

Listed as UNESCO world heritage, the Couvent de la Tourette, designed in 1953 by Le Corbusier, is hosting, as part of the Biennale de Lyon, the works of Lee Ufan. Minimalism and a sensitive relationship with space... After Versailles in 2014, the artist faces the austerity of the famous Dominican convent. An encounter.

Born in 1936, the Korean artist moved to Japan in 1956 and embarked on studies in Western philosophy. He is one of the main protagonists and theoreticians of the Mono-ha ("School of Things") movement, emerging in 1968 and exploring the association of untransformed manufactured objects with elements of nature. "We must learn to see all things as they are without objectifying the world by means of representation which is imposed by humans," he wrote in 1969 in the journal Critique du design. Ever since, Lee Ufan has worked in this fashion, uncompromisingly, relating places and materials, creating constantly renewed dialogues between the made and the non-made. His sculptural approach is reflected by his paintings characterised by coloured markings. For every exhibition, the artist recalls the necessity to work in situ in order to observe and be in tune with the space. In Lyon, Lee Ufan has created a series of installations, some of which hold the particularity of being ephemeral constructions, like his Japanese-paper room set in the middle of concrete pillars.

In this spot invested by a strong architectural gesture, how did you go about making your works dialogue with Le Corbusier?

The idea that the artwork is a place of mediation between the inside and the outside has long pre-existed in my work. All my works have thus been thought out in relation to spaces and the relationship between the inside and the outside, perfectly accomplished by Le Corbusier in this impressive piece of architecture. For example, when I first visited the refectory, I was struck by the light that flooded it. The windows are huge and the space lives according to the rhythm of this daylight.

You have created a painting called Dialogue. When we look at these blue markings, we sense this interruption of light through the touches of white...

The openings which bring natural light into spaces are key elements in Le Corbusier's architecture. I painted this work specifically for the refectory, after my vision-of-light experience. It's true that the white marks translate this dazzling effect. On the other hand, in the church, I placed on the ground, just under the big light well, another painting surrounded with mineral elements like sand and gravel, which is discreetly revealed by natural light.

Brother Marc Chauveau, the exhibition's curator, speaks of a link between Heaven and Earth regarding this installation. Do you agree?

He's right. The work, also called Dialogue, is like a mosaic of Earth elements, which can be glimpsed when there is daylight. The convent is built on stilts, between Heaven and Earth, except for the church whose foundations are on the ground. Nowhere else in the convent can we find the light pipes that open up the space towards the sky. I naturally play with this.

You intervene in different spaces in the convent, and the first work that welcomes us in the atrium, Relatum-Room, is a tomb. It's a work made up of steel plates in which a candle burns. What does this piece symbolise?

The steel represents the industrial society in which Le Corbusier lived at the time. His period was marked by the triumph of the industrial era, far removed from nature, and this edifice conserves signs of this attitude. One thing that struck me when I arrived at the convent, after entering the front door, was the pyramid – its only pointed form – which Le Corbusier created with a tomb in mind; it's a chapel. I wanted to pick up this symbolism and to put light in it.

So you start the visit with a reference to the passage from life to death?

I hesitated a long time about whether to put it at the start, but I admit that in the end, the exhibition begins with the end.

Doesn't the candle also stand for hope?

Your wholesome reading is the one that I expect! Without light, without a flame, it's just a form, a box. I don't want to be categorical in putting forward any message in particular, but I wanted, through this allusion, to offer a vibration that you can feel with your own body.

In the old classrooms, you used different materials, namely paper, that you hadn't used since 1969...

These are small spaces that remind of the intimacy of Japan's tearooms. In this building where concrete predominates, I wanted to bring back more primitive elements, like slate or stones, but also delicacy, through paper. The duality of the materials results in different spaces. In this way, I displace meaning, perception, to propose other readings, while still echoing the architecture. The paper room is ephemeral and fragile, but I wanted to show that we can also create an enclosed space without concrete.

We get the feeling that you're very critical about Le Corbusier's architecture. Do you think that Beauty exists in this architecture?

I don't think that "Beauty" with a capital "B" exists, here or elsewhere! Regarding the convent, I think that Le Corbusier refuses beauty in the classical sense of the term. Once again, he needs to be placed back in the context of his era; his architecture is raw, without warmth or beauty. What I've tried to introduce with my works is not beauty, but some poetic notes in the interstices.

You took part in the Korean movement Dansaekhwa, which means "monochrome". Is this why your work is qualified as Zen or spiritual? Do you agree with this view?

Dansaekhwa is a movement that has nothing to do with the Korean artistic tradition. Artists from my generation wanted to make gestures to protest against the military government in the 1960s. Korean society was poor and didn't have much freedom. These works without discourse, made with not much paint, were above all acts of rebellion. Zen is not at all a concept that I develop, because the expression itself shuts down the work.

Could we say that this invitation to a religious place opens up the work?

Absolutely, it's an opening. I personally have been to church and I have close relatives who are Christians. But as an artist, I don't want to be religious.

How did you tackle the convent after your monumental intervention at Versailles?

Going in the opposite direction would have been more difficult. Here, I went back to propositions more focused on the individual, on myself. The works presented have been created through a relationship to the body and to gestures, but in contemporary art, there's a tendency to go for virtual works produced with the new technologies. Going back to the human is what I wanted to do.

Memo

"Lee Ufan chez Le Corbusier", until 20 December. Couvent de la Tourette, 69210 Éveux.
www.couventdelatourette.fr

Express bio

Lee Ufan

Represented by the Pace Gallery in New York and Hong Kong, as well as Galerie Kamel Mennour in France, Lee Ufan has inspired the opening of a museum specifically on his work, designed by the famous architect Tadao Ando, on Naoshima Island in Japan, on the Seto Inland Sea. Born in 1936, the South Korean artist today shares his time between Japan, the United States and Europe, especially Paris, where he has a studio. Lee Ufan was awarded the Praemium Imperiale in 2001.