

## ABOUT THE ARTWORK

**Artist:** Lee U-fan (pronounced *Lee Yuu – hwam*)

**Title:** *With winds*

**Date:** 1990

**Medium:** Oil on canvas

**Dimensions:** 227.5 x 182cm

What you see in this image is less important than what you don't see. The series of marks painted by the artist are designed to create a sense of space or emptiness. The artist refers to this as *yohaku* or 'the art of emptiness'. It is an emptiness that attempts to provoke your imagination into creating your own image and, in turn, your own reality. The viewer's imagination is encouraged to decide what happens in this space and to transform the 'emptiness' into something with meaning. Lee U-fan's painted marks and gestures act as a guide towards understanding how your inner self (your mind) creates its own reality through an encounter with the outer world. The photograph of the artist at work (below) demonstrates how Lee U-fan forces himself to limit his mark making to simple and direct gestures.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Lee U-fan was born in Seoul in 1936 and has lived in Japan since 1956. He is a painter and sculptor whose art practice is strongly influenced by the study of comparative philosophy. The artist's philosophical perspective led to him becoming a founding member of the important Mono-ha ('school of things') movement. The movement was formed in response to what was perceived as rampant consumerism emerging in Japan as it rapidly modernised after World War Two. Mono-ha manifests Lee U-fan's interest in developing a practice that deliberately rejects this consumer-based materialism. The 'things' in his works are elements such as water, stones, slabs of metal and sky. Within his paintings Lee U-fan explores the character of the painter's brushstroke, to draw attention to what is absent as much as to what is present. His interest in Zen philosophy, in particular, underpins the extremely meditative and concentrated nature of his work.

## SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What elements of a painting has the artist *not* used in this artwork?
- How is this artwork a rejection of 'consumer-based materialism'?
- Lee U-fan creates awareness of the imagination through a sense of emptiness. In what other ways is it possible to create awareness of the imagination?
- Does an artwork have to represent something *recognisable* to communicate to the viewer?



## ARTIST'S WORDS

'... the highest level of expression is not to create something from nothing, but rather to nudge something which already exists so that the world shows up more vividly.' Lee U-fan, 1996, p.30.

## References:

- Hall, Doug. 'Lee U-fan: Correspondences'. In *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art 2002* [exhibition catalogue]. Queensland Art Gallery, South Brisbane, 2002, pp.62–5.
- Lee, U-fan. *Selected writings by Lee U-fan 1970–96*. Ed. Jean Fisher. Lisson Gallery, London, 1996.
- Lee, U-fan. 'U-fan Lee: On infinity'. *Domus*, no.779, February 1996, pp.4–6.
- Restany, Pierre. 'Lee U Fan and the Mono-ha revolution'. *Domus*, no.779, February 1996, pp.80–6.

## Mono-ha

Munroe, Alexandra. 'The laws of situation: Mono-ha and beyond the sculptural paradigm'. In *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky*. Ed. Alexandra Munroe. Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1994, pp.256–83.

What's Mono-ha?, Kamakura Gallery, Kanagawa, Japan.

<[www.kamakura-g.com](http://www.kamakura-g.com)>

Over: Lee U-fan South Korea/Japan b.1936  
*With winds* (detail) 1990 Oil on canvas  
227.5 x 182cm The Kenneth and Yasuko Myer  
Collection of Contemporary Asian Art. Purchased  
1998. Michael Myer and Ann Gamble Myer through  
and with the assistance of the Queensland Art  
Gallery Foundation Collection: Queensland  
Art Gallery

Below: The artist's studio in Paris, 1997 Photograph:  
Kim Sungsoon Courtesy: Tokyo  
Gallery, Tokyo



ASIA-PACIFIC TRIENNIAL  
OF CONTEMPORARY ART



Lee U-fan is both a sculptor and a painter. He was born in Seoul but lived in Japan from the time he was 20 years old. Lee U-fan was the leader of a movement called Mono-ha (meaning 'school of things'). The group focused on 'encounters' rather than representation and turned away from practices based in materialism. The group looked for new ways of representing things and were very critical of authority, uniformity and the dominance of American power. Artists were interested in natural materials, such as water, stone and sky, and the way these could be used to make art that is very site-specific (designed, made and exhibited for and within a particular location). Lee U-fan's earlier work explored the tension between objects, such as stones arranged on soft cushions.

#### Websites

<http://www.assemblylanguage.com/reviews/Lee.html>  
<http://www.xs4all.nl/~myranya/pictures/relatum.html>  
[http://www.kamakura-g.com/KG-html/monoha-page/works/e-works\\_lee.htm](http://www.kamakura-g.com/KG-html/monoha-page/works/e-works_lee.htm)  
<http://www.qag.qld.gov.au/collections/myer/ufan.htm>  
<http://images.google.com/> (search for 'Lee U-fan')

#### ACTIVITY

While Lee U-fan's art is clearly linked to the Mono-ha movement (see <http://www.kamakura-g.com/KG-html/monoha-page/e-mono-ha-what.htm> for more information), it can also be viewed in the context of Korean minimalist monochrome painting, especially his later work. This style of art related strongly to the traditional action of the brush that can be seen in traditional calligraphy. Calligraphy views the act of painting as a form of contemplation or meditation.

