

# ARTNEWS

## File Conversion: Austin Lee Goes From iPad to Canvas in a New Show at Postmasters

BY *Alex Greenberger* POSTED 11/17/15 11:53 AM



Austin Lee, *Eye 2 Eye*, 2015, Flashe acrylic on canvas.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND POSTMASTERS, NEW YORK

To make his paintings of embracing lovers and running horses, Austin Lee relies on a series of “and thens.” First he makes a drawing on his iPad, and then he exports that sketch to Photoshop, and then he prints the Photoshop mock-up, and then he paints it. And then, sometimes, if he feels the painting doesn’t work, he photographs that work-in-progress, brings it into Photoshop, plays with it a little, prints out the image again, and then repaints it.

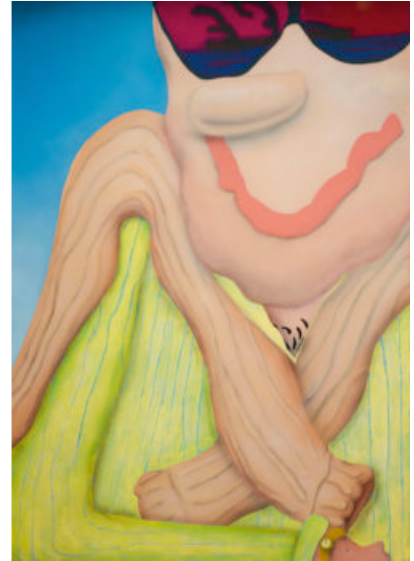
“I guess it’s never been a one-way track,” the 32-year-old artist said as we sat in front of Postmasters, a gallery in Manhattan’s Tribeca district where Lee was installing [his newest show](#), “Nothing Personal.” Next to him were two 3-D-printed plaster busts—one of his mother, the other of his father—both produced in the artist’s endearingly reductive style. Lee reached between the sculptures, opened [a newly printed book](#) of his work, and held his iPhone up to it. Using an augmented-reality app, a happy Day-Glo blue figure set against a fire-truck-red background on the page began to literally jump for joy on Lee’s phone. He turned the page; another figure leapt into motion in the app. It became hard to tell whether the analog or digital version was the work, or if, in Lee’s hands, the two were separate.



Lee's paintings, with their nauseatingly vibrant tones, look somewhat like computer screens with their brightnesses scaled all the way up. To achieve that effect, he relies on Photoshop techniques. "I think I probably have been using Photoshop a lot longer than I've been painting, so for me, Photoshop is a natural way of solving problems," Lee said. "Whenever I'm trying to think through something, I'll think of it in these more Photoshop ways of thinking. Even when I'm mixing colors, I'll think of the color slider."

Of course, like many other artists, Lee started out using analog tools. As an undergraduate at Temple University's Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, he kept a sketchbook full of random drawings. He bought a Wacom tablet, an electronic device equipped with a pen-like stylus, and used that for a while. "But then," he said, "when the iPad came out, it shifted things a little bit, because I had something so portable that I could be on the subway and do drawings," and then they would be quick and spontaneous.

Lee sketches often and finds it difficult to part ways with his hard drives full of unused drawings. A self-professed "digital hoarder" and a compulsive doodler, he described a time when, on an eight-hour flight, he sketched because he had nothing else to do. A film was playing, and he decided to borrow images from the in-flight movie. But as it morphed from dinky airline screen to high-definition iPad, the image became looser and more surreal. As he sees it, an image so removed as a film still becomes personal through the act of drawing and reinterpreting it. "For me," he said, "it'll remind me of that moment where I was sitting there. That'll be my connection."



Austin Lee, *Shady*, 2015, Flashe acrylic on canvas.



Austin Lee, *Private Moment*, 2015, Flashe acrylic on canvas.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND POSTMASTERS, NEW YORK



Lee himself may not even know why he chooses to make certain drawings into paintings. “For the ones that resonate, I ask, ‘OK, what is interesting about that?’” he said. We walked over toward *Eye 2 Eye* (2015), in which a balding man leans in for a kiss with a lumpy, bubblegum-pink woman. (And if it looks a bit like Nicole Eisenman’s *Sloppy Bar Room Kiss*, in which two androgynous people make out on a table, it may be because Lee is a big Eisenman fan.) He saw the couple on the subway and quickly sketched them on his iPad. “It might be the way two people are looking at each other,” Lee said. “So that original moment is lost a little bit, but to me, it becomes about focusing on that moment.” Later, he said of his sketching process, “If I knew why, if everything is figured out—like, if I remember doing that drawing, it looks like what I was thinking—that might be really boring.”

Back in the studio, Lee tries to sort through what resonates with him about his sketches. Although this will mean using a combination of screens and painterly tools, Lee isn’t specifically trying to work exclusively with digital or traditional mediums. He said, “I think that’s what’s more interesting, finding ‘What does this do well?’ and ‘What does that do well?’ instead of one or the other,” he said. With their blurry Flashe-acrylic forms set against high-definition backgrounds, Lee’s paintings really do look like a hybrid of the Paint app on the computer and the paint tube from the art-supplies store.

Finding the middle ground between analog and digital can often bring Lee into contact with cutting-edge technology. When he was an M.F.A. student at the Yale School of Art a few years ago (he received his degree in 2013), he had the opportunity to make his art using a 3-D printer. “I didn’t have any interest in sculpture at the beginning, but I tricked myself into it,” he said. Something about it seemed too cold, too removed—it didn’t feel personal enough. “There wasn’t that hand quality that I was interested in, so I poured plaster on the sculptures. That opened that up—to the point where the paint then absorbs into it, and it became this way [to] have this an object that I can paint and experiment with.”

In the Postmasters show, there is a monumental sculpture of Lee on his knees set in the center of the main gallery. Made with Kinect technology and the help of Lee’s young nephew, the sculpture was an idea that the artist had abandoned for a while, until he rediscovered a 3-D model for it on one of his hard drives. “I kind of didn’t even remember what I was thinking when I made it,” he admitted. But something about it interested him, and he kept pursuing it, using a combination of the computer and handmade plaster. The final version, he said, “has more meaning. I can make something and then revisit it and think new things with it later, and I think that was what ended up happening with this one.”

That thought process is fairly common for Lee, who often works without knowing exactly what he wants to do at the start. “It started off as this idea of not making this work super personal,” he said. “What gets interesting is that these weird drawings that I didn’t understand, that through making the painting, I understand more. I realized that you can’t get away from that.”



Austin Lee, *Kiss*, 2015, Flashe acrylic on canvas.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND POSTMASTERS, NEW YORK