

Evan Lee

S. FRASER WAY, SURREY, B.C. LANDSCAPE #1 (FLAGS)

Picture Elements: The Photographic Activity of Evan Lee

BY SHARLA SAVA

Artist's Statement (2007)

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Section One: Biographical

Evan Lee's pictures demonstrate an ongoing curiosity about the art of depiction, patiently interrogating its possibilities as well as its limitations. Born and raised in Vancouver, Lee is a Chinese Canadian artist currently working with photography. He belongs to a globalized generation of artists whose orientation to the picture has been indelibly marked by the advent of digital technology. While Lee experimented with drawing, painting, and video art during his student years, his mature work examines the transition from

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S. Fraser Way, Surrey, B.C. Landscape #1 (flags), 2000

chromogenic photographic print on paper

(30 x 111.3 cm)

SAG 2001.03.01

analog to digital through the lens of photography. “I think my generation is preoccupied with this idea of progress, because of the way we grew up with the birth of personal computers,” Lee commented in 2005, saying, “I do find myself remembering ‘Asteroids’ or thinking ‘Google Earth will change the world’” (Lee and Harrison). Rather than embracing the rhetoric of technological utopianism associated with “new media art” or the defiant renunciation of such by proponents of “relational aesthetics,” Lee’s work joins a stream of photographic art production that relies on continuity with traditional art history, infusing the open frontier of digital production with the sobriety of established conventions. His pictures synthesize an allegiance to modernist painting with the materialist commitment typical of straight photography.

Lee’s work is demonstrably shaped by the aesthetic and intellectual discourse of post-conceptual photography that has developed in Vancouver, Canada. For instance, Lee has publicly discussed the important influence that Jeff Wall has had on his

artistic development (Laurence). Jeff Wall, a photo-based artist born in Vancouver in 1946, has actively contributed, as both artist and writer, to making Vancouver an internationally recognized centre for visual art. During his student years in the Fine Arts Department at the University of British Columbia (BFA ’97; MFA ’00), Evan Lee had the occasion to study with many influential figures in this milieu, including Ken Lum, Jeff Wall, and William Wood, and subsequently also worked as a studio assistant for Jeff Wall. Given the international success and prominence achieved by Vancouver artists such as Wall, Lum, and Rodney Graham, an anxiety of influence is one of the dynamic factors of the generation in which Lee finds himself. It would be difficult, I think, to establish an understanding of Lee’s artistic position without first coming to terms with this formidable, and formative, frame of reference. The artist appears to negotiate this terrain with tremendous imagination and skill, demonstrating a willingness to inherit ideas from the previous generation without falling into the repertoire of an exhausted mimicry.



Evan Lee, *S. Fraser Way, Surrey, B.C. Landscape #1 (flags)*, 2000, chromogenic photographic print on paper (30 x 111.3 cm) SAG 2001.03.01

Section Two: Lee's Oeuvre (so far)

Evan Lee, having worked with different artistic media during his student years, turned to photography in the late 1990s. During the past decade he has become known as a photo-based artist, exploring various possibilities with respect to the kinds of pictures that photography can create. Rather than embracing the dissolution of medium specificity typical of postmodern installation, projection, or new media art, Lee shows an affinity with those artists who, characteristic of late modernism, remain curious about the possibilities of picture-making. Informed by the history of conceptual photography and the logic of the readymade, Lee's photographs elevate the world of familiar and everyday things.

During the initial phase of his move to photography, Lee explored diverse genres, including staged photography (*Stain*, 1997, *10 Cheeseburgers*, 1997), street photography (*Closer Than They Appear* series, 1996-2001), photo-conceptualism (*40 Armoured Cars*, 1998-99), rephotography (*Untitled* series, 1950/2000), and social landscape photography (Surrey landscapes, 2000). Lee has also borrowed subjects typical of deskilled and vernacular photography in several c-prints (*Lighted Bush*, 2001, *Stain* series, 2003, *Box Study* series, 2003). In recent years Lee has turned to cameraless photography, using a desktop scanner to create photographic works (*Stellar Curves* series, 2004, *Ginseng Root Studies* series, 2005; *Dollar Store Still Life* series (2006 to present).

