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Serenading the Land

Jivan Lee captures the rhythms and colors of New Mexico

BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF

BEFORE SUNRISE one morning recently, artist Jivan Lee packed his dog Osha into his Nissan Pathfinder and headed south from his home in Santa Fe to paint Our Lady of Light chapel in the village of Cañoncito. Lee arrived on the scene eager to capture the sunlight as it rose over the historic Territorial-style, white adobe church. As he neared the chapel, however, Lee came face to face with an ominous sign. A construction crew was working full throttle, about 30 feet from the chapel, to finish a highway deceleration lane.

The crew had ripped down the trees that served as a natural, picturesque fence in the foreground. There were cement walls and piles of dirt everywhere. And Lee's treasured, unspoiled view now also featured a giant Volvo excavator. The painter recalls that he struggled with what to paint for a while. He even contemplated moving on, but eventually he was drawn to painting the scene just as it appeared, Volvo excavator and all.

DECELERATION LANE, the painting that resulted from that dawn excursion,

is part of Lee's solo show, titled *Hallowed Ground*, which will be on view at Harwood Art Center in Albuquerque in August. As this story was going to press, Lee was planning on painting a second work depicting the chapel itself. The two paintings will hang side by side in the exhibit and serve as a commentary about contemporary life in New Mexico. "One scene is a romantic, quaint look at old New Mexico; the other is not as romantic but industrial and beautiful in its own way—the new New Mexico," Lee says. "I realized that this is the meat of my *Hallowed Ground* exhibition. I am looking at cultural landscapes here in the state. This is the moment when the old meets the priorities and needs of modern-day New Mexico culture."

At 30, Lee is a talented, emerging artist with a blossoming career and bright future ahead of him. In addition to the *Hallowed Ground* show, William Havu Gallery in Denver is featuring his work in a three-person show that opens in May, and Heinley Fine Arts in Taos is presenting his third solo show in the fall.

There are a few keys to understanding Lee and his work. For starters, often his favorite paintings are born out of a deep struggle, as in **DECELERATION LANE**. While he's painting these pieces, a moment always arrives when he abandons his original plan for what he thought he was going to paint. He then embraces what he calls the "new script," accepting the reality of whatever the day brings. This artistic philosophy is the behind-the-scenes force that drives his art. "As much as painting is revealing and inspiring, it is also rife with miscues, distractions, frustration, quiet defeats, and outright failures," Lee says. "But when I start from the reality of temporary failure, I allow myself to remake the piece and go slow enough to allow things to unfurl and reveal themselves. The seeds of positive change begin to grow."

Also important to know is that Lee loves the medium of paint—the thick, gooey, malleable, luscious nature of it. Working with oil paints brings him back to his childhood days when he adored creating snakes, elephants, and tigers with Play-Doh. He relishes the tactile nature of his preferred medium and the many ways he can arrange the paint in patterns that take on certain rhythms.



▲ **Deceleration Lane**, oil, 30 x 40.

◀ **Revival**, oil, 40 x 60.

And he isn't afraid to use oils generously; a 10-foot-long painting may involve three liters of oil paint. Some observers have described his impasto style as sculptural. After a painting has dried, Lee sometimes runs his fingers over its three-dimensional peaks and valleys. "I guess since I'm the artist, I have that luxury," he says. "I get to follow the rhythm of the piece, to touch the scene, and follow how the day unfolded. And I get to make contact with the materiality of the paint in addition to the color."

The tools of Lee's artistic trade are kitchen spatulas, big brushes, paper towels, and of course, his bare hands. On occasion he even employs the dirt from his plein-air location. When dust blows onto a wet piece, Lee uses the sepia tint to enhance shadows and lights. "I'll scrape back dust-laden passages of paint to reveal the pristine color beneath, and elsewhere I leave the dusted paint as is," he says. "I like that a literal part of the place I'm painting remains in the piece; it feels like a sort of homage to the special fortune of a given day in a given place."



representation

Heinley Fine Arts, Taos, NM; **William Havu Gallery**, Denver, CO; **Galerie Kornye West**, Fort Worth, TX.

upcoming shows

Three-person show, **William Havu Gallery**, May 8-June 20.

