

Esther Schipper

Lee Bae

Syzygy

September 11 – October 18, 2025

Esther Schipper Berlin



Lee Bae, **Brushstroke A3**, 2025, bronze, 170 x 165 x 120 cm. Image © Lee Bae Studio

Esther Schipper is pleased to announce **Syzygy**, Lee Bae's first solo exhibition with the gallery. On view will be works from the artist's series **Issu du feu**, and his **Brushstroke** sculptures and paintings, including a monumental site-specific work covering the walls and floor of the exhibition space.

Lee Bae is best known for his striking adoption of charcoal as his main means of expression. The artist has turned the material into a versatile instrument with which to create mosaic-like arrangements constructed from shards of charcoal, paintings and ink drawings using charcoal as a pigment dissolved in a medium, and sculptures reminiscent of large charcoal logs. While the choice of charcoal was initially an economic one made upon Lee Bae's arrival in France in the early 1990s, the material also became a reaffirmation of the artist's Korean identity. Charcoal has unique meanings in Korean tradition. Said to hold the energy of the fire that produced it, it is believed to have cleansing, purifying qualities, as well as the ability to ward off evil forces. The artist employs it as a transformational material, drawn from the elements and history of Korea, and imbued with a rich aggregate of personal, cultural and spiritual associations. To Lee Bae, charcoal represents a condensation of time; immortalizing the life of a tree, it embodies concepts of renewal, circularity and the rhythms of nature, all of which are central to his artistic approach.

Living between Korea and Paris, over the course of his by now thirty years of practice, the artist has explored various articulations of the material, operating in a productive tension between its formal qualities and its relation to ritual. Lee Bae's work exists in a dialogue between Western and Far Eastern approaches to art making, and weds formalism and spirituality, presence and absence, stillness and dynamism.

For **Syzygy**, Lee Bae has lined the entire surface of the walls and floor in the exhibition space with white paper. The paper, which can only be stepped on with shoe covers, signals a kinship to traditional Korean-style interiors. To the artist, the care taken in Far Eastern domestic settings—for example, taking off one's shoes when entering—suggests mindfulness, and it is this sense of place he seeks to evoke. The environment fosters an atmosphere of intellectual concentration in which the visitor encounters the works. Some sections of the paper have been painted by the artist with broad ink strokes which were executed onsite in the gallery. Additionally, two framed brushstroke paintings in ink on paper are suspended from the ceiling.

Lee Bae's painting process is conceptually rooted in the tradition of Far Eastern drawings and calligraphy and the idea of spiritual refinement through controlling one's physical movement, breath and rhythm in the work process. Rather than being spontaneous gestural expressions, the brushstrokes can be understood as crystallizations of the artist's thoughts and physical sensations, accumulated over a long period of time. Traces of chance and contingency are present, manifested by tremors of the artist's hand, as well as by twists and pauses of the lines. The brushstrokes seem to have a life of their own, a liberated, spirited, and vigorous life that exists in itself and for itself.

Three sculptures in the exhibition at first resemble assemblies of large black logs. Butting into different directions, their surface has a deep relief recalling woodgrain. The works are from a series giving Lee Bae's **Brushstrokes** a three-dimensional form. Cast in bronze, the sculpture nonetheless captures the fluidity and the texture of his ink-wash paintings. One work is installed on the floor, the others extend out from the wall into the space. With the sculptural work, Lee Bae makes manifest the long simultaneity of one-, two- and three-dimensional associations inherent in his painterly practice: His brushwork not only unfolds on a flat, two-dimensional surface, the works also conjure a three-dimensional space through twists and swerves.

One wall is covered with Lee Bae's iconic **Issu du feu** works. They are created by aligning hundreds of small charcoals on the panel, which are then grafted and polished. The surface shows wood grain and growth rings made by nature and time, refracting light in various directions and in multiple angles. Evoking a wide range of images in the viewer's minds, the surface reacts to the entire spectrum of light, from the faintest to the brightest, from clouds passing to shadows thrown by a passing visitor. As the artist has said, "it is a black material that produces light."

What at first may sound like a contradiction, in Lee Bae's work aligns in conceptual unity: black and white, presence and absence, ying and yang. It is this harmony of opposition to which the title refers. Syzygy aims to create a holistic environment that will provide visitors with an encounter with the exhibited works embodying harmony and alignment, offering an experience of spiritual unity.

An essay by Marc Mayer accompanies the exhibition. The marouflage has been realized under the direction of Jeonghwa Min and Taesik Jang. This exhibition was installed with the help of: Inhyuk Park, Seungsoo Back, Hyeoki Kwon, Hyun-Jung Suh.

Lee Bae was born in 1956 in Cheong-do, Korea. He received his BFA and MFA in Fine Arts at Hongik University in 1981 and 1986. The artist lives and works between Paris and Seoul. The artist was awarded Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, France (2018), 4th National Association of Art Critics Award (2013), Artist of the Year, Korean Cultural Center, Paris (2009), and Artist of the Year, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (2000).

Lee Bae's recent solo exhibitions include: **Lee Bae – La Maison de la Lune Brûlée**, Wilmotte Foundation, Venice (2024); **Lee Bae**, Indang Museum of Daegu, Daegu (2021); **Union**, Phi Foundation, Montreal (2021); **Venice Wood Water**, Wilmotte Foundation, Venice (2019); **Plus de Lumière**, Fondation Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence (2018); **Overstated & Understated**, Paradise Art Space, Incheon (2018); **La Cohue**, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Vannes (2016); **Issu du feu**, Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire (2016); **Suspens**, Domaine de Kerguéhennec, Bignan (2016); **Carte Blanche à Lee Bae**, Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet, Paris (2015).

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