

LEE BAE

SYZYGY

Esther Schipper, Berlin

September 11 – October 18, 2025



Esther Schipper

Lee Bae



Lee Bae was born in 1956 in Cheong-do, Korea. He received his BFA and MFA in Fine Arts at Hongik University in 1981 and 1986. The artist lives and works between Paris and Seoul.

The artist was awarded Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, France (2018), 4th National Association of Art Critics Award (2013), Artist of the Year, Korean Cultural Center, Paris (2009), and Artist of the Year, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (2000).

Lee Bae's selected solo exhibitions include: **Lee Bae – La Maison de la Lune Brûlée**, Wilmotte Foundation, Venice (2024); **Lee Bae**, Indang Museum of Daegu, Daegu (2021); **Union**, Phi Foundation, Montreal (2021); **Venice Wood Water**, Wilmotte Foundation, Venice (2019); **Plus de Lumière**, Fondation Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence (2018); **Overstated & Understated**, Paradise Art Space, Incheon (2018); **La Cohue**, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Vannes (2016); **Issu du feu**, Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire (2016); **Suspens**, Domaine de Kerguéhennec, Bignan (2016); **Carte Blanche à Lee Bae**, Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet, Paris (2015).

The artist's work is held in collections including: National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Gwacheon; Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul; Busan Museum of Art, Busan; Daejeon Museum of Art, Daejeon; Daegu Art Museum, Daegu; Jeju Museum of Art, Jeju; Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul; Clayarch Gimhae Museum, Gimhae; Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Saint-Étienne; Gyeongnam Art Museum, Gyeongnam; Fondation Colas, Paris; Privada Allegro Foundation, Madrid; Baruj Foundation, Barcelona; Ministry of Culture and Communication, Paris; Fonds National d'art Contemporain, Paris; Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris; Fondation Carmignac, Paris; Fondation Maeght, Saint-Paul de Vence; Musée Cernuschi, Paris; Musée National des Arts Asiatiques – Guimet, Paris; Musée des Beaux-Arts – La Cohue, Vannes.

Photo: © Lee Bae Studio
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Cover image, Exhibition view: Lee Bae, **Syzygy**, Esther Schipper, Berlin (2025)

EXHIBITION TEXT

Esther Schipper is pleased to announce **Syzygy**, Lee Bae's first solo exhibition with the gallery. On view will be works from the artist's series **Issu du feu**, and his **Brushstroke** sculptures and paintings, including a monumental site-specific work covering the walls and floor of the exhibition space.

Lee Bae is best known for his striking adoption of charcoal as his main means of expression. The artist has turned the material into a versatile instrument with which to create mosaic-like arrangements constructed from shards of charcoal, paintings and ink drawings using charcoal as a pigment dissolved in a medium, and sculptures reminiscent of large charcoal logs. While the choice of charcoal was initially an economic one made upon Lee Bae's arrival in France in the early 1990s, the material also became a reaffirmation of the artist's Korean identity. Charcoal has unique meanings in Korean tradition. Said to hold the energy of the fire that produced it, it is believed to have cleansing, purifying qualities, as well as the ability to ward off evil forces. The artist employs it as a transformational material, drawn from the elements and history of Korea, and imbued with a rich aggregate of personal, cultural and spiritual associations. To Lee Bae, charcoal represents a condensation of time; immortalizing the life of a tree, it embodies concepts of renewal, circularity and the rhythms of nature, all of which are central to his artistic approach.

Living between Korea and Paris, over the course of his by now thirty years of practice, the artist has explored various articulations of the material, operating in a productive tension between its formal qualities and its relation to ritual. Lee Bae's work exists in a dialogue between Western and Far Eastern approaches to art making, and weds formalism and spirituality, presence and absence, stillness and dynamism.

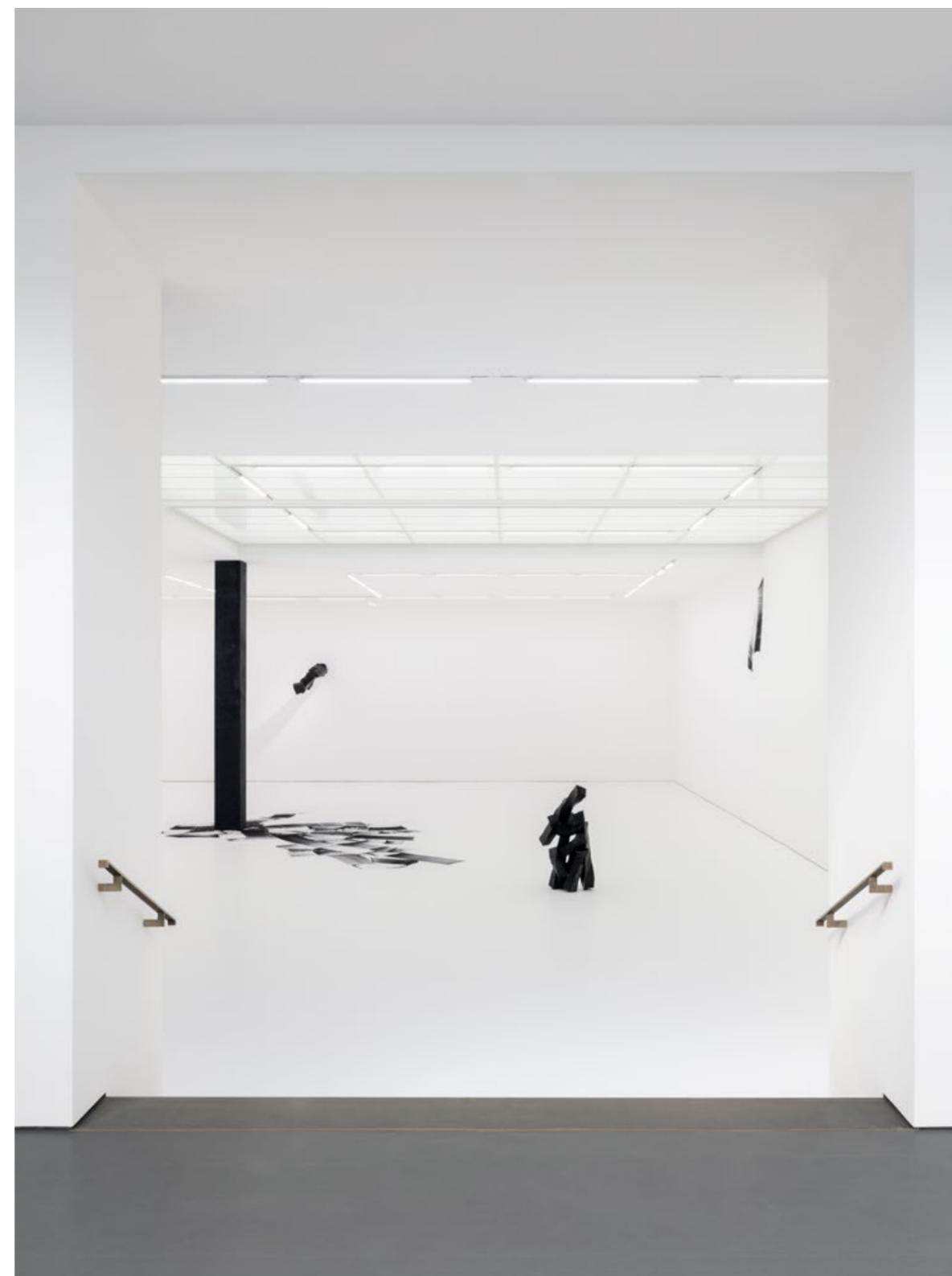
For **Syzygy**, Lee Bae has lined the entire surface of the walls and floor in the exhibition space with white paper. The paper, which can only be stepped on with shoe covers, signals a kinship to traditional Korean-style interiors. To the artist, the care taken in Far Eastern domestic settings—for example, taking off one's shoes when entering—suggests mindfulness, and it is this sense of place he seeks to evoke. The environment fosters an atmosphere of intellectual concentration in which the visitor encounters the works. Some sections of the paper have been painted by the artist with broad ink strokes which were executed onsite in the gallery. Additionally, two framed brushstroke paintings in ink on paper are suspended from the ceiling.

