

Daesung Lee

Crossing Borders

di Valeria Ceregini



Daesung Lee "On the shore of a vanishing island. Soth Korea" 2011. Ph credits and courtesy the artist and Amy-D gallery, Milano

As Italian I am very sensible at the migration problem, every day it is possible to see on TV, newspaper, or only meet in person these people in the streets who lost everything. They are moving on for so many different reasons in a foreign country where often they are seen as an unwelcomed guest. I absolutely don't want to compare myself to these *wasted lives* (Z. Bauman, 2004), but like me, many others people from my generation left Italy to find a job or a stable future. Italy was and still is a country of migrants. That demonstrates how many reasons there are beyond the decision to cross borders even when you are living in wealth and developed western country.

Acting a visual arts curator, I decided to approach this argument researching among artists how to transmit the message of this social and ecological emergency. The South Korean photographer Daesung Lee has been hit my attention for the quality of his images and stories. At the same time, I came across a wonderful group of international artists and curators with my similar interests and with an ambitious project titled *Crossing Borders*.

Valeria Ceregini: Why and when did you decide that photography was the right medium to express your art, thoughts and yourself?

Daesung Lee: My favorite artists is like Charlie Chaplin, Christian Boltanski and William Kentridge, not even photographers. Their works are not difficult to understand and create a lot of different pathos in my mind.

They know how to tell the story and how to resonate to audiences rather than express their thoughts. I am generally interested in telling social issues. Therefore, I am focused on how to communicate the subject and how to deliver the message to the audience. By that, I generally prefer to use popular and understandable visual languages. I started to photograph for fun as an amateur. And to me, photography is still the same medium for easy, fun and good communication to audiences, because it is more illustrative than abstract. But at the same time, it also has ambiguity and mystery to inspire audiences with imaginations and interpretations upon their perspectives. That is the charm of photography as a medium.

Please, tell more about yourself and your research...

I am from South Korea, born in 1975.

My generation has experienced a very compressed and rapid economic growth. When I was born, in my grandparents' village, no tap water, no proper toilet (we already had an eco-friendly toilet in nowadays trend) and cooking with wood. Nothing was sufficient in daily life. So, we had to depend on and help each other to live. There was more solidarity, friendship and neighbourhood by that time. Also, we were very depending on our lives in agriculture. The relationship with nature was very different in the village. There were still very strong animism and shamanism traditions and practice since economic change has happened rapidly in 40 years. Also, I have watched the rapid change in society. We have lost these beautiful traditions through economic growth and westernization. I guess most of the Asian countries have similar experiences. I think we are maybe more intelligent, but not wiser than before. This globalization economically connected the world more than before, which means that we globally depend on each other more. But ironically we are less connected as human by this globalization. In the past, we used to have a lot of small shops and ateliers in my childhood memories. But now, we don't know who produce and how is made any more by globalization. So, we finally don't appreciate any more to those who produce daily products for us. And also, all the products have become cheaper by globalization (by using this cheap labours & resources from poorest countries). So, we waste more and throw them easily. That causes enormous impacts on the environment. We

are maybe smart in a small picture. But in a big picture, we are not wise at all.

You are a documentarist photographer, what it means for you, especially in these challenging times?

I am interested in telling audiences stories. So, when I work, the format is not my biggest concern. I think which is an efficient way to communicate in visual language. Yes, it is a challenging time. We have experienced a lot of environmental crisis recently. I had Covid-19, and I still have a long-covid syndrome since April. But honestly, I am not surprised or frustrated because these problems are supposed to come to us one day. Pandemic, climate change, environmental crisis, these are all the consequences of human activities. And look at the fact, past 50 years, almost half of species of the planet have been extinct by humans' activities and still goes on. So, who is a virus on the earth? But we say 'Save the earth!'... well? Who saves who? But the truth is: the earth doesn't need to be saved by us, we need it to survive.

Our society is changing due to the pandemic. Our planet is close to the irreversible collapse. What art and artists can do to awake the social consciousness?

I don't believe that art could do something so much. But I could not say art is useless. I am in a sceptic about the function of political art. I went to see an African art exhibition in Louis Vuitton's centre. Many of the workers were about colonial history and conflict around natural resource in African countries. But when I walked around there. All the security guards have black African or Northern African origin, and then after the exhibition, I went out through the back door. There were a group of cleaners, and they were all black people. Regardless of the intention of those political artworks, the situation has not changed so much from the colonial time. I felt a big paradox between the works and reality in one exhibition space. In my opinion, seeing those political artworks make us believe that there are changes regardless of actual changes in reality. Even, sometimes, it rather than washes the problems. (For example, Barrack Obama's presidency in the U.S., but It seems that racism has worsened than before.)

But I already told that art could not to do much but not useless in the beginning. In my opinion, because of Art functions as an indicator of the current situation of society. As long as many artists feel those social problems, there is more work produced on that. But why there are no actual changes? Because people don't consider it my problem. Honestly, during the confinement, it seems that the shortage of toilet paper awakened more social consciousness than art. Why? Because it was my problem. Climate change action is the same. We maybe go to 'Climate change March' and urging the government to find the solutions on

Saturday morning, and then in the afternoon, we fly for a weekend trip again. There is no actual action in daily life so much. We still live the same as before. And asking the government for the change instead of changing ourselves. 'I live what I want, but you find a solution for me.' We are very hypocritical.

In your photos, you are describing the ecological changes and environmental disasters. Also, in your *Souvenirs*, you are ironically depicting an unexpected cynical society. What do you think about our current times?

This economic system is depending on growth. As long as there is no growth, we have an economics problem. But the earth doesn't grow natural resource doesn't grow. How is it possible to keep growing? This economics system itself already has the fundamental paradox from the beginning. If we built the economic system sustainable, we would not have all those problems. This sustainability is based on collaborations and harmony with other people, other species and nature. This crisis requires us the complete change of our paradigm. But the situations are very pessimistic. This pandemic shows that we have chosen infinitive competitions among us instead of collaboration or solidarity. We already have lost so many things by this competition with nature. Why do we have the refugee crisis in Europe and other countries? Because we have ignored all the global problems because it was not directly happening to us. Economic inequality, war and environmental disaster in the 3rd world were not my problems. Finally, they have become my problems as the refugee crisis, pandemic and forest fire (climate change) due to my ignorance. That is the consequence of our current paradigm, and we pay now. Be wise... Don't forget what Carl Edward Sagan showed and told us. Think about how you want to live when you still alive. And also, think about what kind of world and future you want to give to your loving children.

Daesung Lee
"Futuristic
Archaeology" 2015.
Ph credits and
courtesy the artist
and Amy-D gallery,
Milano

