

JANE LEE

TO BEGIN

AGAIN

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TABLE *of* CONTENTS

4	FOREWORD <i>Linda Neo & Albert Lim</i>
10	JANE LEE: TO BEGIN AGAIN <i>Tan Siuli</i>
22	ARTWORKS

To begin again suggests the continuation of something that was paused or interrupted. It also suggests starting something new and fresh, leaving the old state behind. Jane Lee's current exhibition, *To Begin Again*, is a self-enquiring state of mind by the artist on her next move.

For us, this exhibition also represents a fresh perspective on our collection, 5 years after our inaugural Jane Lee show in 2017, *Rise and Fall, Ebb and Flow*. Having exhibited several other artists in our art space since, we felt it timely to revisit Jane's evolving practice and the new works that she created during the pandemic.

FOREWORD



Linda Neo & Albert Lim

We have always been taken in by Jane's creativity and ability to refresh her art-making through changing seasons. We once heard someone say that "life is made up of 10,000 new beginnings"—a thought that brings hope, expectation, and the promise of a good future, and a theme that characterizes Jane's experimentation with new materials and art forms.

A few pieces in this exhibition stand out and bear particular significance for us.

Alpha and Omega, rendered in black and white, represents a eureka moment when she describes the work as "the absolute painting". It evokes a sense of creative achievement and it marks the *beginning* and the *end* of finding the "absolute painting". In Jane's previous exhibition, the question on her enquiring mind was also the title of the exhibition. "*Where is painting?*" Has she found the answer in *Alpha and Omega*? To Jane, a journey has ended and therefore she needs to begin again. It is time for a new season to transit

and find a path forward from practising mainly Western aesthetics to a new form that combines both western and eastern aesthetics.

In *Not Here But Not There*, she references an ancient style Chinese landscape painting, *qinglu shan shui* (blue-green landscape painting) that employs blue and green mineral dyes. The painting alludes to the blue-green realm associated with the ancient style of landscape painting. The pendulum of questioning and discovering is Jane's trademark and it propels her to experiment with untried mediums and forms.

For Jane, every stage of her artistic practice is a sojourn, not a destination. She has to begin again and again. We hope this exhibition inspires you as it has inspired us to pursue the hope and expectation of new beginnings.





JANE LEE: TO BEGIN AGAIN

Tan Siuli

In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few.¹

—Shunryu Suzuki (1904–1971)

There is an Eastern teaching, 'Return to Zero'. This is what I've been practising in many phases of my life. From figurative painting I abandoned all techniques and skills I had accumulated for years, to start all over again by just exploring into the elements of painting. This eventually led me onto the path of a new abstraction.²

— Jane Lee

Greek myth tells of Sisyphus who was doomed to repeat the laborious task of rolling a boulder up a hill, only for it to roll down again as it neared its peak. Every day Sisyphus would have to begin his arduous task once again, as punishment from the gods for his hubris.

Some may see in Sisyphus's story a tragic tale of futility—having to start right from the bottom again just as one is about to near the pinnacle of what one sets out to accomplish. Eastern philosophy however, takes a rather different perspective to the notion of 'beginning again'. Zen encourages the adoption of 'a beginner's mind' (*shoshin*) in one's approach to tasks, and life in general. Inherent in this is a spirit of humility, being open and receptive to new ideas and new ways of doing things, and not harboring any preconceptions or assuming a premeditated outcome.

This spirit informs much of Jane Lee's practice. In her creative journey, Lee has wholeheartedly embraced

the idea of 'beginning again', first, by switching careers in order to pursue visual art, which would "allow (her) all the freedom to create"³, and then as an artist, in moving from realism to abstraction, jettisoning the academic conventions and skills acquired from her training so as to arrive at her own visual vocabulary. Even within the trajectory of gestural abstraction that she became so well known for, Lee decided to stop creating in the mode that garnered her critical and commercial acclaim, in order to forge new directions in her artmaking. As such, her practice is marked by cycles of exploration, creation, and then letting go of these acquired techniques and identities. Making art is, however, like muscle memory, and vestiges of Lee's past ideas and experiments inevitably inform and inflect each new cycle, with endings feeding into new beginnings.

