



CARL LEE • *myoptic* • January 11 to March 1, 2019



CARL LEE is a media artist based in Buffalo, NY. Since the 1990s he has been making single channel films and videos and multi-channel installation work that explore personally significant environments and objects encountered in his daily life and experiment with visually inventive modes of expression. His work has been programmed locally, nationally, and internationally and has garnered a number of awards and support over the years. From 1997-2008, he was co-director of Termite TV Collective, a media group founded in 1992 that produces formally innovative personal and political programming for television, the web, and live performance. This work was featured at the Museum of Modern Art, NY, public television outlets, and in festivals worldwide. Carl's first in-depth exposure to film production came as an undergraduate at Harvard University where he received his BA in 1992 in Visual and Environmental Studies. In 2000, he received his MFA in Film and Media Arts from Temple University in Philadelphia. In addition to his artistic endeavors, he has worked in a variety of positions as a videographer, editor, and curator in the media arts field and across a diverse range of projects from no-budget productions to studio features, community-based grassroots projects to multimedia development.

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*myoptic*

While they are presented through several distinct viewing devices, the images throughout Carl Lee's exhibition *myoptic* are ultimately part of a single long epic poem about life and time. The life of time and the time of one's life. Throughout the works, a variety of quixotic and mundane images prod the viewer with their ordinary aspects and their resonant beauty. They don't tell a single story, but imply multiple narratives. Much of the imagery feels as though it is leaning forward from the near and distant past in an effort to occupy a more present space. The various structures built to contain and present these images are akin to dreamcatchers, tools designed to ensnare memory in a physical place because maybe then the intangible currents of recollection can be made tangible and the tangible can be held onto into perpetuity.

Lee has often utilized imagery of commonplace objects in his work. His impulse is to posit a consideration of the ordinary as it is, rather than exoticize it through an effect of the camera. Over even a short duration of time, what is ordinary reveals itself as resonant with its own internal beauty. The viewer is eventually lulled into a space that is more than ordinary—contemplative, dreamy, and suggestive of the whimsical connections of memory, longing, and desire. The ordinary reveals itself as a talisman to a wide, interior world.

Much of Lee's imagery derives from the home environment and the space enacted by family, whether it is the slow pans through interior spaces, overlaid with a roto-scoped figure walking through the same space; his father singing a sentimental karaoke song; or images of his wife and daughter. In *Telescope House 2*, Lee plays off an image of his daughter playing outside with a letterboard upon which hands enter to spell out memories—such as the fact that the sound of his daughter in the womb evoked horses galloping, a forceful and even ominous portent. Lee's hands don't spell out these memories completely—there are letters missing, just as there are gaps in memory. Trying to physicalize the memories in three-dimensional letters is a valiant but losing proposition.

Sometimes, various objects are seen floating within the home space, underlining the domesticity of the scene—a spoon, a toy duck—but perhaps most interestingly, in *Telescope House 1*, a locked lock. It is a familiar household object, but in the context of what Lee is concocting, it comes across as an acute and specific desire, to take this space, and the things and people within in, and lock it all in place. Hold it dear but hold it dear for good, forever, so it never slips away.

In *Home Movies*, one of the more quixotic images Lee presents is bracketed between segments featuring his own family of wife and daughter and his parents—between the two is the view from a boat of a shipping vessel and hundreds of shipping containers on a dock. A passing view from a family vacation, seemingly at odds with much of his other imagery, but it does emphatically evoke structure and the sense of everything being fixed in its right place. Firm and secure.

There is a placid and serene satisfaction in much of Lee's domestic imagery, the contented air of someone who sees ever-deeper beauty in his ordinary surroundings. In *Vision Test*, a flat and beautiful depiction of house exterior shows the artist exiting the front door, seeming to consider his surroundings, his situation, briefly watering the plants, then returning indoors, followed by selective details of wet plants and a perfect hovering cloud. The piece repeats its action, speeding up with each successive loop as though suggesting the ever-increasing passage of time, though this does not impact the sense of internal satisfaction. Even at its fastest pace, there remains a slow sense of contentment.

All of Lee's works in the exhibition are housed within constructed viewing devices. Two directly mimic telescope house forms. Two utilize binoculars while the telescope houses layer multiple images through variations of the "pepper's ghost" visual trickery. One is shaped like a souvenir viewer. Their physical structures frame the images contained within. The telescope houses are immersed in domestic imagery while the souvenir viewer emphasizes the jewel-like aspect of Lee's prototypical home.

But the structures also function in other ways. They each play with distance and space. They are the constructs within which Lee is trying to trap and maintain certain memories and sensibilities. At the same time, they are distancing devices that keep the viewer detached from images that are doing their best to connect with them. It is as though, wanting to grasp memory and time, we are nonetheless disabled from fulfilling that desire. It is the curse of memory within time—that which at once feels like it should be fully ours, that which feels fully present to us, is perpetually slipping away.

John Massier  
Visual Arts Curator