Lee Bae's painting process is conceptually rooted in the tradition of Far Eastern drawings and calligraphy and the idea of spiritual refinement through controlling one's physical movement, breath and rhythm in the work process. Rather than being spontaneous gestural expressions, the brushstrokes can be understood as crystallizations of the artist's thoughts and physical sensations, accumulated over a long period of time. Traces of chance and contingency are present, manifested by tremors of the artist's hand, as well as by twists and pauses of the lines. The brushstrokes seem to have a life of their own, a liberated, spirited, and vigorous life that exists in itself and for itself.

Three sculptures in the exhibition at first resemble assemblies of large black logs. Butting into different directions, their surface has a deep relief recalling woodgrain. The works are from a series giving Lee Bae's **Brushstrokes** a three-dimensional form. Cast in bronze, the sculpture nonetheless captures the fluidity and the texture of his ink-wash paintings. One work is installed on the floor, the others extend out from the wall into the space. With the sculptural work, Lee Bae makes manifest the long simultaneity of one-, two- and three-dimensional associations inherent in his painterly practice: His brushwork not only unfolds on a flat, two-dimensional surface, the works also conjure a three-dimensional space through twists and swerves.

One wall is covered with Lee Bae's **iconic Issu du feu** works. They are created by aligning hundreds of small shards of charcoal on the panel, which are then grafted and polished. The surface shows wood grain and growth rings made by nature and time, refracting light in various directions and in multiple angles. Evoking a wide range of images in the viewer's minds, the surface reacts to the entire spectrum of light, from the faintest to the brightest, from clouds passing to shadows thrown by a passing visitor. As the artist has said, "it is a black material that produces light."

What at first may sound like a contradiction, in Lee Bae's work aligns in conceptual unity: black and white, presence and absence, ying and yang. It is this harmony of opposition to which the title refers. **Syzygy** aims to create a holistic environment that will provide visitors with an encounter with the exhibited works embodying harmony and alignment, offering an experience of spiritual unity.



Exhibition view: Lee Bae, **Syzygy**, Esther Schipper, Berlin (2025)