This has resulted in a remarkably rich and varied body of work, united by certain motifs and preoccupations. This exhibition is an introduction to Jane Lee's evolving methods, materials and ideas, and explores turning points that herald new approaches to Lee's journey in art as well as in life.

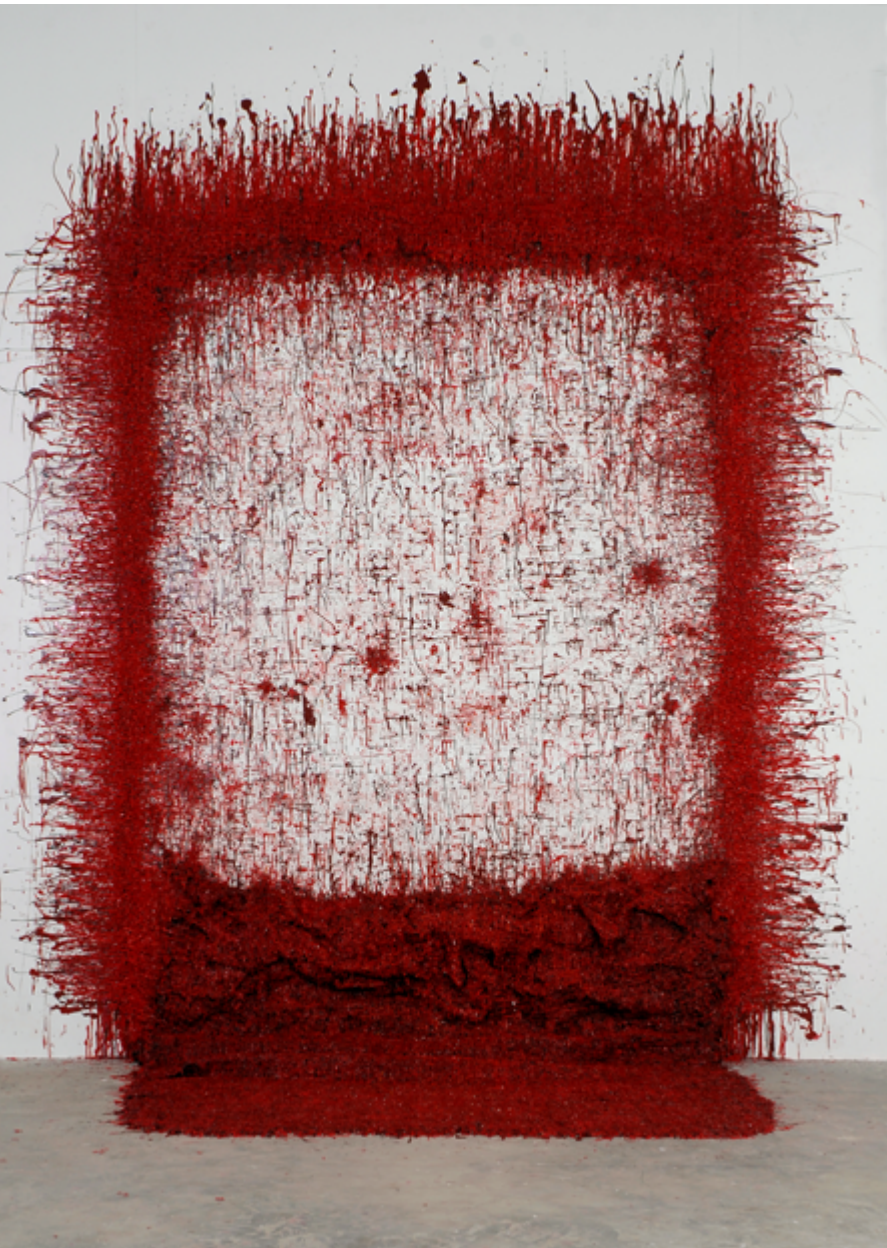
In 2017, a presentation of Lee's work at Primz Gallery titled "Rise and Fall, Ebb and Flow: Works of Jane Lee" focused on the earlier chapter of Lee's artmaking, when she created works through an often labour-intensive and additive process. This presentation builds on the last, and takes as its starting point the culmination of that earlier phase of Lee's artmaking, embodied in the pentptych *It Is As It Is* (2019).

