



Recuperation

By Todd Porterfield

From the right edge of Lee's installation drawing, a conjuring of the current exhibition, darkness encroaches and spills across the sheet. Six monoliths stand, nodding, bending, swaying, shifting, squeezed. Some are placed on repurposed blocks, variously blank or covered in a Lewittian grid or in Buren stripes, while other of his posts are plonked straight through the most prosaic chairs, which seem to hold them aloft, or at least prevent them from crashing straight through the earth. Their iconographic language is inspired by the folkloric rhomboids of the Romanian Brancusi's *Endless Column*, the bulging stomachs described in Matisse and Picasso's Africanist line, and the strings of ovals of Polynesian ornament. Over the last years of Lee's career, these modernist and "primitivist" motifs are not so much replanted in new soil as constantly reconfigured and redeployed by an artist who lives between Tahiti and New York City and is just as often in Europe, as much cosmopolitan as nomad. In the drawing, uneasily, no space is left for the armchair visitor to walk

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around the sculptures. In New York, cramped in the space of gallery and artist's studio, Lee's monoliths mock the cigarette-thin lipstick skyscrapers of Manhattan, emblems of our putrid age.

What to do with the remains of our scorched earth and tattered artistic inheritance? Since around 1800, this is the question facing most artists who have been paying any attention. Under the weight of global ecological catastrophe and the genocides of colonial expansion, Alexander Lee's work confronts us not only with the processes of that destruction but, materially and stubbornly, with what is left. His practice is one of recuperation in so many senses of the term. *Alexander Lee est un artiste de la récupé.*

For this exhibition, *Rā'au*, meaning both wood and medication in Tahitian, Lee is recycling wood taken from Tahiti, East Harlem, and the forests near the killing fields of Verdun, even as he takes repossession of modernist and Polynesian motifs, some familiar from the work of the Catholic reactionary and Symbolist, Paul Gauguin. And it's sweet revenge. During his time in Tahiti, Gauguin militated against the Hakka Chinese minority, who had been oppressed in China and conscripted to work in Tahiti after 1848 when France, finally and for the second time in six decades, put an end to their enslavement of Africans. Unironically and unashamedly, the Frenchman crusaded for a "Tahiti for the Tahitians," which is to say, for the exclusion of the Hakka, from whom Lee in part descends.

Lee's installations and interventions also summon Christian evangelical artifacts and histories. In a forest niche in eastern France, Lee convoked a vulgar plaster Saint Theresa to stand amongst his monoliths. Pleading, she looks ridiculous next to the used but untarnished materials and motifs of his works. In other interventions in France and Tahiti, the artist repeatedly stamps indigenous designs on large cloths and flies them from church facades like a ceremonial flag, an announcement of an upcoming exhibition, or a victorious military banner that puts its own mark on the old colonial power.

Much of Lee's work of recuperation resonates with Georges Didi-Huberman's observation that "the ashes of Auschwitz or Hiroshima [that] form these vast remains, this grey world...about which we can no longer say that 'nothing is left.' The enduring survival of ashes and that of images: this is the soil, the ground of our present haunting obsessions." (*L'empreinte*) *The survival of ashes and of images*: works like the print x of Lee's studio floor take me back

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to the gritty, ravishing, and ravished remains, the phantom traces of our trashed earth found in the black and white photography of Aaron Siskind (1903-1991) and the first generation that lived under the threat of planetary annihilation, the same destruction and threat registered in Tahiti, where France tested nuclear bombs from 1966 to 1974, their spectacle and devastation figured elsewhere in Lee's oeuvre. To make x, Lee carved the bottom of a cubic pedestal, maneuvered it atop a sheet, and stamped repeatedly, reactivating the modernist motif of the incised grid. On top of it, he cast the shadow of the Polynesian ancestral motif of the Veri, a centipede that is one of the few animals that can regenerate limbs after they've been cut off. The Veri, in art as in the ecosystem, is an agent of decomposition who, like Lee, serves to upcycle nutrients and revitalize culture, an active force for renewal and revived beauty.