While Lee's mature artistic production demonstrates a diverse array of approaches to photography, it is also possible to see his work united by a number of ongoing theoretical and aesthetic concerns. One of the tendencies demonstrated in many of Lee's pictures can be characterised as a wish to draw painting and photography together (Somani). More

specifically, in works such as *Stain* or *Stellar Curves* series, or in *Stars and Glitter* (2002), or *S. Fraser Way, Surrey, B.C. Landscape #1 and #2* (2000), or the ongoing *Dollar Store Still Life* series, Lee's pictures integrate two opposing tendencies, moving artfully between the photograph as a form of documentary evidence and the repertoire of modernist abstraction. Focussing on a world full of familiar objects, and avoiding the thrall of intensely dramatic events, Lee's pictures leave plenty of room for the spectator to contemplate the art of depiction. That is to say that Lee's work should be interpreted as a site of inventive pictorial construction, which encompasses both abstract and concrete concerns.

A second tendency that becomes apparent in Lee's oeuvre is the artist's investigation of the border between the real and the surreal. While many of his pictures consist of resolutely banal subjects - for instance, plastic drafting instruments, empty produce boxes, a Sponge Bob Squarepants helium balloon, bushes decorated with Christmas lights, streets stained with gasoline, or roped-off fields at the edge of the suburban highway - Lee photographs them with an eye to evoking mystical and ineffable realms of experience. He utilizes various means to accomplish this aim, including patient and methodical construction beforehand as well as subsequent degrees of digital manipulation. The artist's resolute commitment to revealing a sense of irrationality, wonder, or infinity embedded within banal objects and familiar surroundings is reminiscent of modernism generally, but more directly, of tendencies in Conceptual Art of the 1960s and 1970s (i.e. Robert Smithson, Bas Jan Ader, Piero Manzoni).

A third tendency in Evan Lee's art is his approach to the medium of photography itself. Apparently disinterested the casual style of the snapshot, Lee

focuses his efforts on “picture elements,” a phrase that is apropos because it is also the basis for the term “pixel.” A *pixel* refers to the smallest measurable component of a digital image. In that they retain an identifiable engagement with capturing what the camera sees, Evan Lee’s photographs belong to, and are continuous with, the history of photography. In that his pictures also break free from the idea of the photograph as a source of evidence, truth, or journalistic documentation, Lee’s work is also a departure from conventional photography. Animated by a concern for the picture as a form of constructed realism (built, potentially, pixel by pixel), Lee is free to experiment with degrees of digital manipulation, or even cameraless photography.

Section Three - The Artwork: *S. Fraser Way, Surrey, B.C. Landscape #1 (flags)*

In 2000, Evan Lee produced two related landscape photos, *S. Fraser Way, Surrey, B.C. Landscape #1 (flags)* and *S. Fraser Way, Surrey, B.C. Landscape #2*. Documenting the enclosure of field and forest,



Evan Lee, *S. Fraser Way, Surrey, B.C. Landscape #1 (flags)*, detail

at first glance these full colour panoramas appear to fit squarely into the social landscape tradition. Taken in the Vancouver suburb of Surrey, Lee’s landscapes attest to the departure of wilderness from daily life, showing the development of residential neighbourhoods and commuter highways that link life in city and suburb.

In Canadian art since at least the Group of Seven the landscape genre has played an important role in maintaining the ideology of modern progress. British Columbia’s most celebrated modern painters, Emily Carr and Jack Shadbolt, were animated by a love of nature, and their paintings can be seen as a protest against the rampant destruction of the wilderness brought on by modernisation, as well as an attempt to counter that destruction through the painterly expression of the *genius loci* (spirit of place). This regional landscape tradition was drastically transformed by the break from modernism that occurred during the 1960s, when the lyrical romanticism of west coast painters was displaced by radical politics, critical urbanism and conceptual photography. Rather than celebrating the spirit of British Columbia, local artists asserted the realism of the bland and defeated landscape through documentary-style photographs that captured scenes from a disenchanted modernity. This photographic counter-tradition, established by artists including N.E. Thing Co., Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Roy Arden and others, has since become the dominant version of the west coast landscape (Brayshaw, Sava).