It Is As It Is is a concise summation of the thoughts and processes around painting that preoccupied Lee in the first part of her career as a contemporary artist. The making of the work also coincided with a time when she was shifting studios, and as such, marks a close to one period of her life, while heralding a new beginning. *It Is As It Is*

1 Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Weatherhill: New York and Tokyo, 1970, 1973, 1995. Pp. 21.

2 Conversation with the artist, 6 July 2022.

3 'A Conversation with Jane Lee', ART SG, <https://artsg.com/news/a-conversation-with-jane-lee/>



Status, 2009.
Collection of Singapore Art Museum. Image courtesy the artist and Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

is made up of 5 panels, and when read from left to right, suggest a progression of ideas and the various approaches to 'deconstructing' and rethinking painting employed by the artist over a decade.

On the far left is a canvas rendered in what has become known as Lee's signature style: lush and densely layered skeins of paint, in a saturated (red) hue. This is what earned Lee acclaim in her ambitious painting-installation created for the inaugural Singapore Biennale, titled *Raw Canvas*, where the medium of paint is liberated from its conventional parameters of frame and canvas and comes into its own, throbbing with a visceral intensity.

The second panel continues this technique, but here the canvas is coloured half red and half white, as if its top half was leached of colour and beginning to take on that of its backing wall. In the third panel, the 'painting' appears to have collapsed from its frame to the ground, where it lies in a crumpled heap, leaving behind a void. Here, the white wall—the exhibitionary context of the work—makes its presence felt more visibly, and invites viewers to consider the dialogue between painting and its surrounding environment as each becomes part of the other.

The fourth panel bears a striking resemblance to the first and second in terms of its visual texture; however its surface has been created not with paint but with strips of canvas, which often plays a secondary role to paint in painting. The final piece in the pentptych pushes this exploration to its conclusion. Here, paint has been completely voided from the frame, laying bare the structural supports that lie behind a painting. The top half of the panel is half-clothed with woven canvas strips, calling attention to the foundations and base materials that constitute painting.

These propositions question painting's status quo, and consider anew what makes a painting, a painting—ideas that preoccupied Lee in the first phase of her artistic journey, and evident in memorable works such as *Raw Canvas* (2008) and *Status* (2009). *It Is As It Is*, in many ways, is the artist's 'essay' summing up her artistic practice in its first bloom of maturity.

Around 2013 however, the artist began to reconsider her approach towards making work, realising that her art-making was at odds with her personal philosophy towards life—that of letting go, in order to achieve effortlessness and ease:

“I started to realise that my work in the past was too meticulous and labour-intensive, and I was frequently layering my work. I started to question this working method. Could I do the reverse? Instead of layering, what if I did the opposite? Over the years, I’ve become more interested in the process of reduction. In meditation, there is this idea of Emptiness. It is something that speaks to me, making me question my method of painting. Emptiness does not mean nothingness. In order to bring in the idea of emptiness in my painting, I started to remove, deduct what I had been doing to my paintings. Eventually, I realised that painting is essentially, pure space. My works then began to develop further through this idea of removal.”⁴ — Jane Lee

In *Portrait #1*, one can discern Lee’s first tentative steps towards mark-making through removing, rather than adding on paint. Here, she has scraped away parts of the painting surface by gouging at its edges, and slicing a long horizontal gash through layers of paint in the centre of the canvas. There is a sense of Lee desiring to begin with a new slate, as suggested by the white paint that blankets the ‘face’ of the canvas, in contrast to the highly worked surfaces of her earlier pieces. Still, vestiges of her earlier approach to painting may be discerned underneath the blank white face, as the gashes on its surface reveal underlayers and veins of rich colour. The work thus marks a midpoint, poised between an earlier cycle of artmaking, and the beginnings of another, embodying the artist’s struggle to let go of something reassuringly familiar while also attempting a bold move in a new direction.