Solo show, **Harwood Art Center**, Albuquerque, NM, August 7-27.

Solo show, **Heinley Fine Arts**, fall.



Sky Above, Earth Below, oil, 24 x 48.



Ancient Monolith, oil, 33 x 53.

A signature Lee landscape features large abstract slabs of color when viewed at close range, which coalesce to form mountains, streams, churches, and people when viewed from a distance. The interplay of abstraction and realism is central to the heart of Lee's work and artistic intent. He completes most paintings on location. And if you happen to see him painting at Ghost Ranch or along the High Road to Taos, Lee wants you to

be prepared: He often bursts into song while out painting in the open air, "serenading and singing to the painting and the place." Lee says he has learned not to avoid this bit of quirky behavior because if he stifles it, the creative process falls flat and fails. "I often paint out of the trunk of my car on the side of the road in the Taos area, so it is all the more surprising that no one has called the police on me," he adds.

LEE DIDN'T always think he would devote his life to art. An avid interest in the outdoors and science came first. The artist was born in Woodstock, NY, in 1984, 15 years after the legendary music festival took place on the grounds of a local dairy farm. As Lee is fond of saying, by the time he arrived on the scene, Woodstock had returned to a sleepy artists' colony. His parents named him Jivan, which means life, breath, or soul in Sanskrit, a language his father had studied. To this day, Lee considers himself a "country boy" because he grew up surrounded by nature and loved to explore the mountains, meadows, and creeks near his home.

In addition to his love for the natural environment, Lee displayed an unusual talent in science. By the time he was in the 11th grade, he showed such promise that he was awarded a full scholarship to Bard College in New York City. He skipped his senior year in high school, earning both a bachelor's degree in biology and a master's degree in environmental policy from Bard in 2007.

During college, he supplemented his science courses with electives in the art department, studying oil painting with Laura Battle and Joe Santore. Lee painted and drew throughout college and graduate school. After graduation, he painted full time in New York for about six months. But one day in 2008 he decided it was time for a cross-country

