

# METAL



AUSTIN LEE

NEON-COLOURED TEARS OF JOY

When I look at Austin Lee's work, it feels as though I'm staring directly into the dilated pupils of life's complexity from inside the protective walls of a pink, padded cell. In his highly saturated, soft, and wobbly universe—in which humans, animals, and plants are all made of the same dough—Lee strips the world of its sharp edges while still acknowledging their existence.

There is an undeniable element of fun in Lee's work: a bright color palette, humanoid figures with unusual proportions befriending animals and computers alike, clumsy little dances, and an occasional nod to artists like Henri Matisse, Jan Vermeer, or Philip Guston. Yet a closer look at his characters—which are cute and uncanny in equal measure—reminds us that widespread good-vibes-only mantras can also easily flip. Between laughter and despair, relaxation and anxiety, loneliness, and love, Lee invites us to a buffet offering the full range of life's emotions. It's like a lively children's birthday party where the parents, slightly on edge, cling on to the punch bowl.

As an artist who had already combined digital and traditional painting techniques when most of us were still trying to figure out our first flip phones, Lee hasn't lost his curiosity about new technologies to this day. While his figures often find their beginnings in virtual reality, he lets them evolve in a multitude of mediums, ranging

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from airbrush paintings to 3D-printed sculptures. We got a hold of Lee just a few days before the opening of his current show, *Passing Time* (open until 31 December), and talked with him about the exhibition, the intricacy of our feelings, and about what makes us human.



**Hi Austin. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with us so close to the opening of your exhibition. What have you been working on?**

Yeah, sure! I'm doing a big museum show at the Lotte Museum in Seoul, Korea, where I'll show videos, paintings, sculptures, and installations all together. It's been a few years that we've been working on it. My show *Human Nature* from 2022 in Beijing was maybe the initial version of that, of thinking about all those ideas simultaneously and presenting them in different mediums. So, this now will be a fuller version of that.

**The exhibition is called *Passing Time*, is there a particular notion of time present in the works you'll show?**

That is just the title. For all the shows I do, I just make work and then try to think about what is in common with everything. However, it is one of the first post-pandemic shows, and for me, time really felt different during the pandemic. So there is that. But *Passing Time* also has many new and old works put together. I am looking at my work from ten years ago and work from today and see what connects them and what's different. That's the thread between everything. I'm the same person, but I've been different over the years.

Also, the sense of time differs in mediums like painting, sculpture, or video. In a narrative video, the viewers go along for the ride with that. But with a painting, the viewer can look at it in their own time. So, that's part of what is interesting in different mediums and how the viewer perceives the time in the work.

**Based on what criteria have you selected the work for this show?**

I started to look at connections between older work and new work, where I might revisit the same idea a few times. Some of those works I pair together in different ways, or there would be subtle relationships between them. I might make a painting at one point, but then I make a sculpture of it later. So, I revisit the same ideas in different mediums.

In the beginning, I mostly think of myself as a painter. I started using VR and these tools to create paintings and to be able to make an image from a digital source. Over time, I realised that I could just 3D print this figure, and

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then that's suddenly a sculpture. It's about figuring out what's more true to that idea. I found that they can exist in multiple ways, and they're actually different. It's usually not that one is better than the other.

In the last exhibition, I noticed how using various mediums allows other people to see what I'm thinking in a broader picture. For example, my older paintings from ten years ago were super clear for me when I made them. However, when I see or talk about them now, I think, "Oh, maybe it was not that clear what I saw in them." Now, when I do animations or so, and people can see the figures walking around, they know what I saw in a way they didn't have access to before.



**By turning your VR drawings into sculptural works, you also give viewers access to your process by allowing them to get close or walk around the figures.**

Yeah, exactly. If I made a figure and made a painting from it, no one would know what the back of the figure looks like. But if I make a 3D-printed sculpture, someone can see how it looks and how dense it is. For me, the idea of a digital space is fascinating. It is almost as if you can walk around in a landscape made by a landscape painter and suddenly see the painting differently.

**Just as you combine digital and more traditional techniques in your work, you also blend the emotions and feelings you show in your pieces. It's often not very clear what is going on with your figures. We don't know if they are laughing, crying, laugh-crying, or on the verge of losing their shit. How much of these works talk about your own emotions, and how much is based on your observations of society and people?**

It's probably a bit of both, but primarily through my lens. The psychological has been a big part of the work, but it was not always on the forefront. It's more that I'm just learning myself over time. I think that's how emotions or psychology works, where you're sometimes unaware of your feelings or what's going on. That's also the complexity of the work. Some paintings look really happy, but they're actually dealing with complicated issues, or they're more of a desire for happiness. It's not always 1-to-1 straightforward, but it's often very complex and nuanced.

I usually start with drawing a lot. Drawing is an outlet for any emotions or things that I'm dealing with, and then I might come back to a drawing, and I may not even remember why I drew it. It's like experiencing something through different moments. You might be sad when you draw something, but later, you're in a good mood

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and forget. If I make a painting based on a drawing, I might have both of those different moments in the same image. The initial part is not lost; you just think about it differently. I think that's also how reality is; you have different experiences over time and see them differently. Something that might seem like a horrible thing might later be one of the best things that have happened to you.

