



ART

MONO-HA

The thing itself

BY MATT LARKING

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In October 1968 Nobuo Sekine dug a hole in the ground, shaped the extracted dirt into a large cylinder and called the work "Phase — Mother Earth." It was probably an experiment, influenced by discussions of the new Land Art and Minimalist works taking place in the United States.

When it was first constructed, the prevailing view in Japan was that it was a kind of quirky visual play of positive and negative spaces. But artist Lee Ufan disagreed, claiming that this was actually the end of *visual* manipulation; it was in fact a real time, real life absence and presence presented in temporal juxtaposition — a before and an after.

This, Sekine's piece and Lee's comment, is typically pointed to as the founding moment of Japan's influential, homegrown Mono-ha art movement.

Born into the post-war years and the supposed ruins of consumer culture, a small group of artists were attempting to create a new, utopian reality. They proceeded as if art might be re-enchanted by shifting attention away from the objectification of images and to the creation of a world of encounters, with everyday objects, that might end up looking like mythic gestures.

Mono-ha, literally "the school of things," was initially an informal term — sometimes used derisively — that brought together loosely affiliated artists around Tokyo including Sekine, Lee, Susumu Koshimizu, Katsuro Yoshida, and 12 or so others. From 1968 to the mid '70s, these artists used natural materials such as charcoal, stones and earth or manufactured ones such as acrylic sheets, girders and glass.

More practically, the overriding tenet was that plain materials be used without doing much of anything to them. This prevented the presentation of the material from being artificially constrained by the limited perspective of an individual artist's ego. Time and space were valued more, and so were relationships to the surrounding world in all their Zen-like interconnectedness and ephemerality.

Lee's "System A" (1969), for example, is a large cube of cotton wool to which steel plates are attached to the flanks, exploring tensions between soft and hard, natural and man-made, and Koshimizu made giant paper envelopes that contain slabs of rock, like "Paper 2" (1969).

Mono-ha fizzled out by the mid-'70s as its members took to various alternative creative directions, and only retrospectively, like many groups, did it really seem cohesive. Its legacy, however, is unlikely to fade: the movement is largely synonymous with the beginnings of contemporary art in Japan, especially as a modern Asian aesthetic untrammelled by imported Western preoccupations.

Much of the daily work of museums and art historians is to tell stories about artists and art movements, locating pivotal moments and seminal works, while serving up plausible explanations for the motives behind the pieces. So it goes with Osaka's National Museum of Art's "Reconsidering Mono-ha." The gist of the show is to revise the commonly accepted belief that Mono-ha got under way with Sekine's "Phase — Mother Earth."

The Osaka show chooses instead to locate Mono-ha's beginnings in the uncertainties of perception — optical puzzles of juxtaposition, line and color, like those found in university psychology textbooks — that characterized many 1960s Japanese paintings and sculptures. This was, actually, the approach that Lee rejected in his original comments on "Phase — Mother Earth." But in "Reconsidering Mono-ha," Sekine's mentor Jiro Takamatsu (b.1936) is accorded a founding role for his influential "Shadow" paintings of the 1960s that played with perspective or depicted source-less silhouettes on the canvas.

Sekine had been Takamatsu's assistant, and toyed with eye-deceiving works like the seemingly circular painting "Phase No.5," a contemporaneous work of "Phase — Mother Earth." From these origins in visually challenging the surety of seeing, artists would ultimately move to more conceptual explorations of materials.

The National Museum of Art, Osaka, isn't the only place where the period is being reconsidered. As the leading Mono-ha artist/philosopher/critic, Lee has been dealing with the movements' emphasis on space, time and minimally reductive use of materials for nearly 40 years. Some 36 recent sculptures and paintings are currently at the artist's solo show, "The Art of Margins," at the Yokohama Museum of Art till Dec. 23.

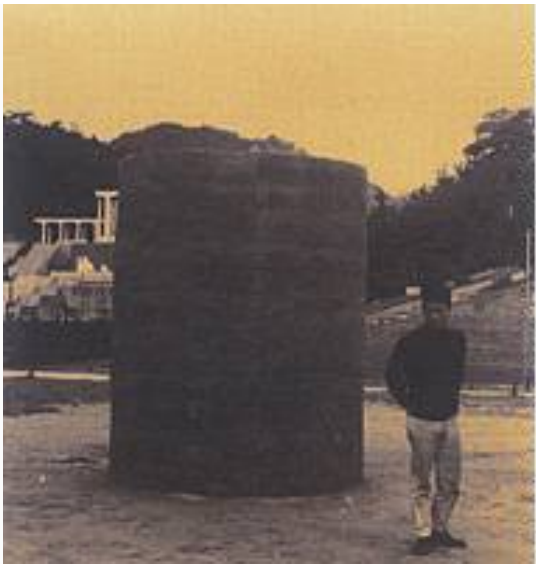
Since his revelation during "Phase — Mother Earth," Lee's approach has been to resist definite forms. By using repetitive practices that slowly dissolve through variation and contrast over decades, his pieces remain ultimately incomplete. His current paintings are similar to early works that attempt to fashion a space for correspondences between the painted and unpainted areas. And much like Robert Ryman, a fellow winner of the Praemium Imperiale, it's as if he were searching for the beginnings of painting itself — the application of pigment to a surface, resulting in a multiplication of relations.

In the end, the Osaka show does not dislodge the importance of "Phase — Mother Earth," or Lee's understanding of it, but broadens the context of its inception. Installation and site-specific artists, for whom the placement of a piece is everything, have essentially embraced Mono-ha's principles — much as Lee did after observing Sekine's revolutionary work 40 years earlier. Mono-ha artists were truly the progenitors of such art as has now become seamlessly absorbed within, and a staple of, contemporary art. Lee's recent work reminds us that he remains one of its leaders.

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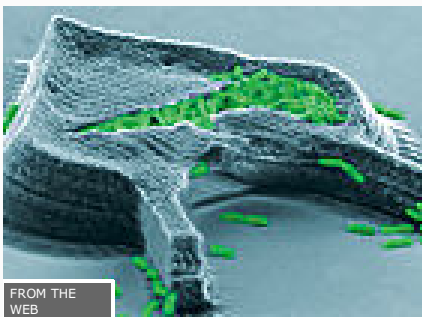
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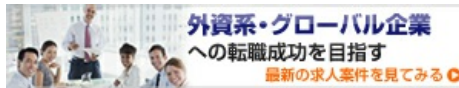
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