

Jungjin Lee Unnamed Road

Between promise land and no man's land

by Paolo Dell'Elce

*"Thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth."*¹

Unnamed Road is a research through pictures realized by the Korean artist Jungjin Lee between 2010 and 2011, as part of the project **Israel: This Place**. A project that has involved twelve international photographers, in order to give a multi-faceted portrait of disputed territories between Israel and Palestine.

Even though Jungjin Lee spent a long time travelling all across Israel, her photographic work is focused on the road connecting West Bank settlements. The artist seemingly suspends judgement about the political events and the Arab-Israeli conflict that tragically marked the history of these territories, trying to remain neutral.

She shifts the focus on geophilosophical and aesthetic aspects instead, tracing an inner map that will result in a further awareness of herself and her work, and will point out her personal vision of the landscape as the place where mind and sensitivity lie.

The *road is a human thing* and things relating to humankind gain relevance in the moment they receive a name. But, Jungjin Lee's road is, by definition, *unnamed*, and in that very political framework the road actually divides the territories it should be connecting, depriving man of the land as it goes. Suspended between a promise land and a no-man's land, Jungjin Lee's *road* rises to a metaphor, it becomes the *signifier* and the place where the artist makes the *transition* to a higher state of awareness, almost a *transhumanation*. On this road the artist can rediscover the various forms of her sensitivity; her perceptive and cognitive structures embrace terrestrial scenarios of an intense emotional suggestion and she questions herself about how to re-imagine this experience through her personal visual language.

Like many contemporary artists, Jungjin Lee too experiments the interaction between different artistic techniques and the effects of technological drift on different languages.

With the advent of digital technologies, Photography underwent a change that, if on the one hand has questioned the possibilities of preservation over time of the new digital archives, on the other hand has pushed photographers to find new technical solutions to preserve their own work renewing the linguistic potential of the photographic medium.

Experimentation is the bridgehead of knowledge and Jungjin Lee has inscribed her personal research on the watershed between tradition and innovation, by using processes and physical formats suitable for embracing the new forms of this ongoing linguistic-technological

transition, forms that the artist interprets in the light of her sensitivity through a rigorous *techné* that combines the earlier procedures and the more recent ones.

In her research, Jungjin Lee solves the apparent discrepancy between *analog* and *digital* technology by activating a sort of conceptual osmosis between the chemistry of photography and binary technologies (the recent image acquisition, image manipulation and image reproduction techniques), that is aesthetically expressed right in photosensitive matter, in the moment in which the emulsion of gelatin and silver nitrate receives the *photographic imprint* and sets the new reality of the work that, on the basis of the initial perception (the external object that the artist *sees* and *photographs*), through the conceptual elaboration and the technical-linguistic decoding (the image that the practice of art makes visible to the artist) becomes form and object (the image that the artist decides that has to be seen), namely, a *photographic print*.

The Photography as a technique allows us to record the visible aspects of external reality, but, at some point, it can transcend this purpose and combine more formal and semantic possibilities, as the result of an artistic intentionality.

We said that the photographic image is an imprint, an *analogon* of things that exist and can be seen; but what the artist *sees* doesn't often match with what everyone else *sees*. The artist, on the basis of a formal intuition pushes the photographic apparatus to record a wider visible spectrum: the *place of imagination* that always reports a delayed dimension, something different from the established reality, the *real place* that we all can see and recognize.

Jungjin Lee starts to develop an interest in Photography in the early Eighties while specializing in ceramics in Hongik University, Seoul. She then earns an MFA in Photography from New York University. In the early Nineties she was apprentice and assistant to Robert Frank, but her vision was really far from the master's visual language; but, aware of his pupil's inclination and potential, he encouraged her to pursue her personal research and to hear and express her inner voice.

Jungjin Lee's gaze wants to lay beyond the conventional objectivity, her vision is constantly in progress and her eye scans, dissects and reassembles, every single feature of the visible object, to land on "*the invisibility at the heart of things*"². Her sight doesn't really duplicate and replicate, it rather appresents, hypostatizes and preserves the uniqueness and the wonder of the visible phenomenon and restores the nascent, ontological dimension of the vision.

Photography is, to Jungjin Lee, a meditative process, that doesn't imply a moral judgement over its subjects; her expression is free and it can afford the contaminations of other ways of expression with no fear of losing its rigour and aesthetic quality. Thus trusting the innovative contribution provided by the last digital technologies, her printings have the taste and the material strength of Asian ancient woodcuts.

Jungjin Lee comes to the aesthetic object – the photography print – through a long process that recalls the completeness of a ritual.