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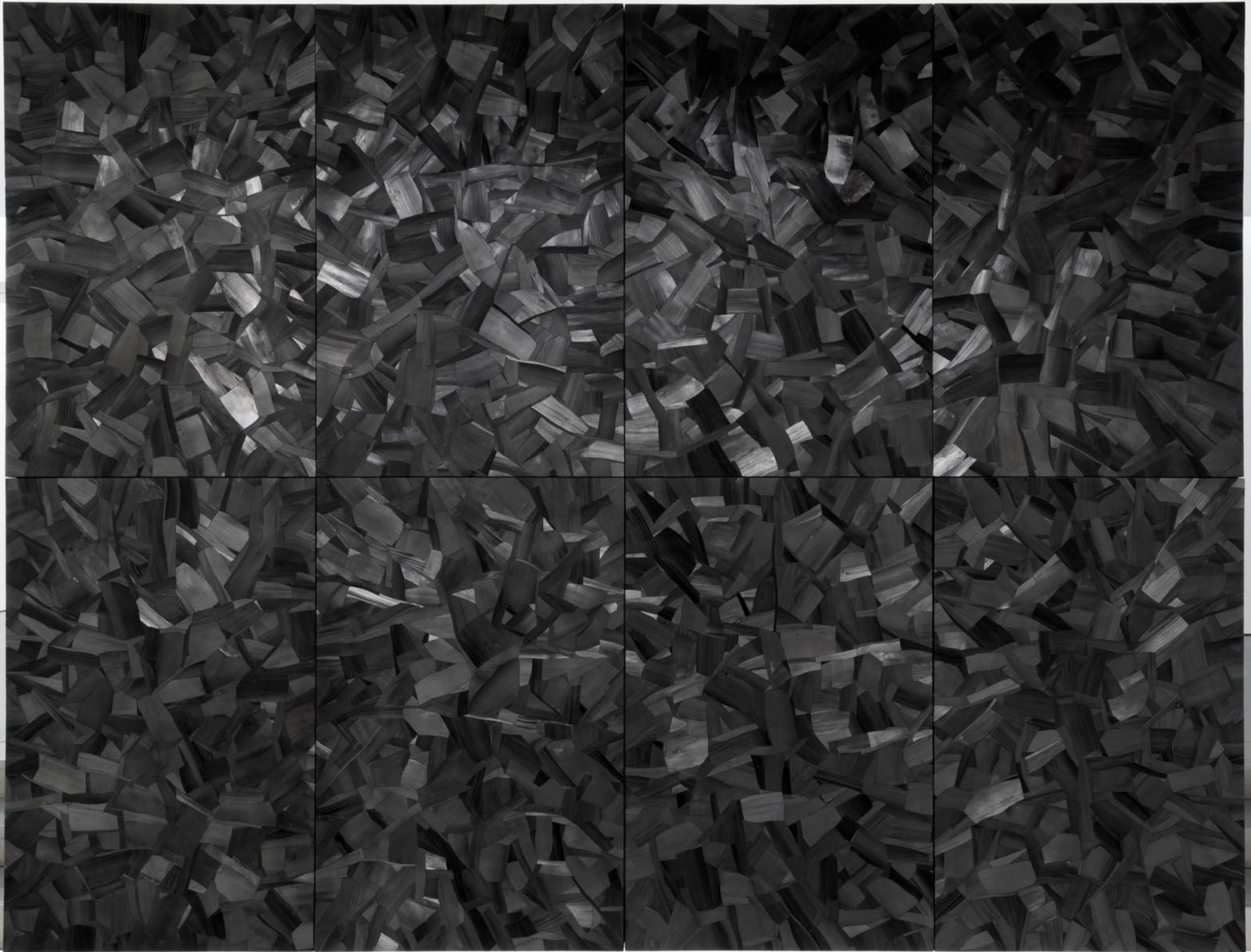
Exhibition view: Lee Bae, **Syzygy**, Esther Schipper, Berlin (2025)



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LEE BAE: SYZYGY

Lee Bae's art has an alchemical dimension that might be familiar to students of medieval cosmology, or natural philosophy. The magic happens early in our encounter with his work. Rather than turn base metal into precious gold – which alchemists never achieved – the artist presents us with an equally thrilling luxury: charcoal.

Lee Bae's achievement is all the more impressive for not altering the properties of charcoal to effect its transformation – on the contrary, he takes us deeper into its ontology, deeper into the essence of a material created by fire. In a further ritual of purification – this one aesthetic – Lee helps carbonised wood transform itself again into art – not as its subservient medium, but as the thing itself.

His isn't a transubstantiation in the physical sense – Lee's discreet hands do not alter charcoal's properties. Rather, his efforts transform us – by altering our experience of the material and by expanding our understanding of its nature. More cultural than physical, Lee's alchemy befits his profession, and his position in art history. Despite deep roots in Korean cultural traditions, Lee Bae's magic is unimpeachably contemporary.

Born in 1956 in Cheongdo, a rural county roughly 320 kilometres south of Seoul, Lee took his MFA from Seoul's Hongik University in 1986. He studied there with the late Park Seo-bo, Dean of the school's esteemed College of Fine Art. Known in international circles as the "Father of Korean contemporary art," Park is a central figure of the Dansaekhwa movement (the word means "monochrome painting"). Dansaekhwa reached its apogee in the 1970s but the austere sensibility still thrives on the international scene. The succeeding generation – of which Lee Bae is the leading exponent – renews it for our time.

Having spent formative years with Park, Lee moved to Paris in 1990 where he assisted the other key figure of Korean reductivism, Lee Ufan. Issued from the same generation as the late Park, Lee Ufan bridges the Dansaekhwa scene with Japanese Mono-ha. In fact, with his background in philosophy, Lee Ufan is the principal theorist of Mono-ha, and among its key artists. The term translates as "School of Things," a name it took from a critic's sarcasm. Although he is Korean, the museum dedicated to Lee Ufan's legacy is in Japan. But he has long been based in Paris; so has Lee Bae whose work is the beneficiary of this triangulation of cultures.

Just as it did for Lee Ufan in 1990, in 2018 the government of France knighted Lee Bae as a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

For North Americans, it is tempting to equate Lee Bae's work – along with that of his mentors – to a variation of minimalism. We must be careful, though, because the similarity is superficial. If any Western scene has had an impact on these artists, it would be the French, rather than the American – via *tachisme*, *art informel*, *Supports/Surfaces*, *Nouveau Réalisme*, and especially for the philosophical Lee Ufan, phenomenology. This cross-cultural encounter notwithstanding, the justification for Korean reductivism remains fundamentally East Asian. It is informed by ancient Daoist ideas such as *wu wei*, "non-action" or "effortless action." More specifically, Lee Bae's use of charcoal exemplifies the Korean aesthetics of *mu*, "non-being" or "emptiness" as a pregnant space of possibility; and *yeong*, the spiritual vitality that can inhabit form when the artist gets out of its way.

It's true that artists share the same zeitgeist, but it is not true that they share the same perspective. Artistic ideas may well be promiscuous and oblivious to borders, but Eastern reductivism has its own spirit. The Western tradition is a sequence of cleavages, generally speaking – a dynamic of abandonment, a ritual shedding of old ways. Minimalism, too, follows the pattern of breaks and refusals. In East Asia, on the other hand, the justification for change has emerged from an engagement with aesthetic motivations that transcend time: not an escape from the past – in Lee Bae's case at any rate – but a continuity achieved through refinement and a renewed meditation on the nature of 'things.'