Executed almost a decade later and the first work to be made in Lee’s new studio, *Not Here But Not There* (2021) returns to this approach but with new confidence and complexity. By now, Lee had definitively closed the page on the earlier chapter of her artmaking, with its



Not Here But Not There, 2021,
and *Untitled*, c. 1993

distinctive skeins of paint and saturated hues. *Not Here But Not There* reprises the white surfaces of Lee’s *Portrait* series, but here the white paint is less opaque, brushed over painted underlayers like a wash or veil obscuring a pre-existing image, or perhaps akin to a desire to wipe the slate clean, *to begin again*. Just visible under the white paint are hints of a landscape, signalled by a palette of blues and greens. This visual ambiguity and tentative movement towards a new approach to her practice are suggested by the title of the work *Not Here But Not There*; Lee reveals that at this point she was attempting to merge Western painting and Eastern landscape traditions, and the colours of this work take reference from the palette of deep olive and dark blue typical of Chinese landscape painting. A comparison with an early work of Lee’s (circa 1993), executed when she was still painting as a hobbyist, suggest that memories of these ‘learned’ landscapes are still present, their residues faintly visible under washes of white. In the centre of the canvas, almost like a forceful excision, fragments of these (imagined or remembered) landscapes explode across the picture plane in dynamic, gestural swathes reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism, or the powerful strokes of Chinese calligraphy.

⁴ Michelle Ho, ‘In Conversation With Jane Lee’ in *Rise and Fall, Ebb and Flow: Works Of Jane Lee*, exhibition catalogue, Primz Gallery, 2017. Pg. 12–13. The points made in this conversation were revisited and clarified by the artist in a conversation on 25 November 2022.

The full power of this recent phase of Lee's artmaking — her gestural abstraction — can be seen in two works that speak to each other: *Limbo* and *Alpha and Omega*, both executed in 2022. By this time, Lee had moved away from the vibrant colours that characterised her earlier work, in favour of a more monochromatic palette: blue and white, for her solo *Where Is Painting?* at Sundaram Tagore Gallery Singapore (2022), and black and white in the case of these two paintings. This focuses attention on the painterly marks on their surfaces: a stark record of the artist's gestures and movements around the canvas, and her negotiation with her medium of paint. They also reflect a desire, on the part of the artist, to strip away all superfluous elements in order to get closer to what she calls the 'essence' — of painting, as well as of life. Black and white, in Lee's words, "feel more like existence casting light and shadow on the human visual world"⁵. Rather than understanding them as colours, one may think of them as fundamental and primordial principles of ordering and understanding the world and its phenomena: absence and presence, yin and yang, this and not-this.

Although executed within the same year, *Limbo* and *Alpha and Omega* are very different in tenor. *Limbo* is busy, frenzied, and sumptuous, a cascade of painterly marks spilling down the front of the painting. Here, one recalls art critic Tony Godfrey's likening of Lee's art to a 'dance', with their inviting 'vectors' of movement⁶. There is a visceral immediacy to the work, its predominantly black and white palette enlivened by flecks of green, blue and red. As suggested by its title, and in Lee's words, the painting is about uncertainty and human life in general, with its busy-ness and bustle of activity, actions, expression, and yearning — it is full of 'life'.

Alpha and Omega in contrast, is silent, singular, and absolute. Describing this as her most minimal painting to date, Lee recalls how she was struck by the response of the paint as she dragged a single stroke across and down the picture plane. After it had formed itself into a single, bold line, Lee decided that no further action was needed to 'complete' the painting — its beginning was also its end. In this respect, the work shares many affinities with Zen

painting, exemplified in the *Ensō*: a circle, usually black in colour on a white background, executed in a single, continuous stroke. There is no going back or correction possible with the *Ensō*; with its singular, irrevocable stroke, the circle is an authentic reflection of the artist's temperament and personal style.

While many of Lee's works can be said to have a monumental quality, *Alpha and Omega* stands out for its monolithic character. Where other works with their sumptuously worked surfaces engage the senses, *Alpha and Omega* demands instead deep contemplation and stillness. Its surface appears impenetrable, and resists the gaze that wants to plunge into the sensuousness of paint and mark-making, and therefore turns the gaze back onto itself, and inwards.