I let that happen in the work a lot. I often went from a drawing, and then I would take that into VR and render the VR drawing in a 3D modelling programme, and then I would make a painting from a sculpture. So there are all these multiple moments where I'm in conversation with a previous version of myself. And that's just how I understand the world around us. It's way more complex than just thinking, "I was sad; that's why I made a sad painting." It's more like I didn't even understand what was going on.

**You mentioned that it always starts with a drawing for you, and from what I understand, you sketch mainly digitally, which also gives you different possibilities. Do you CMD+Z or change your work a lot when you look back at your older sketches?**

Yes, I definitely erase things a lot. That's what I like about it. My work often looks effortless, but there are a million layers to it, and I get to that through a lot of secret effort that happens on a computer. You don't see the evidence of that because working digitally conceals a lot. When I translate them to the canvas, I want it to feel like the image just appeared in the same kind of feeling as a digital image, but I still want my hand to be evident in the work.



**How much space is there for spontaneity in that process of transferring the digital images to a canvas?**

It depends. I usually keep it the same for the most part, but if it's more interesting to make a change, I'll do that. However, if the painting is not working, I might look closer at the digital image and see what's working digitally and how that's not working on the canvas, and then I might change colour or something, but I first try it out digitally.

**So, what about your screen time? How much time do you spend on your computer versus creating physical work?**

I think it's pretty balanced. I go through phases. When I mainly work on ideas, that's all digitally. I make a bunch of sketches on the computer, and once I have a couple of ideas and start painting, I'll shift and focus on that for a while. I go back and forth.

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**You've been working with digital tools for a while now, even when it was not as common as it is now. Do you remember the first programmes you used to create images back then?**

My parents got a computer when I was still pretty young, but I don't remember what programmes we had. I was just doing drawings on the computer. That was when I was in my teens, in the 90s. It was that phase when computers were still new, and most of my friends didn't have computers yet as it was pretty early for that. We definitely weren't how we are now.

When I went to undergrad school I had Photoshop. The first painting I remember where I sketched in Photoshop and then made a painting based on that and thought, "Ok, I found my way," was probably in 2003 or 2004. And I feel like the work's been pretty consistent since then. Photoshop has been my tool for a long time. I only started using VR in 2016 or 2017. It's been a while now, too, but it is one of the more recent discoveries, and by now, it's easy for me to use as well. So now I go for whatever tool is the easiest to get the thought out.



**What are your thoughts on image creation with AI? It's easy nowadays to create images of which you are not so sure whether they are real or fake. Are you interested in that technology at all? Mainly because you have quite the opposite approach, the digital aesthetic is quite prominent in your work.**

Yeah, so, I like to show the software in my work. I want my work to be expressive of what I'm making a painting about, but I also want to show the medium. I like the medium to be expressive as well and show the themes with that. That's one aspect.

Then, with the AI, that's a different idea. It's a new shift in culture and that is interesting to me. I don't see that much difference to, for example, a word processing programme. It just seems like a tool that is shifting the way we're going to interact with people. Even in my lifetime, it's pretty crazy how many shifts we've had with technology and how people interact.

I've made some paintings that were experimenting with AI. I would put my images in AI and then make variations of them. It's funny to see how the AI is interpreting my paintings. Almost as if someone tells you what they think of your painting or what they see in it. So it's been interesting to get that kind of feedback in this weirder way.

However, those programmes can take certain cues, but they don't have the actual history of one particular person. Taking all this information and combining it gives AI a general idea that this is a sad image or a happy

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image. Still, it's different from someone who actually had a sad experience or a happy moment. AI can't do that. It's not having a particular lived experience, and this is what makes us human. We only have one life, and our own history gives us our unique identity. AI is just an accumulation of all these different ideas, and it becomes this other thing like a mass consciousness. That's interesting, but the difference is that I think people make paintings and art because we want to share with each other what it is to be human, and sometimes we can relate to each other through artwork and these experiences.

## **Do you remember the first artwork that had an impact on you or the first time you consciously experienced art?**

I didn't see a lot of art at a young age. I didn't have a ton of access to it. I was born in Las Vegas, but then my parents moved to Pennsylvania, and there weren't a lot of museums or anything. So, I never really went to a museum until I was an adult. I was more shaped by things I would see in pictures.

Later, when I was in college, I saw a painting by Leonardo da Vinci at the National Gallery of Art in D.C., the *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci*. That was very memorable for me. It felt like there was a before-and-after moment when I saw it. It is a very uncanny picture. It's a painting of a woman, but it doesn't look like a real person. It always stuck with me as that's what I try to do in my work: to make images that feel unreal. They don't feel like our reality, but they still feel like a living thing. That's what I saw in that painting. It was kind of a living being, but also not, and it's not photorealism; it's something else. That's something only a painting can do, to create an object that feels alive but that we don't fully understand.

– Words by Words Marie-Louise Schmidlin