Lee U-fan's work is strongly connected to his spiritual and philosophical ideas, which include Zen Buddhism (see <http://www.natur.cuni.cz/~vpetr/Zen.htm>), Daoism and western philosophy. His works value time and space. In Zen terms, this space is considered to be the space for dreaming.

The works originate from the northern Asian tradition where mastery of brushstrokes is highly prized. The placing of the brush on the canvas is an act of control and skill.

Lee U-fan's process of painting is a very important part of his art-making. He lays the canvas on the floor and uses all his body. He believes that painting using the body allows him to consolidate ideas, technique and spirituality. He aims to create a work that encourages inner conversations rather than creating something that is purely decorative.

#### ACTIVITY

Research Zen philosophy and prepare a set of visual images that capture key ideas of Zen philosophy. You can create original images or collect images from a range of sources to explore the concepts of Zen philosophy.

Abstract expressionism in mid-century America was influenced by the Buddhist teachings of Zen. In keeping with Zen Philosophy, expressionism valued the process of making, the non-material world and the importance of absence and spaces between solid objects.

#### ACTIVITY

Discuss the extent to which inner spiritual ideas complement or contradict aesthetic qualities. How can spiritual ideas be captured in a material work of art? You might like to explore this idea in some of your own art-making.

## ACTIVITY

Talk about the intersection between spiritual communication in a visual form and art. At what point do artistic values determine that something is art and at what point could a religious or spiritual icon not be considered art?

## ACTIVITY

North Asian painting is usually read from the top to bottom rather than the usual Western idea of left to right.

Look at traditional calligraphy. Try doing your own calligraphy. Consider ideas of vertical as opposed to horizontal reading of Lee U-fan's work. How does a different way of viewing change the work.

Experiment with vertical and horizontal reading in your own art-making. Document your experimentations in your visual arts process diary or art journal.

## ACTIVITY

Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Aboriginal Dreaming, to various extents, all impose forms of religious or spiritual codifications. These codifications may act to control or dictate certain representations and directly impact on aesthetic values and the creation of artworks.

Explore the impact of spiritual codifications on a particular aspect of Asian art. Investigate the way the level of rigidity of these codifications has changed over time. How is Lee U-fan's work influenced by the codifications ascribed to Zen philosophy? How has he interpreted these codifications into an aesthetic form?

## ACTIVITY

Lee U-fan said of his work, 'My work is simpler with more space on the canvas. The viewers stand in the non-expressed intention and the space ... The space between the expressed and the non-expressed ... for the viewer to see the relationship between the expressed and non-expressed elements of the work' (extract from the video accompanying the APT exhibition).

This idea reflects the Japanese aesthetic that has emerged from Buddhism that supports a simplification of a vision. In this process you find the essentials in something and depict only that, avoiding the temptation to add detail and elaboration.

Experiment with this idea in your own art. Try making lots of drawings of a person, animal or plant, trying each time to simplify your work so that you can capture the essence of that thing without having to include detail. Zen Buddhists consider that the spaces between a thing are as important as the thing itself. It is in these spaces and simplifications that the viewer has time to think or contemplate.

## ACTIVITY

How does Lee u-fan's work challenge Western ideas of materialism?

Identify postmodern artists who also challenged the connection between the ideas of art and the material properties of art. Consider artists such as:

- Joseph Beuys (<<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/B/beuys.html>> and search for 'Joseph Beuys' at <<http://images.google.com/>>)
- the British-based Art and Language Group (<<http://www.caroun.com/Art/ConceptualArt/ConceptualArt.html>>)
- Yves Klein (<[http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/klein\\_yves.html](http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/klein_yves.html)> and search for 'Yves Klein' at <<http://images.google.com/>>).

## ACTIVITY

Chinese *guohua* was a traditional and highly respected form of ink painting that used monochrome, black, white and greys. During the early 1950s the Chinese government introduced a systematic program to replace classical Chinese ink painting with an art that was socially useful and not tied to modes of brushwork that were considered 'backward' in a time of modernisation and change.

The primary means by which this was accomplished was through training a younger generation of painters in principles of Western academic drawing, which they then applied to figure painting. The young artists created and painted themes that had never been seen in traditional Chinese art. This became known as social realist painting.

This form of art was tightly controlled by the Chinese government, but gradually artists began modifying the socialist realist idea, realising the expressive potential of the blank backgrounds and rich ink tones typical of traditional Chinese painting. Subtleties in the work were achieved through the strength and pressure of the brushstroke and the flicked ends that revealed the feathered dry tips of the brush.

Research *guohua* (search for 'guohua art' at <http://images.google.com/>) and experiment with trying to create these effects using only black ink (water it down for different levels of intensity) on white paper. Continue to practise using pressure and 'loading' of your brush to subtly change the intensity of the lines.

## ACTIVITY

Lee was the leader of the Mono-ha movement in Japan. Use the World Wide Web to find out more about this group (for example, search for 'mono-ha' at <<http://www.artnet.com/>>).

Asian artists frequently formed themselves into groups as a way of fostering and encouraging an identity for their work. Identify other Asian and Western art groups who worked closely together towards shared ideals.