In considering *Alpha and Omega*, and what it might signal for Lee's new direction in painting, it may be informative to reflect on certain aesthetics that Lee has professed an admiration for. The first reference is Rothko's Seagram murals, the late artist's first experiment with what a critic described as a 'darkly luminous'⁷ colour palette, which, coupled with their minimalist, geometric abstraction, constitute an attempt to evoke a certain emotional response in the work's patrons and viewers. The second aesthetic that Lee has spoken of is that of the deep silence and calm of traditional Japanese tea rooms, with their spareness and monochromatic play of light and shadow. To better understand this, one may turn to novelist Junichirō Tanizaki, who writes about "the magic of shadows", and how within such an atmosphere, "there reigns complete and utter silence; that here in the darkness immutable tranquillity holds sway"⁸.

5 Conversation with the artist, 29 November 2022.

6 Tony Godfrey, 'Dancing With Jane Lee' in *Jane Lee*, exhibition catalogue, Osage Singapore, 2009. Pp. 6–12.

7 <https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-britain/display/turner-collection/mark-rothko-seagram-murals>

8 Junichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, Vintage Books: London, 2001. Pp. 33.

Perhaps coincidentally, or maybe providentially, the bold white mark across the surface of *Alpha and Omega* mirrors that of *Portrait #1*. *Portrait #1* signalled the beginning of a new trajectory in Lee's practice where she experimented with a subtractive rather than additive approach in her mark-making, and *Alpha and Omega* embodies its full culmination in the most powerful form. At the same time, its minimalism and stark palette herald new thresholds in Lee's artmaking: the beginning of yet another chapter of exploration.

While painting forms the mainstay of Lee's practice, she is continually venturing into new material explorations, and included in the exhibition are series of works that relate to, and materially extend, some of the ideas Lee articulates in her paintings.



Studies, 2007. Image courtesy NTU ADM Gallery.

Returning to *It Is As It Is*—which serves as a touchstone for much of Lee's practice and the various trajectories she has embarked on—one may observe Lee's inventiveness in exploring the myriad possibilities presented by painting's by-products, such as canvas strips and dried paint skin. These 'essays'—observed in the fourth and fifth panels of *It Is As It Is*, as well as in a series of accompanying small studies on display—were fleshed out in Lee's *Fetish Series*, where paint remnants are given new life, meticulously rolled, coiled and collaged, transformed into a richly sumptuous work that is almost sculptural. From the end-life of paint comes a splendid new beginning.

A similar approach was taken with paper offcuts, and realised in the work *Coiling II* (2015), made during the artist's residency with the Singapore Tyler Print Institute. Discarded paper remnants were meticulously coiled and arranged into a composition that suggests a floral bloom, or perhaps the topography of a cityscape, with the whorls of paper pressed up against each other, some tightly coiled and others gently unfurling, all held in check in a delicately calibrated balance of freedom and tension, mirroring the same play between chance and control that informs all of Lee's painting.

Another trajectory Lee has been exploring involves the use of mirrors. Around 2013–2014, the artist started to incorporate the use of reflective surfaces in her work, having observed the rise of 'selfie culture' and recognising people's innate desire to be 'seen' as a form of self-affirmation. The mirrors were also a means of bringing viewers and the surrounding space 'into' Lee's work.

These early experiments have since developed into far more complex pieces that question the activity of self-regard and reflection, as well as our perception of the realms we inhabit. In works such as *Nowhere* (2018) and *Beyond Infinity* (2022), straightforward reflections give way to faceted and multiple images that dissolve the unitary subject, splitting form and space into hundreds of views and perspectives. These works, while affording a form of visual pleasure and engagement in their restless surfaces,



IN YOU, IN ME, 2015. Image courtesy the artist and Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

also frustrate the act of looking at the same time, or perhaps demand a different kind of 'seeing'. As Lee notes, her interest lay in "no longer reflecting outward space but internal spaces and beyond"⁹. The mirrors of *Nowhere* and *Beyond Infinity* prompt an understanding of the self that is more inwardly focused, or perhaps beyond the dimensions we can currently apprehend or imagine. Indeed, installed at Primz Gallery, *Nowhere* takes on the appearance of a shimmering portal hovering within the gallery. Mirage-like, it toys with perceptions of where the space ends and where it is extended. As its name *Nowhere* suggests, it is a liminal threshold, a non-place, but also a now-here, collapsing notions of multiple temporalities and realms. In a similar manner, the viewer's image is splintered into

9 Email conversation with the artist, 24 October 2022.

a myriad facets in *Beyond Infinity*, gesturing towards an idea of self beyond what is conventionally recognised or visible within the boundaries of this world and our common understanding. Collectively, Lee's mirror works displace viewers from contexts and realities that are recognisable or familiar — just as Lee's paintings have sought to challenge the genre and medium's status quo — so that we too, may begin to imagine new possibilities.

