



## Austin Lee's Feel-Good Art Is More Complicated Than It Seems

Where virtual-reality drawings become paintings

Don't be thrown by the sugary, rainbowntinted allure of painter Austin Lee's latest show with Jeffrey Deitch. Among the enormous roses—the fields of floating hearts, the goofily grinning faces—there's an undercurrent that unsettles. Even the exhibition's title, "Feels Good," implies an instability, partly alluding to the infamous catchphrase of Pepe the Frog, a hippydippy underground comics character who was coopted by the altright and other hate groups. "Something that seems good can be not so good for you—this show is poking at those different things," Lee tells GARAGE.

And at the same time, walking around these massive, airbrushheavy paintings does feel good. They have a vivid, graphic simplicity, despite the hightech road that Lee takes to arrive at them. While the artist was, for years, mocking up his compositions in Photoshop, he's since adopted an entirely new way of working, using the Oculus Rift's virtualreality program Medium as a sort of imaginary studio. (He was introduced to the technology by V.R. early adopter Rachel Rossin.)

After donning the Oculus headset, Lee labors in a purely virtual space—a "blue void" that "feels infinite," he says. "I can draw in space, very gestural. You just press a button and it's almost like extruding paint tubes." The process isn't always easy. "I'll sit and use [the Oculus] four or five hours at a time," he explains. "I'll take it off and feel crazy. I really like it—but it does make me nauseous."

The resulting V.R. drawings are then turned into paintings—or sculptures, like *Walk* (2019), whose orange skin and cloud of yellowy hair can't help but recall an unnervingly buff, Gumby version of Donald Trump. For *Down* (2019)—a painting of a knockedout boxer—Lee constructed an entire V.R. scenario, complete with a boxing ring, spectators, and multiple lighting sources. This complicated source material informed the final work, which the artist attempted multiple times before nailing it during a single, hourlong session of intensive airbrushing. Lee himself used to box during high school, and thinks of painting in not dissimilar terms: a combination of strategy, physicality, and perseverance.

He's inspired by painters, like Alex Katz, who exude effortlessness and compelled by an older generation of artists who are able to put new technologies to intriguing use, whether that's David Hockney and his iPad drawings, or Cindy Sherman and her perverse Instagram self-portraits. It's a problem "when the aesthetic of the program takes over," Lee says. "[But] when someone shifts mediums, if they're a good artist—you'll see them in it no matter what."

# PERES PROJECTS

Despite his reliance on technology, Lee is also a very traditional painter, the sort who happily nerds out over technique and process. The daily struggle of making an image, tweaking it, obliterating it, brings unexpected joy and the occasional revelation. For *Rose* (2019), Lee had spent a lot of time prepping a large painting of a flower, agonizing over the reddish orange background tones. Eventually, he reversed course entirely, airbrushing a totally different image—a lion, with glowing yellow eyes, chomping the head off of a nude figure. (The titular, tiny rose is still visible in person, if you look closely, inside the lion's nose—though it doesn't show up in reproduction.) What was initially a failure, he says, is now his favorite painting in the show.

Upstairs at Jeffrey Deitch, a series of small portraits further show off Lee's ability to squeeze real pathos out of what, at first, can seem childlike. It's not easy to take the basic components of a face—two round eyes, a loopy smile, nose optional—and give it emotional range. “The subtlety of a facial expression will mean so many different things,” he says, discussing the eccentric, small-scale paintings he has made of friends and other visitors to his studio over the years.

Perhaps no face in the show is more unnerving and loaded than that of *Jesus* (2019), a pared-down riff on El Greco's early 17th-century *Christ on the Cross*. Lee manages to translate the anguish of the original in the form of a cartoon. (The effect is oddly similar to that of the Spanish woman who attempted to “fix” a fresco of Jesus back in 2012.) The artist became interested in religious imagery after a trip to the Philippines, where he was intrigued by the country's tradition of “super bloody” religious artwork. “Making a painting slows me down to think about it,” he explains. “Even the El Greco—this depiction of someone in such a violent position....For me, it's really interesting—to see something new again.”

– Scott Indrisek



Austin Lee, *Feels Good*, Jeffrey Deitch, New York, 2019. Photo by Genevieve Hanson



“Down” from Austin Lee, *Feels Good*, Jeffrey Deitch, New York, 2019.