Unlike Western artists of his generation who tend to blur their vocational lineage, Lee Bae's work makes his

lineage transparent, but not through reiteration. His originality in the context of his teachers reflects the Korean concept of *beop*, the idea that the proper way to absorb a method or tradition is to internalise it, rather than practice imitation. Lee deepens and extends the material inquiry and spiritual commitment of Dansaekhwa into a new register – personal and original, but grounded in a shared ethos.

Lee exemplifies this ethos vividly in the calligraphic works. Pulverised charcoal is turned into ink that he applies with a broad brush on room-embracing scrolls. Great lengths of *hanji* – traditional Korean mulberry paper – are the support for a sequence of brushstrokes attached like strung beads rather than character sets. Each stroke adds its length to a contiguous collection – we might also call it a sentence, or a phrase – to join other unique records of duration. The strokes have their own subtle features – density, etiolation, curvature, wetness, length – but all are meditative instances of the same thing.

Like a photograph, each brushstroke registers a repeated but unique occurrence in space and time. That is its only purpose, aside from our pleasure. But the finished drawings are the opposite of photographs – practiced and repeatedly rehearsed, they record a performance rather than capture a slice of life.

The extreme contrast between the whiteness of the paper and the blackness of the ink invests these works with a forensic lucidity: evidence of life and not much more. Despite Lee's refusal to represent here – he has been happy to elsewhere, notably in 2000 with his exquisite drawings of persimmons – the context of this work remains resolutely calligraphic; we can't account for it otherwise. But unlike a calligrapher, Lee's marks don't represent words or ideas; they align more with the cadence of speech, measured in breaths. The hand speaks for the mouth.

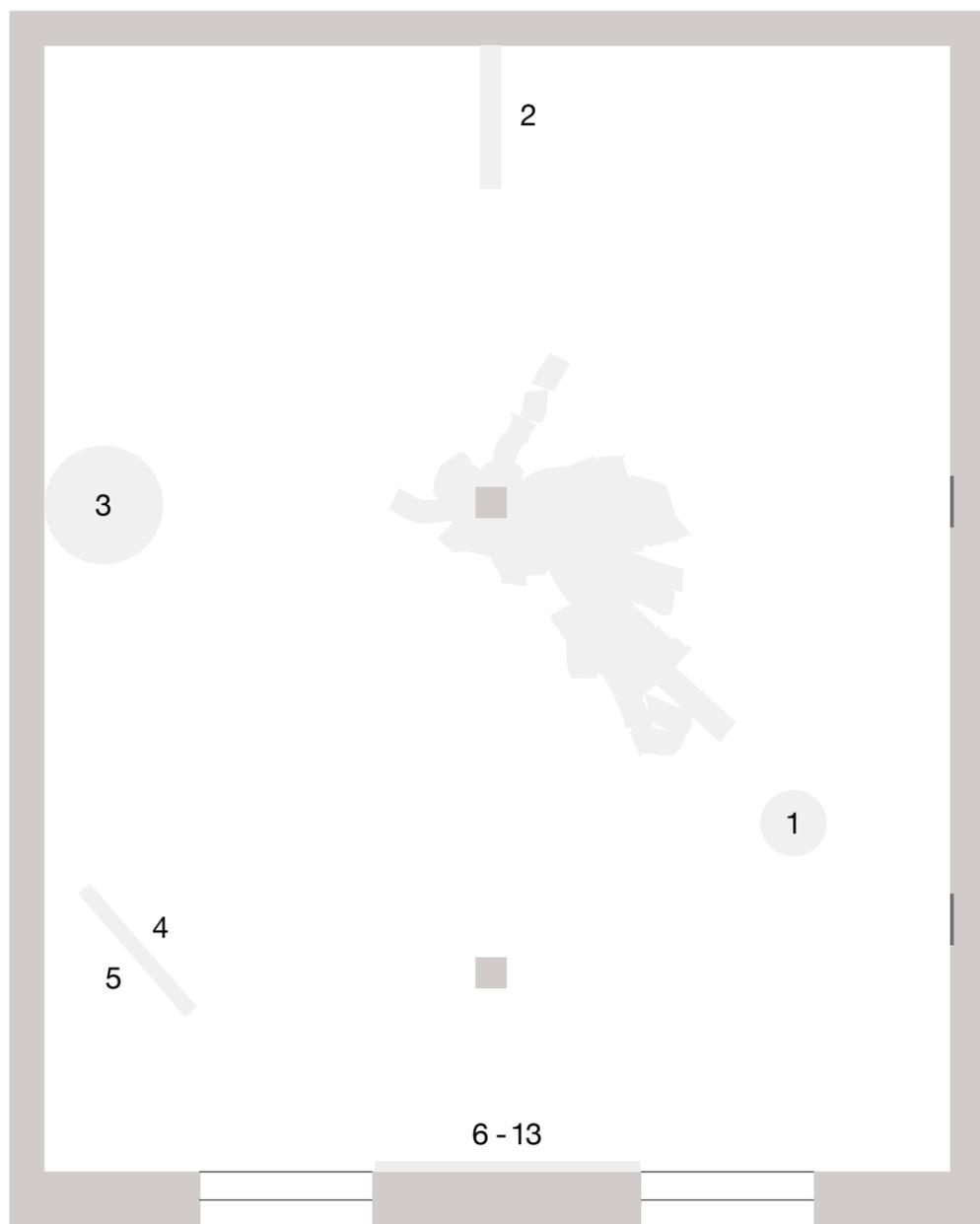
The principal sense of the word 'syzygy', the exhibition's resonant title, is 'alignment' or 'union.' In both astrology and astronomy, it refers to the alignment of celestial bodies, such as in an eclipse when the Sun, the Moon, and the Earth line up, one behind the other. For poets, it suggests pairing or mirroring – metrical feet joined in rhythm, or meaning echoed in sound. For Carl Jung it is the archetypal union of opposites, the integration of anima and animus into a psychic whole. In philosophy and the cosmology of the alchemists, syzygy structures the universe through sacred unions: spirit and matter, darkness and light, being and nothingness.

