During the mid-1980s Lindy Lee came to prominence with works that explored issues of appropriation, often including images culled from western art history, to focus on themes of authenticity, repetition and the copy. Progressively, however, as her interests shifted, Lee moved beyond her signature canonical imagery, alighting instead at a contemplation of self. Notably she created artworks that examined her place within the flow of generations and her family’s Chinese heritage. Then earlier this decade, a 2003 series of works inspired by the metaphysical black paintings of Ad Reinhardt foreshadowed a profoundly personal turning point, heralding Lee’s retreat from the external appearance of things.

In May 2008, as a satellite event of the inaugural Hong Kong Art Fair, Lee was included in a show celebrating the thirty-fifth anniversary of Australia’s diplomatic mission in China. ‘Process–Journey’, as the show was titled, was conceived by artist and curator Tony Scott of China Art Projects (CAP), an organisation established that year to foster creative exchange between China, Australia and the United Kingdom. The exhibition featured artists whose works and lives traversed both countries. Having been born in 1954 to parents who had only recently emigrated from Guangzhou to Brisbane, Lee was an obvious inclusion; moreover, she had undertaken numerous projects in China and her work had long been energised by questions around cultural inheritance. During the early part of her career, at a time when migration and multiculturalism were helping to shape a new Australian identity, Lee’s work constituted a personal perspective on the challenges, ambivalences and potentials that arose when people, families and indeed whole cultures were transposed across continents, generations and epochs. Yet such themes, however prominent in Lee’s oeuvre, are but one facet of a practice spanning three decades.

As a curator working for CAP, and in Hong Kong for ‘Process–Journey’, I met with Lee for the first time and a friendship soon began which was strengthened by our mutual travels through the island city. Seeking out a touring exhibition by British graffiti artist Banksy, we were bemused to discover that the gallery contained nothing but empty space. The significance of this was not so much that the show was not there but, rather, that the conversation we had been enjoying along the way had centred on the Buddhist concept of emptiness. An elusive proposition at best, emptiness in its doctrinal context is often explained through the related notions of impermanence and interconnectedness. This I came to realise was central to Lee’s multifaceted practice, to her way of being in the world and, above all, to her profound commitment to the discipline of Zen Buddhism. Reflecting now on her more recent artworks, which represent a period of considerable artistic maturity, it is this first meeting and the image of an ironically empty gallery that returns to me again and again.

I mention this anecdote not so much for personal reasons but rather to suggest that when it comes to artistic responses to the dharma, understanding in any literal sense might not always be the right place to start. Art historians, especially in the western tradition, are customarily predisposed to enlisting the social and cultural contexts in which artists might operate and in which their products come into being. When artworks are ‘read’ only in this way, their meanings are sometimes truncated or delimited as a result. In Lee’s case, it is quite easy to locate her installations and paper-based pieces within the study of what Zen practitioners call ‘koans’ – mind-bending riddles that are presented as a progressive series of questions by the master to the initiate. ‘Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not?’ is one such example and, depending on who you believe, so is the one about the sound of a tree falling in the forest. Zen followers must study these koans, though not in any academic sense but, rather, with a view to facilitating and awakening a condition of mind. Though such fixed coordinates as these are useful, especially where cultural specificity is concerned,
more abstract conditions should also be seen to apply. In Lee’s case, the concepts of interconnection and emptiness may be seen as subject, object and action within the work and integral to its process of becoming.

For Lee, who speaks quite readily of her intense and sudden spiritual conversion, well-known koans in which elemental forces are contemplated have been especially inspiring for her art. Those relating to fire, for example, have given rise to a recent series of paintings created with the aid of heat and fire. In artworks first developed during a residency in Beijing in 2005 and presented in 2008 at Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, pyrographic imagery, charred perforations and residual umber curlicues are apparent, the result of a novel type of palette requiring little more than a match. Rather than her signature vivid colours we are privy to something quite sobering. Recent pieces created in this manner include two large-scale black acrylic works on linen. *The universal record of the flame* and *The tenderness of rain*, both 2011, are large enough to envelop the viewer, containing our immediate field of vision with patterns that may be raindrops or vast swathes of stars.