What is the impulse that ties together the mirage-like reflections of Lee's mirrored works, and the austere palette of her recent paintings? As different as they may appear, I would venture that a similar preoccupation underpins them: that of a shedding of selves. Firstly, *Alpha and Omega* with its single, irrevocable stroke, is a moment of self-reckoning. With its spare, minimalist approach, there is no recourse to the adornment of layering — it is the artist's hand, laid bare. Second, it is worth bearing in mind that *Nowhere* was conceived as a site-specific commission at the National Gallery Singapore. At its original site, it was intended to respond to — and reflect — Lee's monumental early work *Raw Canvas*, which is permanently installed in the grand stairway of the National Gallery. *Nowhere* dissolves the unity of that iconic image, and by extension, the labour and status associated with that artistic accomplishment. In this context, *Nowhere* is a poignant moment of self-reflection, expressing the transience of our earthly achievements, and also the artist's symbolic gesture of 'letting go'.

During a conversation with Jane Lee about a draft of this essay, she mentions the mandala. In Tibet, elaborate and beautifully detailed mandalas are created at ceremonies, involving the labour and energy (both creative, and spiritual) of several monks. Once complete, the mandalas are ritualistically dismantled or destroyed. Perhaps we, like Sisyphus, may lament the coming to nothing of all these efforts. Or perhaps we, with a Zen mind, may discern that in order to see our truest self, all else, all ego, must be washed away like the sand mandalas: a dissolution, in order to begin again.

Untitled

c. 1993

Oil on canvas

25 × 35 cm (unframed)

Collection of the artist





Portrait #1

2013

Acrylic on fiberglass

122 × 122 × 7 cm

It Is As It Is

2019

Studies: 2002–2017

Acrylic on fiberglass

111 × 111 × 2 cm (each)

