

Keunmin Lee “Realizing Boundaries” at Peres Projects, Berlin

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Keunmin Lee “Realizing Boundaries” at Peres Projects, Berlin, 2024. Courtesy: Peres Projects. Photo: Jerzy Goliszewski

ADVERTISING

Keunmin Lee’s new series of oil paintings unfolds tormented cartographies. Networks of nervous lines meander across organic shapes, charting circuitous routes that read as intricate maps of the mind. The thirteen paintings on display hover between figuration and abstraction, depicting biomorphic forms that resemble zoomed-in fragments of bodies, organs, veins, or skin. Juxtaposing light and darkness, Lee works with rich palettes dominated by warm hues that are interspersed with icy blues. Varying shades of red saturate the exhibition. An allusion to blood, they serve as metaphorical markers that distinguish the outside world from inner ones. Despite their literal titles, the paintings elude rational grasp, emphasizing instead a raw physicality that shifts back and forth between meticulous brushwork and expressive mark making. As scratches, imprints, and fierce brushstrokes activate the surface of *Encounter in the Mountains* (2023) for instance, figuration dissolves, leaving behind visceral traces of inner struggles made both visible and tangible.

This in-betweenness speaks to the origin of Lee’s images—a place where the real and the unreal overlap. The paintings capture visualizations of pathological experiences and hallucinations that the artist endured in 2001 while hospitalized and diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Rather than rendering straightforward depictions of hallucinatory visions, Lee’s works convey impressionistic memories that weave together the overall feeling, atmosphere and psychological impact of this haunting time, held within the confines of the frame. While working mostly with oil, Lee sometimes welcomes debris and foreign bodies that enhance the organic quality of the works, seen in his use of plastic wrap in *Flesh Construction* (2023). His images translate the heat, viscosity and throb of vital organs. This conveys a synesthetic experience while embodying the arcana of a brain turned inside out. Throughout the exhibition, flesh and thoughts coexist on canvas as Lee explores the recesses of the psyche, both conceptually and through his artistic process, guided by instinctive choices and gestures.

Inspired by outsider art, Lee draws on the idea of a pure creative act freed from the conventions, references, and expectations of the art world. He follows a spontaneous stream of thought, which materializes simultaneously in improvised forms and controlled brushstrokes. Absorbed into this introspective process with both body and mind, Lee engages with his experience of mental illness as raw material that he tames, shapes, and refines. Brushstroke by brushstroke, work by work, the artist disconnects his hallucinations from the medical realm and allows them to exist beyond being mere symptoms of an illness. In doing so, Lee fosters a practice that is both introspective and emancipatory. He explores a form of resistance against social structures that categorize and label individuals—socially, medically, economically, emotionally. Medical diagnosis serves here as a metaphor for the regulating systems that manage and standardize social bodies, reducing them to data for the sake of rationalization and efficiency. Through his practice, Lee endorses the role of the artist in unpacking definitions and expanding possibilities of existence. With this exhibition, he invites viewers to reflect on the underlying social conditioning that narrows and confines one’s identity, and to embrace what diverges from societal conventions—these anomalies that trouble categories.

at Peres Projects, Berlin
until February 24, 2024

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