



This page, clockwise from above: *Hazard No. 2* (detailed view), 2014; *Diagonals*, 2014, all artwork by Michael Lee.



**ART REPUBLIK DISCOVERS MORE ABOUT SINGAPOREAN ARTIST MICHAEL LEE AFTER HIS RECENT SUCCESSFUL EXHIBITION AT YAVUZ FINE ART. BY YEN PHANG**

## Silent Witness

112

Born in Singapore, and having been based in creative centres such as Hong Kong and Berlin, Michael Lee's work has clearly been shaped by his built environment. However, to characterise the artist's oeuvre as the relationship between lived experience and city spaces would be too reductive, and inadequately captures Lee's expanded field of investigation into urban memory, and psychological geography.

Apart from architectural structures and their physical trappings (tangible or yet unrealised), the social ecologies of densely built metropolitan areas bear their own metabolisms and invisible

tumults — themes which have been a constant undercurrent in Lee's practice. His latest solo show at Yavuz Fine Art, 'Machine for Living Dying In', builds upon these ideas through a new body of work that seems to signal a move towards a more meditative and introspective direction.

Tapping upon Lee's recurring use of cut-outs, 'Hazards' (2014) is a series of collages that contrast the conventions of public space and interior design against grittier surrealistic backdrops. Their modest size, almost dollhouse-like in nature, belie the pictorial frisson that inhabits these compositions. The





fitting counterpoint to his more visually sombre installations. In 'Slab' (2014) for example, the artist appropriates the everyday innocuousness of furniture, modifying modular shelving to mimic the configurations of a typical public housing block in Singapore. While its aesthetic is decidedly minimalist (almost tomb-like), the installation hums with a sense of mystery, challenging our experience of the non-descript and ordinary.

One feature which threads through much of Lee's best work is his grace and restraint in not overtly belabouring concept, allowing his artwork rather to be the inevitable intersection for complex ideas. This is perhaps best exemplified by 'Diagonals' (2014), a wall installation featuring the recognisable yellow and black stripes found in hazard-zones. The employment of this familiar visual, paired with Lee's effective use of industrial materials, is illustrative of his continued effort in broadening the formal and tangible aspects of his artistic output. The result installation? The creation of a liminal space and physical non-place that stands at the juncture of form and function, of detached abstraction and pointed representation.

And while there is an immediacy underlying Lee's choice of medium and visual motifs that clearly reference the real world we live in, his work is neither burdened by any normative messaging, nor is it restrained by localised context. 'Script For Unperformed Performance No. 1' (2014) provides such an example of Lee's confident gesture, comprising a black hammock that cuts a bold stroke through the gallery space, accompanied by text about a worker's routine (possibly one which led to the creation of the shelving units for 'Slab'). This piece is arguably one of Lee's most concise works; it holds the memory of possible past interactions, and the latent drama of actions yet unrealised. The text (and by extension, the installation) becomes a self-sustaining machine, with its refrain being a reminder that the main medium of living itself is not just time, but repetition.

Indeed, linguistics play an integral role in Lee's practice, from the neon text of 'Machine for Living Dying In' (2014), to the video compilation of deaths in 'Gone Solo' (2014). They resonate because of their simplicity and matter-of-factness, in a similar vein to Lee's series 'Dwelling', comprising detailed paintings of floorplans. They take their cues from the specific, be they quotes, events, or places (actual or imagined), and radiate out toward the philosophical. Spend enough time with the works, and their role as art-object becomes gradually down-played, distilled to almost pure idea and information. In avoiding design and ornamentation, Lee's works gravitate toward introspection on living (and its corollary, dying), and become koans unto themselves. ■

meticulous manipulation of card and paper draw indirect references to architectural scale models, but their goals could not be more diametrically opposed; these pieces are not means of achieving precise knowledge of measured space toward a Rationalist purpose, but rather they depict fantastical fever dreams of idealised domesticity cut out from their safe confines, and thrust into quiet delirium.

Lee's precarious take on the notions of home-life in his collages also echoes throughout his other work, providing a



his page, clockwise from top: Hazard  
p. 4, 2014, Michael Lee; *Machine For  
Living Dying In* exhibition, interior view.  
Images courtesy of Yavuz Fine Art.