While Evan Lee’s Surrey photographs belong to the critical urbanism of the social landscape tradition, they also maintain an element of restless defiance. For instance, *S. Fraser Way, Landscape #1*, while appearing to be a relatively naturalistic panorama, is in

fact the product of careful digital orchestration. Certain visual cues have been embedded in the picture so as to persuade the eye of natural continuity: a fenced off stretch of land beside a highway, a single parked car, a modest cloud floating on the horizon. Upon closer examination, however, other visual cues appear to diminish the function of the picture as an example of social landscape, and turn it into a panorama of a different sort: the distant arms of a crane appear three times, the skyline of the forest repeats in a suspiciously identical fashion, and the stream of bunting that borders the highway shows an uncanny tendency to be wind-blown in identically repeated sections. Representing one stretch of land that has been flipped twice horizontally, the photograph is a flawless composite of three sections. The edges of each of the three sections create a meeting point of sky, forest and grass that the artist has mobilized to suit his creative interests. These meeting points anthropomorphize the landscape, creating the appearance of grassy devils or demons crouched on the far side of the highway, behind the colourful row of bunting.

Lee's Surrey landscapes imbue nature with spirits, recalling the primordial animism so often seen in paintings of the romantic tradition. Why has Lee re-enchanted this modern landscape? Is this a nostalgic or retrogressive gesture, a futile, awkward attempt to restore the lost romantic tradition for the west coast? I would argue against this interpretation on the grounds that the spirits populating Lee's landscapes are remarkably autonomous from nature. These creatures are not a testament to *genius loci* but are, rather, the demons of digitalisation. Crouching in the forest and the grassy field, these figures act as a playful and potentially frightening reminder to the spectator that the unadorned, everyday world possesses an inner vitality. These lessons may remain

hidden or invisible as we rush across the surface of our daily lives, so Lee creates impossible landscapes in photographs, to remind us that the experience of vision can be a source of trickery and wonder. It is through the experience of patiently attending to the visual evidence at hand that the landscape appears to come to life. These are photographs that speak to a savvy and sophisticated contemporary audience, addressing issues that reach far beyond the regional landscape.

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Artist's Statement (2007)

My works in *Out of Sight: the Image Beyond the Index*, made in 2000, are unique as my first experiments using digital composition and manipulation. They are also among the few landscapes I have made to this day. The site I chose as a subject was a private vacant lot in South Westminster, Surrey, BC. Upon finding this location, I was initially attracted to how this vast undeveloped space was visually interrupted by a line of fringe bunting, the string of multi-coloured flags hung to discourage trespassing on the property. Normally used to call attention to roadside attractions or sales events at car or boat lots, it seemed unusually out of place with nothing but bushes and trees around.

As an experiment, I manipulated the image with the intention of exaggerating the extent of the colourful motif of the fringe bunting. As a result, I created a fictional landscape with its impossibility evidenced not only by the repeated scrolling landscape, but also by the never-ending line of flags, like the tied scarves that a magician pulls out of his sleeve. I was surprised to discover unusual new forms emerging from the places where the image parts were mirrored and seamed. The forms were thus symmetrical, and displayed what appeared to be uncanny heads, eyes and bodies, suggesting tree spirits. Such a notion of the supernatural, which I fancied to be lurking either in the picture beneath the image or the film, or in nature behind the bushes or in the trees, was for me an interesting counterpoint to the themes normally explored in contemporary landscape photography. The ideas put forth by this early piece have had a strong influence on my photographic work to date, which remains invested in probing the possibilities of the medium.



Evan Lee, *S. Fraser Way, Surrey, B.C. Landscape #1 (flags)*, detail

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