

# We Are the Dew Drops

Poetic and poignant, Lindy Lee's work reflects the enormity and fragility of the cosmos.

WRITER

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Over a career spanning four decades, Lindy Lee has become recognised as one of the most significant contemporary Australian artists. Her work, which spans sculpture, painting and major public art projects, grapples with ongoing questions of self and the nature of existence. Drawing on both her Chinese ancestry and her ongoing exploration of Buddhism and Zen philosophy, Lee's practice speaks directly to the heart of what it means to exist within the world today.

Lee's forthcoming survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney, *Moon in a Dew Drop*, is a synthesis of many of these major themes. The exhibition is a culmination of Lee's artistic practice to date, and includes an almost equal mix of historical works drawn from collections alongside new works. When I spoke with Lee over FaceTime, she graciously showed me around her studio via her webcam, and introduced me to her studio assistants Zoe and Demian. It is clear that they share a mutual respect and enjoy each other's company. Lee previously taught at the Sydney College of Arts for many years before her relocation to the Northern Rivers of NSW, and her passion for mentoring artists is demonstrated through her ongoing employment of local emerging artists.

The poetic title of the MCA exhibition is drawn from the collected writings of Zen master Eihei Dogen (1200-1253), whom Lee identifies as a major influence on her practice and thinking. *Moon in a Dew Drop* articulates the relationship between the infinite and the finite, the symbiosis between beauty in

the impermanent—as represented by the dew drop—against the unknowable possibilities of the infinite, signified by the moon. For Lee, “we are the dew drops”, and in each of us we contain and reflect the enormity of the world. She expresses this by saying, “the vastness and hugeness of everything is abundantly here and we are part of it. And even in our limited craggy little selves, this infinity and magic is here also.”

One of the new works made for the show, titled *Moonlight Deities*, articulates this relationship of symbiosis particularly poignantly. The work takes the form of an immersive installation made from large perforated paper discs suspended from the ceiling, which audiences walk through to complete the experience. For Lee, this process emphasises that art is a “co-creation between viewer and object or situation”, rather than a static encounter.

Offering audiences a fresh opportunity to appreciate Lee's artistic trajectory to date, the survey exhibition also charts how common themes continuously surface in the artist's work. Lee's early career was partly inspired by her ongoing exploration of personal and cultural identity, appropriating Western art historical imagery to make sense of belonging and difference. Drawing on her Chinese ancestry, and her experience as a child growing up in white Australia, Lee's early works employed methods of reproduction and intervention to challenge notions of cultural authenticity. She later came to Zen philosophy as an articulation of these questions of self—moving from questions of “who am I?” to “what am I?”. For Lee, this latter exploration of the self is “far more expansive,

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— LINDY LEE



Lindy Lee, *Unnameable*, 2017. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SULLIVAN+STRUMPF, SYDNEY AND SINGAPORE WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF UAP.



Lindy Lee, *The Long Road of the River of Stars*, 2015, from *The Tyranny and Liberation of Distance*. NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA, PURCHASED 2018.



Lindy Lee, *The Silence of Painters*, 1989. MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, GIFT OF LOTI SMORGON AO AND VICTOR SMORGON AC, 1995.

entertaining more possibilities.” That is not to say that questions of identity as it relates to social or cultural codes are no longer relevant, rather they become located within existential questions of self—sitting between universal and individual concerns.

This philosophical development in Lee’s practice is evident in her recent works and the shift in materiality. *Moon in a Dew Drop* will include a number of fire and rain drawings from the MCA collection that Lee produced through methods of burning and soldering. By piercing the surface of paper with fire before leaving the paper outside to the elements, she creates mini constellations that evoke ideas of the broader cosmos. For Lee, materiality is very important because all materials, through our human experience, are already lined with “poetic meanings”. By drawing on these in-built associations, she creates works that offer us ways of looking at these relationships afresh. Lee’s ethos and working methods mark her art with a simultaneous sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity, and offer us a deep contemplation of existential questions.

In 2019, Lee travelled overseas nine times to work on international projects and exhibitions; in 2020,

COVID-19 has inevitably changed this pattern of work. While Lee has had to halt many of her planned international travels and exhibition opportunities, she is excited about the forthcoming exhibition at the MCA, which has been two years in the making. Now the artist reflects on what her recent downtime at home has afforded her: “I get to look over my shoulder and look at the past to gain a new perspective; it’s an incredible privilege to have this exhibition,” she shares. “The show crystallises my journey, and lets me understand where I have come from.”

At a time when our collective mood is marked by uncertainties, Lee’s works can offer us a reminder that there is a freedom and liberation in letting go of expectations, and in accepting impermanence and change as a guiding principle of the world.

### *Moon in a Dew Drop*

Lindy Lee

Museum of Contemporary Art  
(140 George St, The Rocks NSW)  
2 October—early 2021

[mca.com.au](http://mca.com.au)