

# An Eye on the Contemporary

Exhibition Review: *Machine for Living Dying in*  
16 August–21 September 2014  
Yavuz Fine Art

Text By Ruyi Wong  
All images courtesy of Yavuz Fine Art

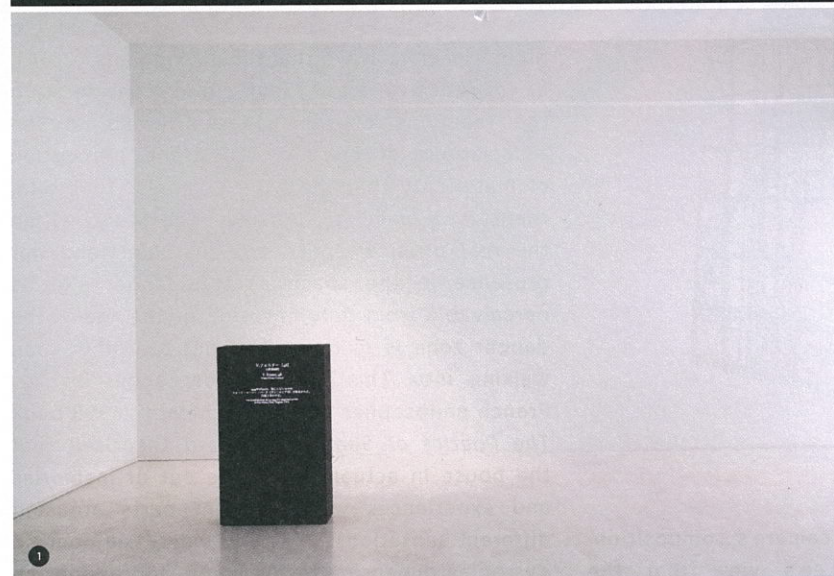
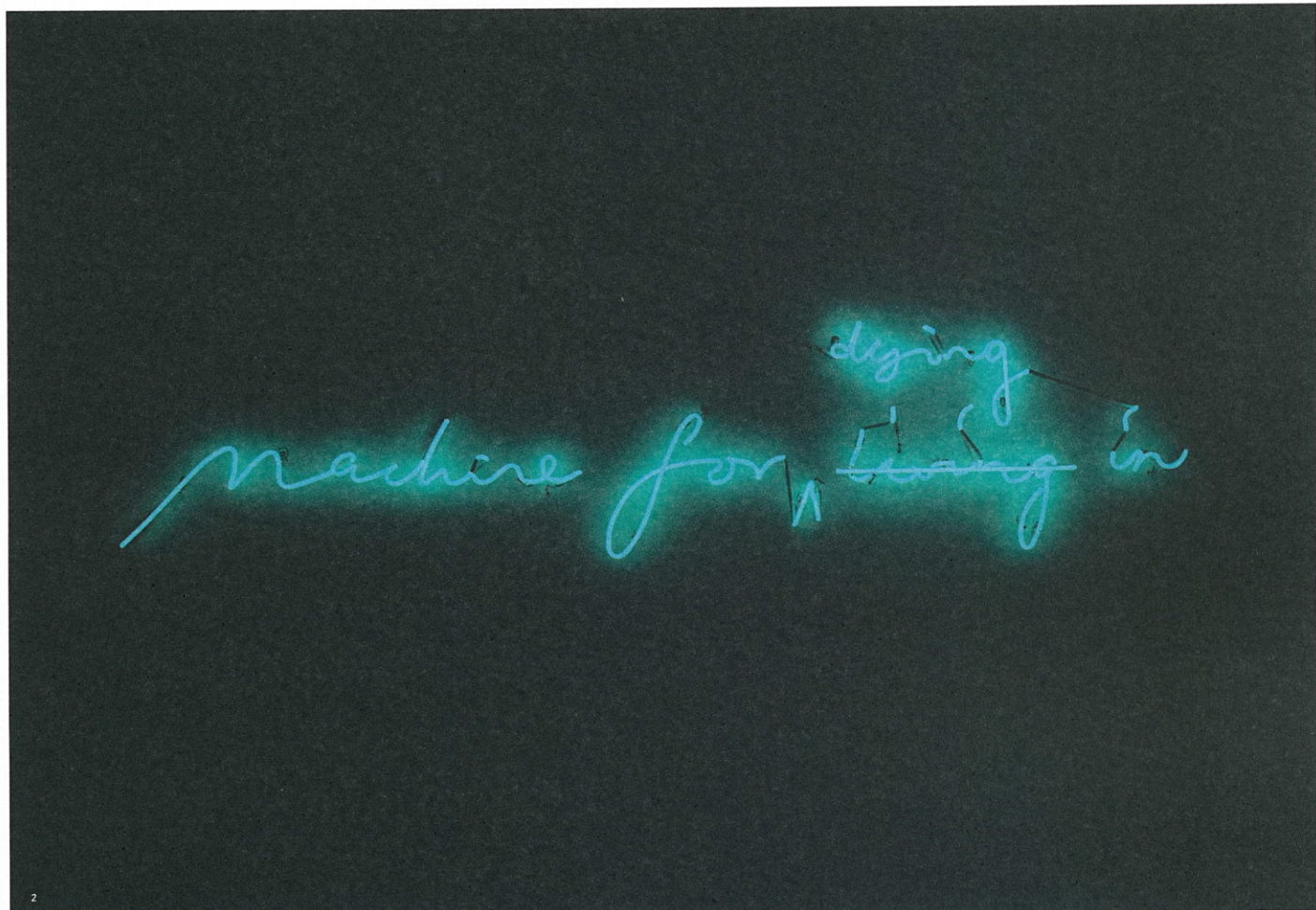
An artist, curator, and publisher based in Singapore and Berlin, Michael Lee researches urban memory and fiction, and in particular the contexts and implications of loss. *Ruyi Wong* reviews his latest exhibition.

