

A RESPECT FOR THE LAND

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Photo by Wendy McEahern

Plein air painter Jivan Lee works quickly to reproduce the drama of a summer monsoon over the mountains near Santa Fe, New Mexico. A custom-designed rack in the back of his vehicle allows him to quickly set up for work and to transport wet canvases.

DRAWING ON HIS BACKGROUND IN ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE, PLEIN AIR PAINTER JIVAN LEE CAPTURES THE BEAUTY AND FRAGILITY OF NATURE

When Jivan Lee sets out to paint on location, many of his favorite spots are ones where legendary artists stood with their easels or cameras decades ago. His hometown of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and its surrounding region, has for centuries attracted creative types—think painters E.L. Blumenstein, Georgia O’Keeffe and Maynard Dixon, as well as photographer Ansel Adams—who captured its open landscapes, breathtaking storms and iconic architecture from every angle, during every season and at every time of day.

“It is hard to find your voice,” says the 32-year-old artist. “If I paint Taos Mountain, are people going to think of Blumenstein? If I go to Cerro Pedernal, am I doing so because of O’Keeffe?”



"On the Road to Chimayo," oil on panel, 30"H by 90"W

"I don't go to a location because other artists have been there or because it's been painted 10 million times before," he responds. "I go because I love it. I've painted Taos Mountain 30-some times now. The only voice you can find is your own, and everything else eventually is going to fall away."

It's an approach that has worked well for Lee since he began painting full time in 2010. His style, influenced heavily by his appreciation of the natural world, impresses everyone from art aficionados to those with untrained eyes.



Ever since he broke onto the art scene, Lee has been wowing clients with his bold painting techniques and richly-colored images.

"From placing an importance on environmentally conscious studio practices and materials, to his choices in subject matter, the environment and our impact on it are inherently part of Jivan's artistic process," says Audrey Parish, director of Altamira Fine Art in Scottsdale, which has represented Lee since 2014. "How humans relate to their surroundings is something he is passionate about exploring."

With an undergraduate degree in biology and a master's degree in environmental policy, Lee worked for the National Resources Defense Council and other nonprofits before moving West to teach science courses and art and ecology classes at the University of New Mexico-Taos.

"I enjoy looking at how the creative process relates to understanding information and how it might have relevance in coming up with innovative solutions to bigger problems," he explains.

His evocative images are beautiful and raw, eliciting visceral responses from viewers. "From the high drama in his dynamic storm scenes, with ominous clouds and sheets of rain, to jewel-colored sunsets, his paintings stir up a lot of feeling, which is what keeps you coming back to them," notes Parish.

Lee's brushwork—spontaneous and energetic, yet simplistic at the same time—also shapes his images.

Working in an almost sculptural fashion, he thickly layers on copious oils with silicone spatulas, which pull large amounts of paint quickly across the canvas—a necessity when on location. The results are heavily impastoed tableaux comprising broad, chunky strokes; graceful curves; and imposing geometric forms. The visible lines and peaks, like gloriously hued buttercream, form a luscious consistency and rhythm that pulls the viewer closer.



"Evening swell," oil on canvas, 20"H by 64"W

"I've always had a predilection for texture, and I use a lot of it these days," says Lee. "When a piece is dry, I love to rub my hands over it and feel the oils. I like the fact that paint is a material. There's something interesting cognitively about having an identifiable image come out of this raw, colored substance. You go up close, and it's completely unrecognizable, but then you step back and it's a cloud or a mountain. For me, that's probably the most fun part of my work."

Other aspects aren't always as fun. "Painting on-site sucks so much at times," says Lee with a laugh, recalling two episodes in which the wind kicked up unexpectedly and blew his wet canvases into the dirt, face-down. "I was crying when that happened. Really. I was so close to giving up." The second of those two paintings—his largest at 10 feet wide—ended up being his first big successful piece.



"Ed Prado #1: The new gas station, 10 p.m.," oil on panel, 30"H by 110"W

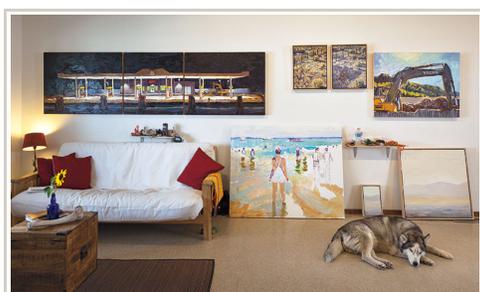


"Apache Canyon #1: Deceleration lane," oil on panel, 30"H by 40"W

"It's all about the unpredictability of life," he says. "There's something that gets invested in paintings, whether mystically or practically speaking, when you're challenged. It's the personal story, the lesson, the creative process."

To look at Lee's paintings is to share in those challenges and to celebrate his respect of the landscape. "There's something special about being on location that deepens my relationship with place. Every piece I make leads me further into the core of something really great."

When not on location, Lee can be found adding finishing touches to his work in his studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Paintings, ranging from landscapes to still lifes to portraits, line the walls and floor. Keeping him company is his dog, Osha.

OF SPACE AND TIME

For Santa Fe-based painter Jivan Lee, the world is more than beautiful Western scenes. It's also about people and how they shape their surroundings. That's why he developed the "Hallowed Ground" project, a series of works that explores socio-environmental narratives embedded in New Mexico's cultural landscapes.

"The romantic Western vistas that are beautiful are a real part of life here. They're compellingly big and humbling in wonderful ways," says Lee. "But usually my experience is if you turn around or look to the side, there's a crack going on that's conveniently out of the image."

The acknowledgement of the juxtaposition of these opposing sights is the driving force behind the project. Take for example, a scene Lee found near one of the most beautiful views of Taos Mountain. Directly across Paseo del Pueblo Norte is a gas station. Lee captured its hazy fluorescent glow, which breaks through the darkness. The piece is accompanied by a sculpture made of garbage collected at the site. Or, there's the painting of an excavator. The hulking machine sits next to a small adobe church in Canyoncito that was made famous by photographer Ansel Adams.

"I hope to open up a dialogue about where we make these choices and why," says Lee. "Do you really want a gas station right next to agricultural land that was really comforting and beautiful? A lot of people would say no, but then they also need gas. Part of this is to see what transformations happen and then decide together what should be done."