Enlisting syzygy, Lee Bae extends his poetics of charcoal into the third dimension with bronze sculptures that seem to have grown, alchemically, from the asemic calligraphy on the walls next to them. That's because they have. Using the contemporary tools, Lee Bae turns his brushstrokes into sculptures, named for their source and reference. The **Brushstrokes** bronzes double his magic by giving the impression that we are looking at the wooden beams he charred and crushed to make the calligraphic ink. Paradoxically, he closes the circle of carbon by escaping into a material of representation external to it.

The same linearity qualifies both the paintings and the sculptures – the linearity of time and of movement – while alignment, or syzygy, is their organising principle. The sculptures are shapes without meaning, but rich with the same emotional power as the abstract lines of which they are a transubstantiation. Both the paintings and the sculptures were made of materials transformed by fire and articulated into art: skeleton-keys to open an infinity of metaphorical doors.

– Marc Mayer

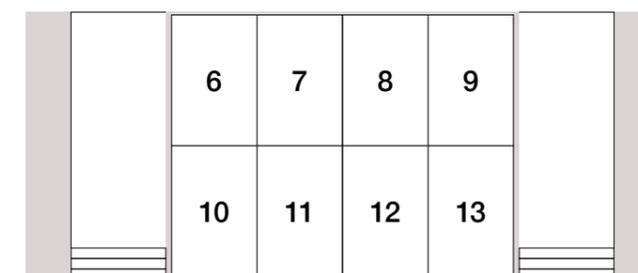
GALLERY MAP



1. **Brushstroke A1**, 2025
Bronze
113 x 73 x 43 cm
(44 1/2 x 28 3/4 x 16 7/8 in)
Edition of 5
(LB 022)
2. **Brushstroke A2**, 2025
Bronze
218 x 50 x 50 cm
(85 7/8 x 19 3/4 x 19 3/4 in)
Edition of 5
(LB 018)
3. **Brushstroke A3**, 2025
Bronze
170 x 165 x 120 cm
(66 7/8 x 65 x 47 1/4 in)
Edition of 5
(LB 017)
4. **Brushstroke-10J**, 2025
Charcoal ink on paper
260 x 170 cm
(102 3/8 x 66 7/8 in) (unframed)
263 x 172,8 cm
(103 1/2 x 68 in) (framed)
(LB 019)
5. **Brushstroke-11J**, 2025
Charcoal ink on paper
260 x 170 cm
(102 3/8 x 66 7/8 in) (unframed)
263 x 172,8 cm
(103 1/2 x 68 in) (framed)
(LB 020)

6. **Issu Du Feu 2g**, 2000-2025
(LB 026)
7. **Issu Du Feu 8g**, 2000-2025
(LB 032)
8. **Issu Du Feu 7g**, 2000-2025
(LB 031)
9. **Issu Du Feu 3g**, 2000-2025
(LB 027)
10. **Issu Du Feu 1g**, 2000-2025
(LB 025)
11. **Issu Du Feu 4g**, 2000-2025
(LB 028)
12. **Issu Du Feu 5g**, 2000-2025
(LB 029)
13. **Issu Du Feu 6g**, 2000-2025
(LB 030)

Works 6–13:
Charcoal on panel
190 x 124 cm (74 3/4 x 48 7/8 in) (unframed)
194 x 127,5 cm (37 x 50 1/4 in) (framed)



Issu Du Feu, 6–13

BRUSHSTROKE PAINTINGS

Lee Bae started a new series titled **Brushstroke** around 2020. The most apparent feature of this series is the fact that, once Lee starts, he can hardly hesitate or change the movement of his brush. In this sense, Lee moves into a realm that beholds the essence of East Asian ink-wash painting and calligraphy which are practices in which how an artist sets the brush to paper and wields the brush are of paramount importance. Brushwork and the shades of ink set the tone for the whole piece.

To listen to the voice of charcoal, Lee seeks to activate the memory deeply embedded in his body, by which he guides the movement of his hand. Each stroke is an unfolding of psychological time. As a result, his brushwork can be seen as the self-initiated performance of the medium itself, as well as the crystallization of the artist's thoughts accumulated over a long period of time. Traces of chance and contingency are also present in Lee's **brushstrokes**, manifested by tremors of the artist's hand, as well as by twists and pauses of the lines. Lee's broad **brushstrokes** seem to have a life of their own, a liberated, spirited, and vigorous life that exists in itself and for itself.

Several fascinating, even playful, aspects are integral to Lee Bae's practice. His brushwork not only unfolds on a flat, two-dimensional surface, they also conjure a three-dimensional space through twists and swerves. Quite surprisingly, reflections of light can be glimpsed at the place where his broad strokes make a turn. Therefore, Lee Bae's **Brushstroke** series should be understood on three registers, namely the two-dimensional plane, the three-dimensional space, and the fourth dimension of time.

Charcoal has unique meanings in Korean tradition. It is believed that charcoal can dehumidify houses and ward off evil forces. When the first full moon of the lunar calendar rises, people would perform the ritual of "burning the moon house", setting ablaze a sacred moon structure built up of pine branches. The charcoal carbonized by the burning of pine wood is considered a purifying substance with spiritual implications.

Relatively inexpensive, the medium of charcoal made it possible for Lee Bae to explore various aspects of its materiality. He no longer felt displaced or uprooted when painting with charcoal. In his artistic practice, he found a way to connect with his cultural root. In this world of black and white, certain themes of Lee Bae's past re-emerged, including charcoal ink, calligraphy, and his own childhood.