These elemental works are an extension of those begun in 2009, specifically the series ‘Conflagrations From the End of Time’, which takes as its inspiration the Zen Buddhist ‘Kalpa Fire’ koan. Compositions burnt into existence are construed around either orderly or chaotic scenarios, and when seen together appear to suggest that these two apparent opposites are in fact mutually intertwined and contained. With its exquisite attention to materials, in particular the obvious mutability of the paper from which the works are made, the series directs our attention to the efforts that attend their coming into being; in the moment that something is created, something must also be lost. Causality and its infinite flow of effects is highlighted within these fragile sheets, foregrounded by the artist’s fiery method. Therefore images conjured in this manner are not merely a question of

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Conflagrations from the end of time (8), 2009
Paper, fire, Chinese ink, rain, 76 x 56 cm
Courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
Photograph Ivan Buljan

Conflagrations from the end of time (3), 2009
Paper, fire, 76 x 56 cm
Courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
Photograph Ivan Buljan

Conflagrations from the end of time (9), 2009
Paper, fire, 76 x 56 cm
Courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
Photograph Ivan Buljan

substance. Fire, after all, is chemistry and that energy which is released at the making of these works continues, endlessly coalescing and, as the sages say, divesting its forms over time.

For ‘The Secret World of the Shadow’, Lee’s February 2011 exhibition at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney, the artist articulated her own understanding of interconnectedness and emptiness as it relates to her recent arts practice:

In Buddhist cosmology the universe is likened to an infinite net – the net of Indra. In each knot of the net is a jewel, which is a light perfect in itself. However that light is made from the reflections of every other jewel in the universe: existence is simultaneously singular and absolutely dependent on interconnection ... [The fire paintings] invoke this interconnection through the concentric and complex interrelationship of the circles – circles within circles, wheels of life turning within greater wheels. ¹

Akin to after-impressions or the echo of some primordial fire, Lee’s recent imagery is arresting, though perhaps unintentionally slow to impart its secrets. These are contemplative objects, not singular visual statements, and their meaning emerges from sustained meditation. There are spatial depths to be seen: perspective they run to infinity, yet we are equally conscious of their two-dimensional fragility, being punctured by circular holes in a manner that recalls Lucio Fontana’s pierced paintings of the 1950s.

Lee, of course, is not the first artist to use fire as a creative element. In recent times Chinese contemporary Cai Guo-Qiang has employed spectacle to astound audiences with his pyrotechnic works. Cai, however, draws inspiration from mythic sources, fire being one of the creative and destructive elements in Chinese mythology. In contrast, we can locate Lee’s practice within a long and complex tradition of Zen-inspired artists. To give but one example, water and fire were also requisite mediums for the reflective poetry of Japanese nun Otagaki Reinetsu (1791–1875), an artist whose calligraphic scrolls and ceramic forms featured in the 2007–08 National Gallery of Australia touring show ‘Black Robe, White Mist’.

While it is tempting to spend time pondering the meanings of such arcane sentiments, Buddhism would be a sadly barren affair if not for its overarching focus on compassion today, a motivation that sustains Lee’s current approach:

In Buddhism compassion is not only kindness but also the courage to hold with tenderness all that exists whether it is joyful or sorrowful. The fire used in these works alludes to the arduity and openness required to walk a path of compassion.²

Lee’s artist statement – revealing a melding of feeling, ideas and medium – helps settle her work within the tender rigour of a heartfelt spiritual practice. While the belief system of Buddhism is not especially prominent in Australia’s national story, nor for that matter overly conspicuous in more than a handful of our contemporary artists, it remains sustaining and true for Lindy Lee. Viewing Lee’s oeuvre through the philosophical prism from which it is inspired adds considerable depth to our understanding. Where Lee’s previous work has drawn on western art, both historically and from within the modern era, it was largely a creative synthesis. In fact the artist who for so long has focused on identity and belonging, on culture and the tensions of living through flux, has entered her own compelling new phase. Still with that empty art gallery in mind, I look forward to her next illuminated act.

¹ The ‘Kalpa Fire’ kōan can be found in The Blue Cliff Record, (c. 1255 CE), as written by the Chinese master Yuashin Keiin. See The Blue Cliff Record, Case 290: Daizai and the ‘Kalpa Fire’.
³ ibid.
⁴ Australian artists such as Sue Ford (1943–2009), Peter Tyn dall, Nell and Tim Johnson have adopted Buddhism, though their work is only occasionally examined in its terms.