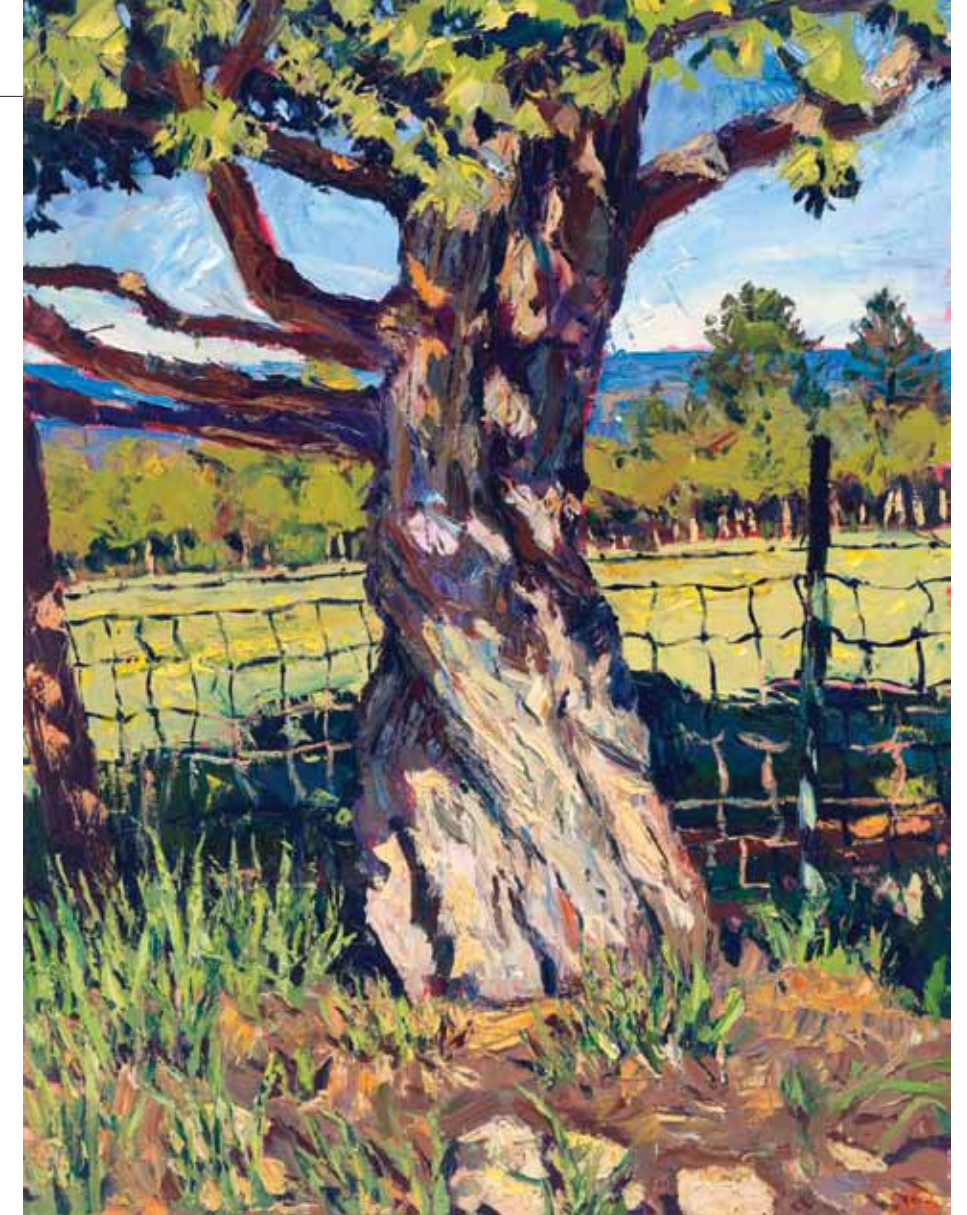
trip in the beat-up 1990 Toyota he had purchased for \$600. His destination was Albuquerque, where he planned to visit a former college roommate. Before he even reached the New York state line, though, the car's muffler dropped out on a hill. And by the time he reached Albuquerque, something far worse was apparent: Lee was diagnosed with Lyme disease and was seriously ill. He doesn't like to reflect too much on the experience but says he was extremely weak, "shook a lot," and at times was even unable to walk. He was grounded in northern New Mexico; it took him a year to recover and resume a normal life. At first he worked as an environmental consultant, putting his college degrees to use. And in 2010, he received a grant to found the Project for Art and the Environment. The project offered classes to Taos-area students on sustainability and using the visual artistic process to understand complex socio-environmental issues.

Lee continued to paint and draw, eventually investing all of his savings from various environmental-consulting positions into painting supplies so he could create a strong portfolio. Contests, juried shows, and gallery representation followed. In 2011 at his first solo show, he sold one painting. Two years later, at a solo show at Heinley Fine Arts, he sold 35 paintings and had to paint new works to keep the walls full during the show.

These days Lee continues to roam the countryside, just as he did as a boy, only now he favors southwestern terrain. He never intended to stay in northern New Mexico, but once he recovered from his bout with Lyme disease, he couldn't leave. "I am inspired by how vast it is here; humans seem so small," Lee says. "There is also the uniqueness of the light, the dry air, the intense sunsets and sunrises. I like the wild feeling of the time and elements shaping the land, and the magical feeling of looking at something with a sense of awe." ❖

Bonnie Gangelhoff is senior editor at *Southwest Art*.

See more of Lee's work at www.southwestart.com/featured/lee-j-feb2015.



Standing Tree, oil, 48 x 36.



A Late Fall Evening, oil, 36 x 58.