

KATHERINE LEE: THE BRAZIL SERIES

EIGHT MODERN
231 DELGADO STREET, SANTA FE

Through the blackened atmosphere and archway of Katherine Lee's incredible *Exterior 10* resides some serious heartbreak. And like all the pain and misery that comes with romance, it is utterly irresistible. Dark black like a cat, the shiny pelt of the picture brims with morbid ennui, degeneration, and despair. Perfection.

Exterior 9 masterfully balances the tensions of abandonment, tragic disregard, and ruinous disappointment with the everyday, off-season aspects of the real. Is this the patio where the bizarre triple murder took place before the shabby resort closed down in '93, or is it just an image of the pool after everybody got out just before the big storm in '01? Nobody thought it would make it that far inland. In the end it only broke an umbrella and some deck chairs.

Lee exhibits an incredible ability to make the essentially mundane into scenes of tremendous unresolved emotion. Like Jan Vermeer, her image source is photographic, or perhaps one should say "cameratic" since there was a camera in Vermeer's time but no photograph yet. And like Vermeer's paintings, Lee's are rich in details, though sparer. While Vermeer employed the projection of the *camera obscura* for his compositions, Lee constructs her initial drawings by enlarging and collaging and tracing photographs she takes. She then lays down a ground of black spray paint on archival paper or board and constructs the image with more spray paint, stenciling, and finally, oils. Her great ability is a classical understanding of space and volume that wrings more and deeper space from her photo-realist reinterpretations than her source material can possibly have contained, coupled with the splash and splatter of an angst ridden graffiti-writer in a darkly Romantic mood.

Lee's complete grasp of the rules of realist oil painting allows her constructive games of pulling the non-objective qualities of the signifier away from the reference of the signified to succeed with splendid authority and an ominous grace. She's a post-graffiti Piranesi with Leipzig School tendencies. Subtler than Neo Rausch, her poetics of space seduces more slowly, but will more willingly try to take you for everything you got.

These heavily atmospheric scenes of architecture in nature seem fraught with an intense sense of continually elusive meanings, meanings that remain largely unexplained, or rather are unexplainable in that among many possible and contradictory explanations they find no single one adequate. Hers are the most still and simultaneously the most restless of paintings. They sulk haughtily, then lurk in an almost visceral way that is unusual for landscape, and clearly "landscape" isn't really their category. They hover on the verge of a critique of industrial culture, then dissolve again in intertextuality. Pregnant women, small children, and people with weak hearts are not allowed on this ride.

She's a cinematic semiotician with her interest in subtly subverting (and thereby expanding) conventional visual linguistics. There is a quality of subtle exhilaration to these processes, however seemingly insignificant or quiet, as the viewer is catalyzed by example to see more freely and allowed by the picture itself through its idiosyncrasies to view it and the world by extension in more and different ways. She deliberately dismantles what she is so carefully constructing as she goes along—like Beckett, like Barthes, like Derrida. Her paintings are concerned with both potential narratives and repeated exposures of the nature of the narrative construct. Lee employs the conventional techniques of her chosen mediums with perfectionist's skill in order to find the ragged edges where those conventions fall apart. Her willingness to let oil-rendered forms drop and dissolve into the deep atmospherics of her spray paint *sfumato* or to use the edges of the paintings' architecture for

some sumptuous minimalist moment of near complete abstraction is akin to Jean-Luc Godard's early experimentation with jump-cuts, etc.

But where Godard's work gets frenzied, even manic, Lee seeks more somber moods. Beyond somber, even. She sets sail on the seas of spookiness, past the jutting rocks of fear, to bring you—dazed and exhausted—to the very shores of the sublime where real beauty resides. Katherine Lee's *Brazil Series*, painted in 2006 when she was a wee College of Santa Fe art student—type gone abroad has the feel of a faraway haze that weighs both heavy and light upon the trees and buildings of a tropical town. Light in the way a mist or a bedsheet is light. Heavy like loss, the heaviest thing you can carry, which oddly enough weighs nothing at all. The actual full-force effect of Katherine Lee's paintings can only be experienced live, in real time. Really good art reproduces surprisingly poorly because it exposes the fact that the reproduction processes can't suck up the full range of the art-vibe you get off reality. Criticism can't either. Katherine Lee's dreamlike artworks have that deep-down vibe of dark, inconvenient truths coming to light that you need to be there to appreciate.

—JON CARVER



Katherine Lee, *Exterior 9 (Brazil)*, oil and spray paint on paper, 22" x 30", 2006