Michael Lee's solo exhibition *Machine for Living Dying in* carries binary notions of the home. This prepares viewers, audiences, and the public to cast away a simplistic approach towards Lee's work. First, Lee cites one of twentieth century's most influential architect Le Corbusier, in his 1923 book, *Towards a New Architecture* in which "A house is a machine for living in." The other precept points to well-admired architect Douglas Darden's exploration of the narrative potential of architecture by proposing a home for a fictional dying client in the *Oxygen House*. Darden's depiction of the home is not just for the living but functions as a tomb as well. Lee reflects both binary principles by deleting the word "living" and rewrites over with Darden's darker notion of "dying." The word "living" is revoked, and even when it is present, is denied audibly. In doing so, Lee fluently paves the way to address the questions of architecture in relation to life and death. *Machine for Living Dying in* poetically urges viewers and audience to explore our own demons and to engage in an understanding of homes that does not exclude the other conditions of being human, as encapsulated by our fears, hopes, and memories. This mapping out of the darker side of the human condition has been Lee's ongoing examination of different aspects and facets "loneliness" and "solitude."

The neon exhibition signage displaying Lee's handwriting on the gallery wall is familiar in the contemporary art world as artists like Bruce Nauman and Tracey Emin have both made use of this aesthetics in their text art. Lee layers this stylistic approach with the minimalist concept of "less is more." The first work in the exhibition, *Gone Solo* (2013), is a 14-minute black and white bilingual text video (in English and Japanese) built into a black plinth. *Gone Solo* compiles 45 accounts of lone departures of pop icons such as Amy Winehouse and Kurt Cobain, to unknown individuals in alphabetical ordered. The random cull of lone death profiles presents death as an aspect of reality, arousing both pity and fear. Each profile is merely represented by name, age, occupation, and location of fatality. We question why Lee would choose the bilingual text as a means of communication over visual imagery. Simply, words give artists the opportunity to be more direct than they usually are with images. Lee added that the inclusion of the Japanese text displaces the morbid tales surrounding Japanese's infamous Suicide Forest, signifying the acceptance of death and suicide as a ritual made apparent in Lee's work.

The black minimalist display of the video work pushes the whites of the gallery space to reside from view. The black minimalist quadrilateral repeats itself in Lee's next body of work *Script*





performer in *Script for Unperformed Performance 1*. Written in the second person's perspective, we are, at the same time, jostled to the role of a bystander envisaging a pitiful helpless clown as he performs the repetitively futile and meaningless routines around his home, knowing that death will come knocking on his door one day. Lee in his own words states his intent to "stir unease" through the topic of death, and to "disturb the binary of comfort and discomfort about home." The tenor of Lee's darker tone parallels Douglas Darden's works, which address the questions of architecture in relation to life and death, and his own struggle with self and life.