— excerpted from an essay by curator and art critic Fei Dawei, 2022



Detail: Lee Bae, **Brushstroke-10J**, 2025, charcoal ink on paper, 260 x 170 cm (102 3/8 x 66 7/8 in) (unframed), 263 x 172,8 cm (103 1/2 x 68 in) (framed) (LB 019)



Lee Bae, **Brushstroke-10J**, 2025, charcoal ink on paper, 260 x 170 cm (102 3/8 x 66 7/8 in) (unframed), 263 x 172,8 cm (103 1/2 x 68 in) (framed) (LB 019)

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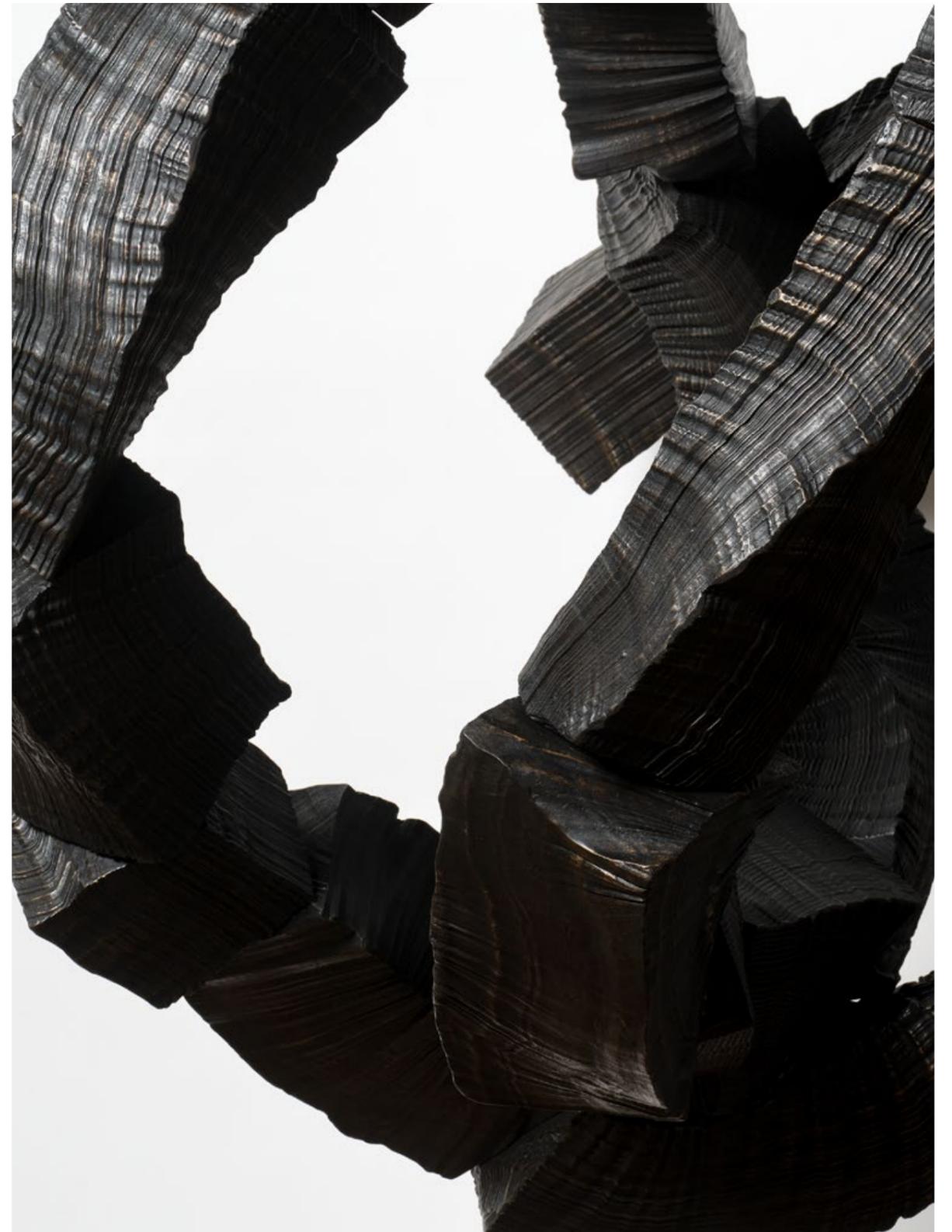
Lee Bae, **Brushstroke-11J**, 2025, charcoal ink on paper, 260 x 170 cm (102 3/8 x 66 7/8 in) (unframed), 263 x 172,8 cm (103 1/2 x 68 in) (framed) (LB 020)

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BRUSHSTROKE SCULPTURES

The sculptures on view are from a series giving Lee Bae's **Brushstrokes** a three-dimensional format. Cast in bronze, at first sight, they resemble assemblies of large black logs. Butting into different directions, extending from the wall or installed on the floor, their surfaces have a deep relief recalling wood grain. The sculptures capture the fluidity and the texture of his ink-wash paintings, making manifest the long simultaneity of one-, two- and three-dimensional associations inherent in his painterly practice.



Detail: Lee Bae, **Brushstroke A3**, 2025, bronze, 170 x 165 x 120 cm (66 7/8 x 65 x 47 1/4 in) (LB 017)

BRUSHSTROKE A1, 2025



Lee Bae, **Brushstroke A1**, 2025, bronze, 113 x 73 x 43 cm (44 1/2 x 28 3/4 x 16 7/8 in), edition of 5 (LB 022)



BRUSHSTROKE A2, 2025



Lee Bae, **Brushstroke A2**, 2025, bronze, 218 x 50 x 50 cm (85 7/8 x 19 3/4 x 19 3/4 in), edition of 5 (LB 018)





Lee Bae, **Brushstroke A3**, 2025, bronze, 170 x 165 x 120 cm (66 7/8 x 65 x 47 1/4 in), edition of 5 (LB 017)



BRUSHSTROKE A4, 2025



Lee Bae, **Brushstroke A4**, 2025, bronze, 86 x 95 x 68 cm (33 7/8 x 37 3/8 x 26 3/4 in), edition of 5 (LB 021)



ISSU DU FEU

Issu du feu works are created by aligning hundreds of small chards of charcoal on the panel, which are then grafted and polished. The surface shows wood grain and growth rings made by nature and time, refracting light in various directions and in multiple angles. Evoking a wide range of images in the viewer's minds, the surface reacts to the entire spectrum of light, from the faintest to the brightest, from clouds passing to shadows thrown by a passing visitor. As the artist has said, "it is a black material that produces light."



