

KALEIDOSCOPE



AUSTIN LEE **GOOD PICTURES**

Text by Gabriela Acha

At first sight, Austin Lee’s paintings and sculptures might feel provocatively childish, even histrionic—but upon digging beneath the surface, further layers are revealed. From his deliberately basic compositions and palettes to his hybrid processes, Lee’s works analyze the power of image creation, as well as contemporary forms of painting.

Lee’s methods are informed by new technologies. As a student, he traded his paper sketchbook for a digital one with a Wacom. Today, he drafts sketches with his iPad and uses them as the preliminary material for his paintings, reinterpreting the collected imagery using Photoshop. These procedures, along with his experimentation with 3D printing robotics, and augmented reality, find Lee relinquishing a certain degree of agency to automated mechanisms, providing a contemporary perspective on the artistic process that challenges historical concepts of creativity as being uniquely generated by human

mind. For Lee, “new technology is an opportunity to explore new ways to use tools and question them”, yet it is only complementary to his core practice, which is drawing.

Nothing in Lee’s works is strictly adventitious except for his imagery, which he literally finds anywhere, following no set rules. Once put into a composition’s narrative, however, his doodled figures, floating upon gradated monochrome backgrounds, question the fundamentals of painting. This register winks at the critique of canonized painterly conventions as exemplified by movements like “art brut” or “naive art,” which sought to convey emotions in paint by means of directness and immediacy.

As our current perception of color is often mediated by the screens at which we relentlessly stare, Lee’s seeks forms to examine the Kandinskyan “psychic shock,” transposing his pure and primary palette from within the digital realm to material forms. For his second solo exhibition at Peres Projects Gallery, “Aah” (2020), thirteen acrylic paintings and two foam and fiber sculptures are displayed, each with variations of the same two colors: red and blue. The binary palette affects all elements of the exhibition, including the space’s walls, turning the show into an interconnected *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Lee’s device takes its point of departure from Jean Fouquet’s medieval painting *Madonna surrounded by Seraphim and Cherubim* (1454-1456), whose blues and reds glorified France’s municipal arms and its monarchs. Whether there is a similarly specific agenda encoded through Lee’s palette is unstated, but there is certainly an attempt to reach beyond the works themselves through chromatic simplification.

The only direct reference to Fouquet’s painting in the show is *ANGEL* (2020), which depicts a scribbled “face” consisting of two eyes and a smile, hovering above a blue cherub against a red background. Despite its overall naive aesthetic and visual simplicity, the angel’s gaze and the floating smile add an eerie tone to the exhibition’s otherwise riotous atmosphere.

Further contradictory emotions are condensed in *Au Hasard* (2020), which depicts a bi-dimensional and disproportioned donkey whose left eye stares directly at the viewer. This kitschy figure references Robert Bresson’s 1966 film *Au Hasard Balthazar*, which narrates the life of a donkey whose stoic response to treatments both tender and abusive eschews sentimentality while still allowing for the spectator’s

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own emotions. As in Lee's paintings, the motif is not important in itself, but is simply a means of conveying narrative.

Lee's recurrent use of equids in his paintings grows out of his time at Yale University, where he was exposed to its British equestrian painting collection. In Lee's depictions, the animals stand alone and free, challenging traditional narratives of human superiority. *HORSES* (2020) depicts a group of blue horses moving together, socially gathered like working class Parisians as in Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Bal du moulin de la galette* (1876). Lee's interest in the relationship and conflict between labor and leisure is further expressed in the sculpture *bluerellaaaax* (2020) and the painting *Relaxed Guy with Flowers* (2020). Both depict joyfully resting figures, recalling Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862-1863).

Lee's enduring painterly concern can ultimately be expressed in this question: What is painting at all? This query is specifically addressed in John Baldessari's work *What is Painting* (1968), which states: All the parts of a good picture are involved with each other. That statement provided the premise for "Good Pictures," an exhibition curated by Lee, currently on view at Jeffrey Deitch New York. The selection of works by forty-four artists proves that there is no single way of making "good paintings," but rather a plethora of valid approaches. The point of Lee's artistic practice, then, is not to answer such questions definitively, but to achieve a qualitative holistic approach through the interconnectedness of all elements involved. His motives, colors, and hybrid process of creation may be interchangeable in themselves, but when positioned together at a given instant, they achieve a uniqueness. Lee's work consistently seeks out this instant and often finds it.