonious.

Eventually one realises that, despite its apparently dynamic form, hers is an essentially meditative art.

This room sized painting is in many respects a version, albeit one more assertive and complicated, of a more patently meditative, thoughtful work of 2013 named *Structural leaned blue* where seven irregular planks, five painted or stained blue, the other two grey, were leaned against the wall. If this seemed like a chance encounter in the sawmill or the lumber yard, the work at Cotton Seed was an explosion in the same mill or yard.

'You call it a painting?' you may ask. 'But how can something like this that spreads not just through one, but through three rooms be described as a painting?' 'Her paintings.' I would answer, 'have long been multi panel, this one even more so. I see this as still, to a great extent, being a painting because it is a collection, or concatenation, of surfaces rather than of volumes. As you approach nearer to it, it is the delicate, nuanced surfaces, each subtly different, that attract attention, rather than the nodal points and edges where these surfaces meet. These planes, like the facets in an analytic cubist painting by Picasso or Braque fit together aesthetically. It is all of a piece and therefore, I

think, wholly feasible to argue that this is an extreme version of an installed painting – or a very extended painting – or an abstract polyptych.’

Even when situated flat against the wall her paintings have always been about the way space is occupied. The way elements and the surfaces and the way they touch each other, or balance against each other, affect space is something she has always been sensitive to. For example, talking of a work, *L painting*, made in 2012 while studying for her MA she said, ‘the *L painting* was a response to my cubicle space. It was just an extension of part of one wall. But, for me, it triggered some changes in the perception of the cubicle space. When I became aware of the gap in the wall, the cubicle itself turned into a canvas. I feel the urge to paint on that gap. By simply painting the gap, I think that action “activated” the space. Also, by extending the “I shaped gap” to “L shape” the floor space could be engaged.’

Just as the cubicle then effectually turned into a canvas, so in this larger, more ambitious work the gallery, all three rooms of it, was turned into a canvas. Paintings have always needed to be installed, have always needed to relate to the wall, either by their frames or the asceticism of the white cube space. The way paintings are reproduced in books and magazine or on the web without frame or shadow tends to make us forget this. And, of course, the simpler the work the more important the way it sits on the wall and the more it can activate the wall – Robert Ryman always claimed his white monochrome paintings in effect extended eighteen inches beyond their outside edges.

Writing of another work, *Yellow painting*, also made as a student in 2012 Yiung Rim said that it, ‘again tried to explore how painting could be presented with actual space and deliberated by real objects. It also explored unconventional material as a medium of painting – a discarded wooden block and some thin transparent paper. In this work, wood and paper do not just function as a format for representing some images on its surface.

‘Unlike in traditional paintings,’ she continued, ‘these two materials were simply joined and presented as being one painting in itself. Technically, it is not painted, but is of very raw materials. Yet this simple piece of work could reveal a dynamicity or tension in the real space with its subtle shadows. For example, the actual shadow I made by folding part of the paper, the shadow thrown by the wooden block, the shadow made

by the gap between paper and wall, as well as a fictional shadow created by my painterly gesture.'

Things put into the charged space of the wall sing to each other, and to the shadows they create.

Her pieces work in space in a similar way to how music works in apparent silence: it sets up relationships; it both changes and makes us aware of the space or aural landscape we are in. The world is never actually silent nor is it ever actually ever empty. Even when you are in an isolation cell, as Robert Irwin pointed out, still there is always the sound of your heart beating and the electric buzz of your neurons.¹ You can always feel your toes and fingers in space.

Much as minimal art does, so Young Rim's paintings in space draw attention to other elements in their context, the room, the walls, the floor, the doors, their incidents and peculiarities. Hers is an art, and a way of thinking, that makes us more attentive to things in the world around us.

In this work, for example, we become slowly more aware of the gap under the wall, the ceiling struts, the shadows that cling in the corners. Shadows: we become especially aware of how light and shadow spreads and congeals in pools.