Detail: Lee Bae, **Issu Du Feu 8g**, 2000-2025, charcoal on panel, 190 x 124 cm (74 3/4 x 48 7/8 in), 194 x 127,5 cm (37 x 50 1/4 in) (framed) (LB 032)



Lee Bae, **Issu Du Feu 2g**, 2000-2025, charcoal on panel, 190 x 124 cm (74 3/4 x 48 7/8 in), 194 x 127,5 cm (37 x 50 1/4 in) (framed) (LB 026)

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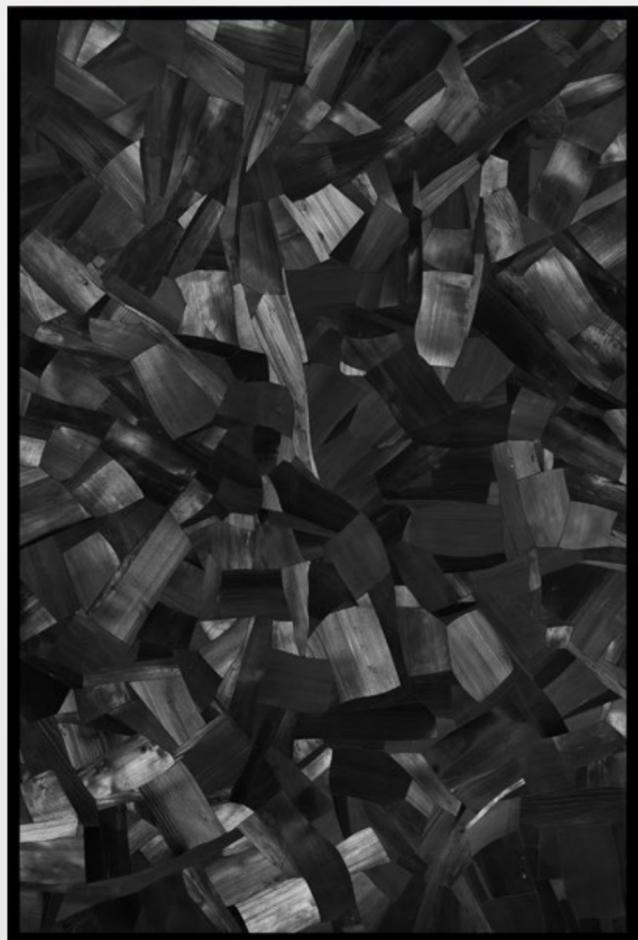




Lee Bae, **Issu Du Feu 8g**, 2000-2025, charcoal on panel, 190 x 124 cm (74 3/4 x 48 7/8 in), 194 x 127,5 cm (37 x 50 1/4 in) (framed) (LB 032)

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Lee Bae, **Issu Du Feu 7g**, 2000-2025, charcoal on panel, 190 x 124 cm (74 3/4 x 48 7/8 in), 194 x 127,5 cm (37 x 50 1/4 in) (framed) (LB 031)

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Lee Bae, **Issu Du Feu 3g**, 2000-2025, charcoal on panel, 190 x 124 cm (74 3/4 x 48 7/8 in), 194 x 127,5 cm (37 x 50 1/4 in) (framed) (LB 027)