Lee takes another poke in his depiction of the home in the series of collages titled *Hazard* (2014). Following Lee's artistic methodology of using found materials in *Slab* (2014) and *Script for Unperformed Performance 1* (2014), the collage materials are culled from the pages of home and interior magazines. Lee mentions his collages can be seen as his interpretation of today's homes, departing from British artist Richard Hamilton's 1956 seminal collages *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*, which were developed from found photographs. Using these found materials become the generator for *Hazard* as a series of works that plays on the constructed representation of interior and home spaces,

for *Unperformed Performance 1* (2014) and *Slab* (2014). Both present found objects as materials. A distinct aesthetic decisions runs through Lee's work. The text art format returns to the darkly humoured *Script for Unperformed Performance 1* (2014), which comprises a found hammock and a set of verses describing a series of lone performative act on loop. Akin to some of the unknown individual profiles in *Gone Solo*, the identity of the performer is anonymous and ambiguous, and that creates an ubiquitous identity that fits anyone. We are the face of the unknown individual in *Gone Solo*. We are the

1  
Michael Lee, *Gone Solo*,  
2013, single channel video,  
black and white, no sound,  
14'00.

2  
Michael Lee, *Machine for  
Living Dying in*, 2014, neon,  
45 x 200 cm.





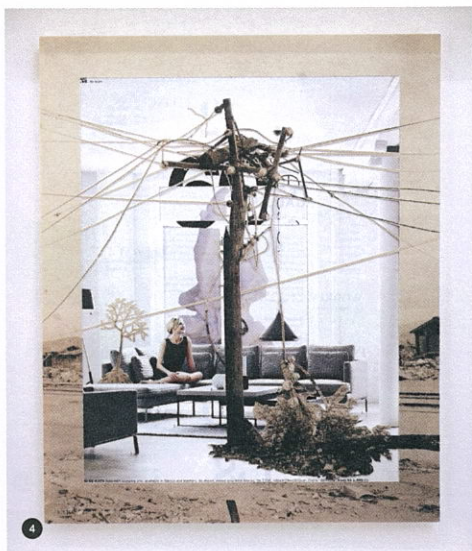
carefully arranged for the camera's composition. *Hazard No. 5* reflects Lee's view that the minimalist home, the cult of defined modern taste, is an irony to man's relationship to nature. The minimalist home is an icon to man's inherent contradictions in its need to manicure and domesticate everything in one's living environment, presenting man's failed attempts at coming to terms with our real environment. Lee juxtaposes a collage of an image of overhead power lines, found in countries with ubiquitous street electrical cabling, to an image of a sleek minimalist home. In doing so, Lee confronts the comfortable and familiar image of the home, putting the viewer ill at ease.

*Diagonals* (2014) locates Lee's interest in the language of signs and materiality. *Diagonals* (2014), the largest piece of work in the show, is hitched up over an entire wall, and simultaneously doubles up as a divider between two rooms, separating two spaces. The yellow and black diagonal strips signify a danger zone, that its PVC material functions as a screen that separates two rooms. For Lee, the qualities and associations of *Diagonals* (2014) "harnessed, challenged or transformed" the object. There is a necessity to articulate the meaning of the object in more ways than one. *Diagonals* (2014), as a reflexive work, takes into consideration the reactions of the gallery viewers to the associations of cultural codes and perception of materiality that the work conjures. That said, there is a need to perceive the work within the real physical space and to understand our presence in the space as the danger sign is perceivable from only one side of the room—the danger zone is to be walked out of, rather than walking into. This sensation of danger invokes French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's 1958 book *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard theorised that the house in actuality is made out of memories and experiences with different parts arousing different sensations. In similar ways, Lee opens a dystopian dimension to the home, addressing the subliminal anxieties of living and dying within it.

Lee extends the poetic space of the home, adding a rich array of darker fantasy to offer us great imaginal possibilities. His depiction of the home draws death at the edge of life. Living on the site where fatality is anticipated is almost like living on the edge of another world, opening the home to a transcendental existence. By means of associations and references, Lee taps into these elements that haunt our nightmares, fantasies, and memories, and brings us face to face with some of his own concerns and fears. ▀

For more information on the artist, visit [www.michaellee.sg](http://www.michaellee.sg).





3  
Michael Lee, *Hazard No. 1*,  
2014, paper collage,  
32.5 × 32 × 23 cm.

4  
Michael Lee, *Hazard No. 5*,  
2014, paper collage,  
41 × 38 cm.

5  
Michael Lee, *Hazard No. 4*,  
2014, paper collage,  
41 × 38 cm.

6  
Michael Lee, *Diagonals*,  
2014, emulsion on wall,  
polyurethane on PVC and  
enamel on galvanised iron,  
294 × 650 cm. Installation  
view.

7  
Michael Lee, *Hazard No. 1*,  
2014, paper collage,  
32.5 × 32 × 23 cm.