The brush spreads the photosensitive emulsion all over the Korean mulberry paper, paving the way to vision. A first chemical print, on which the pictorial gesture (the artist's hand) is detectable into the traces of the brush, intentionally left visible, takes us back to the golden age, to the origin, of Photography and becomes the base of the consequent technical-conceptual elaboration that, in a second phase, will involve the digital acquisition of the analog material, as if it would stigmatise the modern imperative of data "digitization".

Everything must now undergo the merciless eye of the *scanner*, under which every possible identity comes down to a binary number. The *scanner* establishes and extends our real existence in the virtual eternity and Jungjin Lee's vision does not escape this destiny since every artist can deal with the technologies of his time and use it for personal expressive purposes.

After obtaining, with the aid of modern photography software, a high contrast digital negative, in the final phase of the processing, the picture comes back to the dark room to realize the final chemical print on emulsified mulberry paper. In this way, the artist manages to reconcile two different technologies, that are also two different – irreconcilable to some photographers – lines of thought. With that, she affixes her 'digital signature' on the analog imprint also; the finished piece makes us discern, as a transparent watermark, its original aesthetic dimension.

This is the point in which we learn how the aesthetical approach is decisive in Jungjin Lee's work.

The current culture think at the aesthetic dimension as to something negative. *Aesthetic* is more and more often associate to useless, to superficial and sweetened, with no profundity or content, forgetting that *aisth sis* is one of the perceiver's ways to establish a contact, a primary form of knowledge that, passing through the sentiment of the *flesh* of the individual, reunites him to the "*flesh of the world*"³ and to the *living*.

Often we use to oppose the term aesthetic to the term ethic, as if aesthetics should necessarily exclude or invalidate ethics, and we just can't accept that, from the point of view of quality, aesthetics and ethics are just the same thing (or at least accept the existence of a relation of co-implication between them).

The aesthetic approach offers existential dignity to every aspect of reality, it puts together the sensitive mystery of presence and absence and makes us perceive approaching distances. Within aesthetics, many opposing dualisms settle, such as the opposition between spiritual and material, body and soul, chaos and order, giving to the work's formal identity the condition of the *absolute* which manifests itself.

Jungjin Lee puts *Unnamed Road* in a dimension that is purely aesthetic, "*sanza tempo tinta*"⁴ (out of time and light); she outlines a suspended geophilosophical *t pos*, apparently detached from conjunctures and chronicles of the present time; a place where the human being, after facing destruction and abandonment – of which he is cause and effect at the same time – reveals his own remains. Suddenly we realize the desertification and disintegration of the anthropic place, experiencing the misery of being uprooted from history. It's alienation rather than identity.

Jungjin Lee's gaze magnifies a dimension which is terrestrial, immanent, horizontal and makes us perceive the "*immense corps*"⁵ of the Earth: physical concretion of mineral, vegetable and animal forms that seems to marginalize, if not to exclude at all, the human form. Man is the artifact that brings with him a matter of inconsistency and instability and he has the place of a transitory, nomad figure in this landscape.

Distracted by his fetishes and immovable meanings, contemporary man is losing contact and adherence with the hearth of a society that is changing quickly; prisoner of his *character* he is getting further and further away from his real drama to keep acting a script that is not his, misrepresenting the 'real' of reality with the 'realism' of representation. Art and symbolic

languages are affected by this global fiction, the same signs that we produce seem to us more and more obscure and impenetrable and repel us to a dystopian drift, where even the Earth has been imagined as flat as a doormat.

The Earth's surface is the *tabula rasa* on which humankind writes down and deletes everyday, continuously changing the morphology and features of the territory in which he lives; Jungjin Lee, in her turn, impresses her routes and her terrestrial landscapes on the emulsified paper like a scribe and shows us the object of *thinking herself* on earth.

Humankind is maybe losing, in the present days, the values that have stated its relation of mutual belonging with the planet, and it is assuming a liftoff toward other planets. An artist like Jungjin Lee – it might seem a paradox – brings our feet back to the ground, to the “*the sharpest point of the instant*”⁶ that encloses the time and the place where our species shall live, and gives back to us the measure of being human in this world.

¹ Gilles Deleuze e Félix Guattari - Che cos'è la filosofia? - Einaudi, 1991

² James Hillman - Il codice dell'anima - Adelphi, 1996.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty - Il visibile e l'invisibile - Bompiani, 1993.

⁴ Dante Alighieri - La Divina Commedia, Inferno, Canto terzo, verso 29.

⁵ Arthur Rimbaud - Alba, Illuminazioni.

⁶ Jacques Derrida - La scrittura e la differenza - Einaudi.