5 panels in total



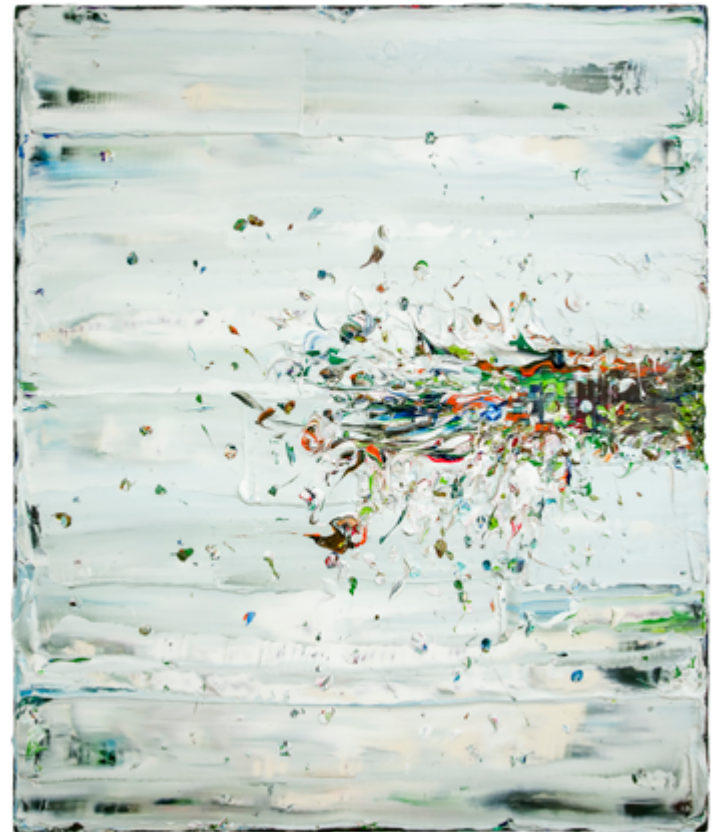


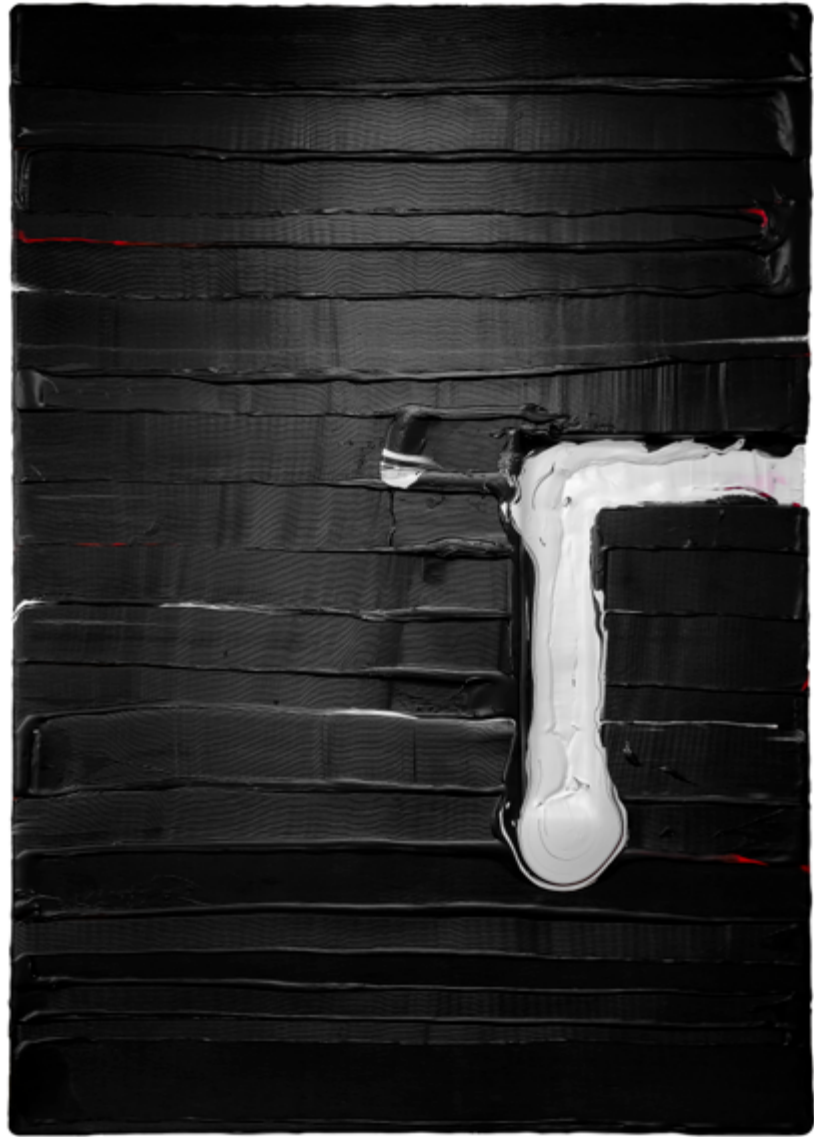
Not Here But Not There

2021

Acrylic on fiberglass

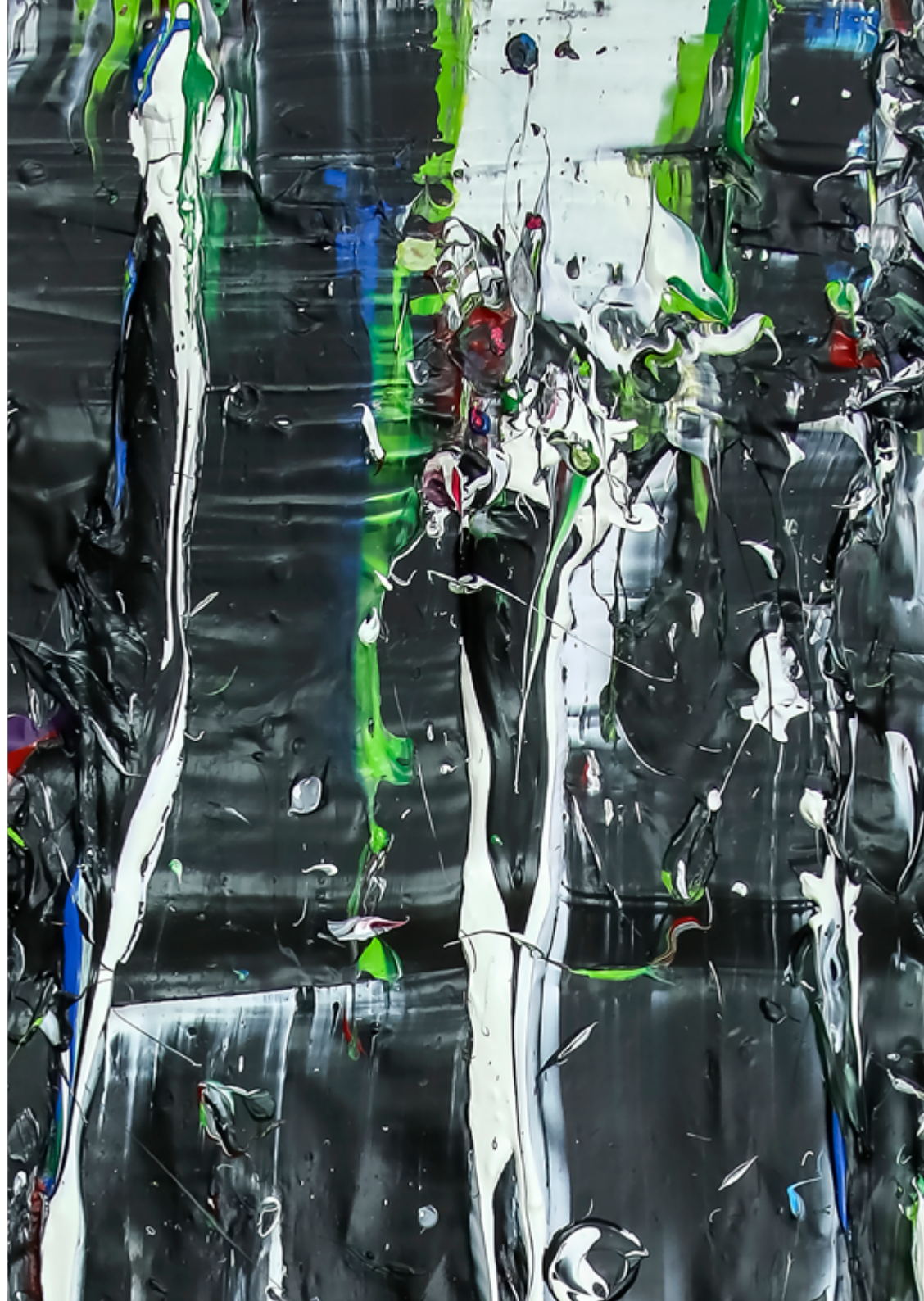
180 × 150 × 7 cm





Alpha and Omega
2022
Acrylic on fiberglass
260 × 180 cm

Limbo
2022
Acrylic on fiberglass
180 × 150 cm



Beyond Infinity

2022

Mirror finish stainless steel, mirror,
polyurethane paint and wood

122.8 × 244.7 × 24.8 cm





Nowhere
2018
Acrylic mirror tiles, reflective vinyl sticker, acrylic
paint, enamel, silicone, resin and wood
Dimensions variable

*This artifact was part of Jane Lee's Nowhere
(2018), a site specific installation for OUTBOUND,
commissioned by National Gallery, Singapore.*

Golden Realm (Fetish Series)

2018

Mixed media on canvas

88 × 65 × 8 cm



Coiling II

2015

Mixed media on paper

110 × 90 × 5 cm



This catalogue is published in
conjunction with the exhibition
Jane Lee: To Begin Again
2 January – 30 June 2023

A selection of works from the collection
of Linda Neo & Albert Lim

Curator
Tan Siuli

Photography
Ken Cheong

Design
Kenta.Works

Lighting
ERCO



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I am into the essence, the ultimate...

— Jane Lee

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