If we look back at earlier works such as her *White reliefs* or her assorted *Shadow boxes* we see that the play of light and shade was always crucial both in giving the works definition and in giving them a sense of completion by ensuring the work has an interesting relationship to the room at large. Shadows anchor an object to a wall or a floor as surely as any nail.

Simplicity and complexity: if we should look at a smaller earlier piece, *Bundle Painting* of 2012 we see something similar, albeit far more modest, at work: a dozen or so off-cuts of wood, each a different natural colour or varnished differently, are gathered together in bundle (*fascis*) and placed on the wall. The title seems, of course, paradoxical. Art is never "bundled" together like some winter firewood gathered casually under one's arm. It is considered. Can something apparently so unconsidered as this, so artless, be a painting? Doubts put to one side, once presented against the wall we start seeing it as a painting. It works as one.

It echoes, however unintentionally, an old and worrying emblem. *Fasces*, the plural of the latin *fascis* literally means bundles. The key emblem of the Ancient Roman state and later Europe's fascist parties it embodied strength through collective unity. A single stick or rod could easily be broken, but when many were tied together they could not. Despite the Hitlerian associations the symbol continues to be used in many countries: it can be seen, for example, in the US House of Representatives, it is still embedded on many Singaporean public buildings built by the British. But, crucially, where Young Rim deviates is in using it to present variety not uniformity. The sticks do not lose their personality when bundled together, quite the opposite: we are made aware of the differences, the distinct gestalt and personality of each off-cut.

Like *Bundle*, her other smaller pieces have a poignancy in the way they sit on the wall, just as the larger ones have an acute sensitivity to the space of the room. The elements do not clash, they may be tense, but they co-exist – even in something as dramatic as this large work.

Squeezing: in this latest work the panels (what we may call either the paintings or painting elements) are squeezed in the gap between the walls. Squeezed, but not with the pain of people getting in and out of train doors at rush hour. Despite the "explosiveness" or large scale of the elements in this work this squeezing action is done as gently as it were filo pastry pressed between fingers.

In all her work there is this emphasis on the junctures of one element with another – the points of touch. In this work there is also the call across the room from the multi-panel complex to the single purple sheet. They call to each other much like the parakeet calls to the mermaid in Matisse's late and beautiful paper 1952 cut-out *La perruche et la sirène*. Or like the soloist calls to the orchestra in recent works by John Adams or Osvaldo Golijov.

These colours are both subtle and complicated: the single purple plank balanced against the reds, yellows and browns of the main group. That the colours of the sheets should be so various emphasises that this is as much about colour as drawing – as much about surface as edge. Her palette is a muted one, the assonances between the closely hued panels helping to keep the mood, make sure that however radical or "zappy" the arrangement of forms, the colours are those one might associate with calm, and even reticence.

Shadows, to reiterate, are an intrinsic part of the work. Created by both natural and artificial light they spread the work through the rooms, adding further nuances and, however subliminally, blending it into the rooms. One is reminded of the shadows in paintings by De Chirico. As you pause in the room, stay still, let time pass by, you realise that, like any complex abstract formulation it carries a host of possible figurative associations: one could think, for example, of a pack of cards falling from a dealer's hand, but such a moment is frozen. In that stasis the drama becomes not about the explosive act but the relationships between the cards – or here the assorted sheets.

Or you could think of the echoes from art history: as a work made in 2015 it could be related to any number of installations or installed paintings focussed on manipulating and energising space – from Fred Sandback or Richard Serra to Katarina Grosse or Ettore Spalletti. It can also be seen as re-engaging with certain aspects of early modernism: the multi-element shapes of Suprematism and the way artists such as both Malevich and Tatlin sought to work with the corner rather than the wall. More eccentrically, it made me think it looked like the kit for a cubist painting: a box-full of facets – facets that were meant to describe and modulate space.

All in all, it was a most curious and compelling work, full of surprises.

It defied instant analysis and categorisation and left one thinking a long time. This was one of the most paradoxical, intriguing, energetic, but calming, art works I had seen for some while.

Tony Godfrey

ⁱ Lawrence Wechsler. *Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees: a life of contemporary artist Robert Irwin*. Univ. Cal. 1982 p.128