ASSORTMENTS:
THE ART OF CATHERINE LEE

Sometime in 1992 Catherine Lee made a small, wall-hung, patinated, cast bronze sculpture, which she titled *Leodhas*. It is a shallow, flat form with a straight horizontal baseline and an otherwise irregular outline in which gentle, sweeping curves alternate with slightly more angular crenulations. Just one and a half inches deep, and roughly one foot by one foot at its outer edges, *Leodhas* is made up of four interlocking segments. Three of these have a charcoal-grey or slate-black patina and between them account for over ninety per cent of the perimeter of the piece. They surround, but do not entirely enclose, the fourth segment whose patina is a weathered sea-blue, much as a dark, rocky shoreline might encircle a well-sheltered inlet. More than a decade later, in 2003, Lee produced another bronze, in this instance a free-standing sculpture roughly eight feet high, almost four feet by three feet at its widest girth, and weighing somewhere between three and four hundred pounds. This solidly-based, brooding mass is a dark, reddish-brown in colour. Its title is *Lewis*. Its imposing bulk at first belies the complexity of its surface topology. Its sharply angled, multi-faceted surface ensures that the viewer's perception of its basic outline changes dramatically depending on the vantage point from which it is viewed. Moving around it we are likely to find ourselves as persistently surprised and confused as an amateur climber faced with a difficult and intimidating mountain peak.

To compare these two works may appear somewhat arbitrary, though the comparison does serve to illustrate some fundamental contrasts between two disparate areas of Lee's art of recent years in the matter of formal topology, compositional and chromatic complexity, scale in relation to the human body, and relative historical indebtedness to the traditional media of painting [as opposed to] sculpture. Nevertheless, this specific comparison was motivated, to some degree at least, by a cross-linguistic coincidence between the works' respective titles; and this may seem both misguided and misleading, especially given the artist's avowal that she never intends a title 'to be a key into the work', and that her titles have a largely 'abstract interest.' Her persistent use of the names of far-flung places, all of which she has visited, however briefly, is not meant to imply any direct formal link between a given place and a given piece. At most, as she has observed specifically of her 'Alphabet Series', of which *Leodhas* forms a part, the title is based on a highly personal association of a particular colour with her memory of a given place. The proliferation of place-names also, however, chimes with her occasional deployment of collective titles connoting a nomadic existence, as in the two related pieces entitled *Travellers* (1998) and *Wayfarers* (1998-2001), each of which comprises a ten-unit series of small works in encaustic on paper. It must be noted that this persistent invocation of restless travel is, in one sense, at variance with the ever assured, occasionally commanding, presence of Lee's various works. As Carter Ratcliff has observed '[some] of Lee's titles may be feints: cues which, if followed too closely, will throw us off balance.'[i]

Yet it is worth pursuing the question of titling a little further. As it happens, *Leodhas* is the Gaelic form of the place-name *Lewis*, the name given to the northern part of the northernmost island in the Outer Hebrides. Gaelic-speaking Lewis is in fact

physically attached to Harris - *Na Hearadh* - in the south. *Na Hearadh* is the title of a small wall-piece from 1993 that, like *Leodhas*, forms part of the second of Lee's 'Alphabet Series' (1991-95). *Harris*, on the other hand, is the title of another large bronze from 2003. Within the relatively restricted confines of contemporary Scottish Gaelic culture, the physical, cultural and linguistic profiles of these two localities are commonly perceived to be quite distinct, despite their close geographic proximity. In a comparable fashion, Lee's *Harris* is broadly similar in height, volume and weight to *Lewis*, and both belong to a series of related sculptures collectively entitled *Hebrides* (2003-4). Yet the differences between the two works are equally noteworthy. *Harris* is dark-green in hue and stands on a narrower base, which, from certain angles, gives it an air of potential instability that is not at all evident in *Lewis*. If we examine a third sculpture in the Hebrides series, *Scalpay* (the name of several different, tiny Hebridean islands), we will note that it appears less forbidding and monolithic than Lewis, and less precipitous than *Harris*. If we push to the limit our comparison of these sculptures to large-scale natural rock formations we may even perceive its gradually broadening base as suggestive of physically inviting foothills or lower slopes.

Of course there is a danger here of becoming carried away with a loosely associative, if suggestive reading of this particular series of sculptures - whose surface morphology is, after all, considerably more geometric than it is organic – in terms of a schematic translation of topologies familiar from our observation of the natural world. This may prove severely limiting, but is not unreasonable. As a variety of previous commentators have noted, all of Lee's works, in their different ways, situate themselves on the borders between abstraction and representation. They accommodate, more or less equally, a primarily formalist mode of exegesis as well as more subjective readings founded on the works' evocations of various objects in the 'real world'. Even the most cursory overview of Lee's work as a whole will, for instance, reveal an abundance of formal echoes of various archaic artifacts such as masks and heraldic devices, vessels, weapons, tools and implements. These echoes are occasionally made explicit in the works' titles, as in the recent *Archaic Figures* (2004), a wall-hung row of eight small pale-green figures in glazed raku ceramic with varying intensities of craquelure. In other instances the formal associations remain implicit. *Other Voices* (1993), for example, comprises four rows of small wall-hung sculptures. Each row contains sixteen small pieces, which are as identical in material, colour and shape as the accidents of individual facture will allow. Yet each row differs significantly from the other in material, colour and shape. The top row is in cast aluminium, the second in a blue-green patinated copper, the third in grey-black patinated bronze, and the bottom a rust-coloured iron. Each of the four disparate, long, narrow, flat shapes recalls that of the head of an ancient weapon or digging implement. Viewed within the context of a standard contemporary exhibition space it almost appears as if the contents of a Victorian museum vitrine had been inexplicably reinstalled on the walls of a modernist White Cube. As David Carrier has noted, Lee has a fondness for 'ancient materials [such as cast bronze, iron and ceramic], which she has set in the specific context of modernism'.