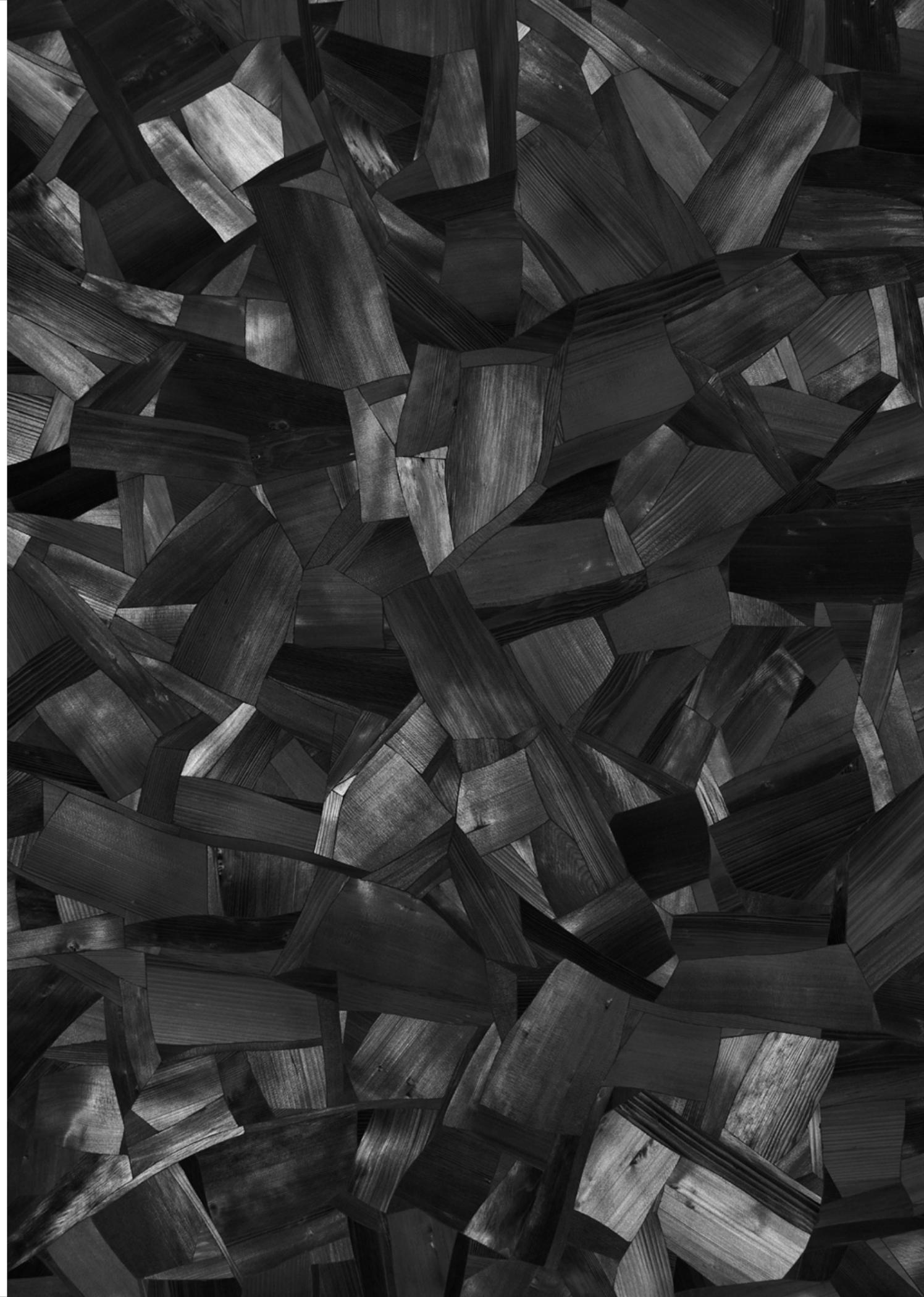
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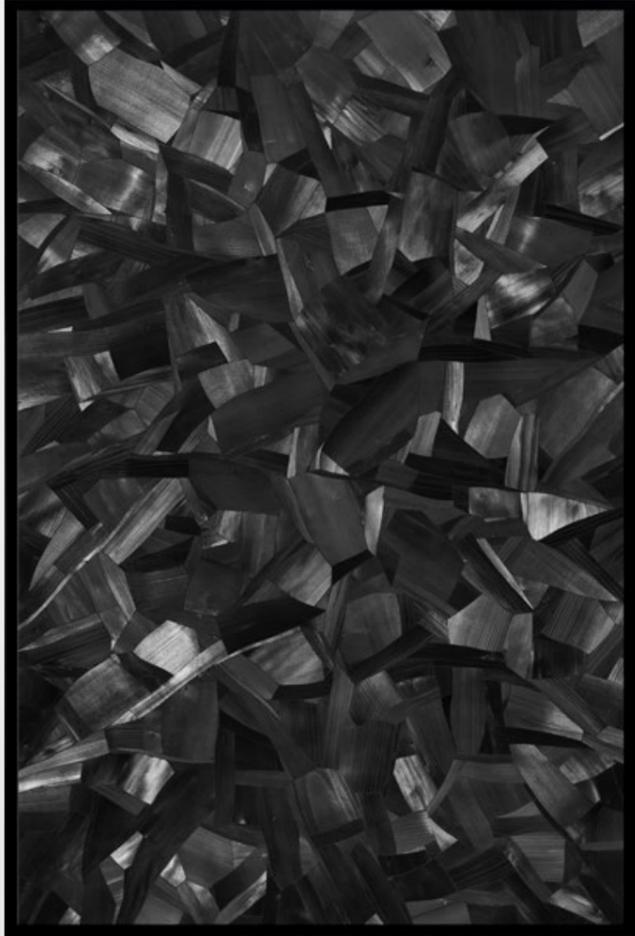




Lee Bae, **Issu Du Feu 1g**, 2000-2025, charcoal on panel, 190 x 124 cm (74 3/4 x 48 7/8 in), 194 x 127,5 cm (37 x 50 1/4 in) (framed) (LB 025)

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Lee Bae, **Issu Du Feu 4g**, 2000-2025, charcoal on panel, 190 x 124 cm (74 3/4 x 48 7/8 in), 194 x 127,5 cm (37 x 50 1/4 in) (framed) (LB 028)

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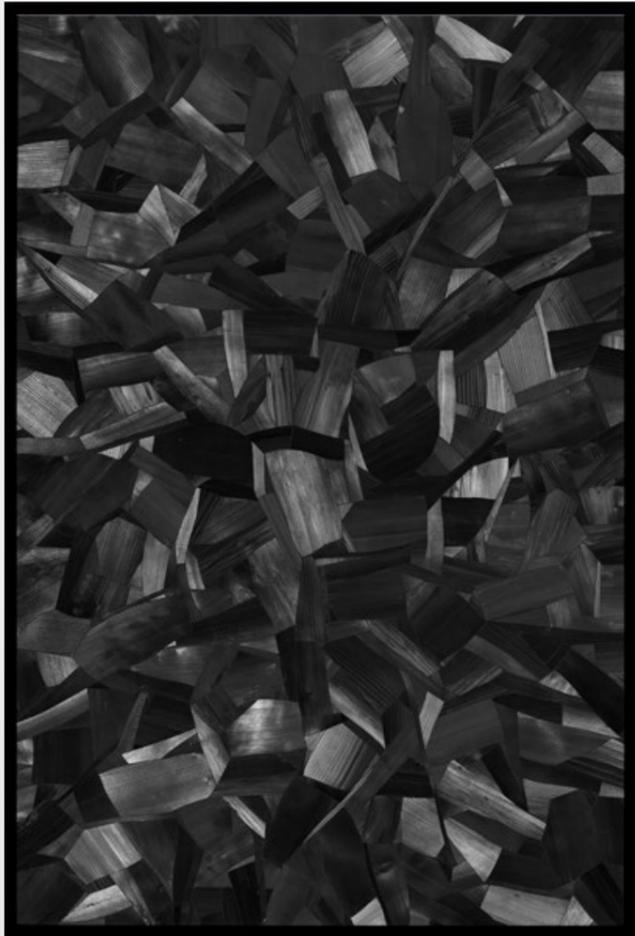




Lee Bae, **Issu Du Feu 5g**, 2000-2025, charcoal on panel, 190 x 124 cm (74 3/4 x 48 7/8 in), 194 x 127,5 cm (37 x 50 1/4 in) (framed) (LB 029)

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Lee Bae, **Issu Du Feu 6g**, 2000-2025, charcoal on panel, 190 x 124 cm (74 3/4 x 48 7/8 in), 194 x 127,5 cm (37 x 50 1/4 in) (framed) (LB 030)

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