Previous commentators have discussed Lee's work in the wake of the various strains of modernist abstraction, both organic and geometric, that preceded and informed it. Less attention, however, has been paid to another crucial aspect of her work, i.e. her ongoing investigations into the properties of sameness and difference. Briony Fer has

recently argued that the pronounced tendency toward repetition and seriality that occurred at the moment of modernism's decline has, in fact, gained ground in its aftermath and continues to shape much of the art being made today.[ii] In the light of this observation it is worth turning briefly to one final sculpture in the Hebrides series, *Calanais*, the title of which points to one geographically specific, visual reference point for this entire series. *Calanais* also, however, provides a useful point of departure for a discussion of seriality and repetition as it functions in Lee's art. The catalogue accompanying her 1997 exhibition, which toured various institutional venues throughout the Unites States, includes a photograph taken by the artist on a visit to Lewis. It depicts the prehistoric standing stones of *Calanais* (English 'Callanish') rising in an open, roughly circular formation above the wind-blown gorse, their dark silhouettes starkly outlined against a blustery grey sky. Faye Hirsch has noted that, in keeping with Lee's fondness for venerable materials, she also 'seems drawn…to places with long, sometimes mysterious histories'. Two other illustrated photographs, which closely follow the Calanais snapshot in the same catalogue; invite is to see Calanais in a somewhat different context vis-à-vis Lee's work. The first is a photograph, once again taken by the artist, this time of the military cemetery at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where her father is buried. It depicts row upon row of virtually identical standing headstones receding into the distance. The second is a detail from Lee's *Lead Constellation* (1990), showing two long rows of small, flat lead sculptures laid out on a gallery floor. Though not exactly typical, the floor-bound *Lead Constellation* is by no means unique in Lee's work. It is comparable, for instance, to *Outcasts Water Iron* (1990), which comprises one row of twenty-one repeated units in oxidized cast iron, and which was designed to be installed either on a wall or on a floor. The consistently identical but geometrically irregular units in works such as these serve to highlight their similarities with and difference from the serial sculptures of classic Minimalism.

'Serial art' and 'Systems art' were just two of the labels applied early on to the nascent art movement we have come to know historically as Minimalism, the movement to which the strategies of seriality and repetition seem most central. For Lee, however, the art of what is more loosely termed postminimalism would appear to provide a more significant antecedent, in particular works such as Eva Hesse's *Repetition* works of 1967-8, informal floor arrangements of small, similarly misshapen vessels, each one of which is clearly unique to the discerning eye. Hesse shared with her most significant peers an interest in the entropic, and she favoured highly unstable contemporary materials such as fiberglass and polyester resin, or paint and papier maché on aluminum screening. Lee, too, has stated that 'Mutability is what interests me' and has professed a preference in materials for 'anything that has been in liquid state - clay, concrete, fiberglass, all sorts of metal.' Yet, despite her readiness to relinquish the possibility of absolute control over certain of her materials and processes - for example, the notoriously unpredictable method of firing raku ceramic - Lee is naturally drawn to materials which, when all is said and done, are both venerable and durable, as previously noted. The decided informality of Hesse's arrangements is likewise at odds with the methodical, formal assortments characteristic of Lee's serial works. Lee marries a contemporary fascination with seriality and repetition to a kind of pseudo-taxonomic impulse whose origins might be traced back at least as far as the display culture of Victorian antiquarianism and its romance with the prehistoric past. While Carter Ratcliff's account of Lee's serial works

may underestimate their affinities with more contemporary, generally antihumanist, explorations of repetition and difference, it is hard to disagree with his implicit suggestion that they are rooted in a fundamentally Romantic conception of the ancient world:

> The repeated forms of these serial pieces allude to such things as pottery shards and arrow heads, objects made by hand in a time when culture had not yet begun to extricate itself from nature. Lee doesn't evoke artifacts so much as the power of artifacts to symbolize the plenitude –the blend of the natural and cultural – that generated ancient forms.[iii]

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith
March 2005

---

[i] Carter Ratcliff, 'The Art of Catherine Lee' in Carter Ratcliff & Faye Hirsch, *Catherine Lee: The Alphabet Series and Other Works* (University of Washington Press, Seattle 1997) p.14. All quotations from the artist are either from Ratcliff's essay or from Hirsch's accompanying essay, 'Placing Memory: Catherine Lee's Alphabets series', pp.30-35.

[ii] Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art After Modernism* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2004).

[iii] Ratcliff, The Art of Catherine Lee,' p.26.