

# ARTnews

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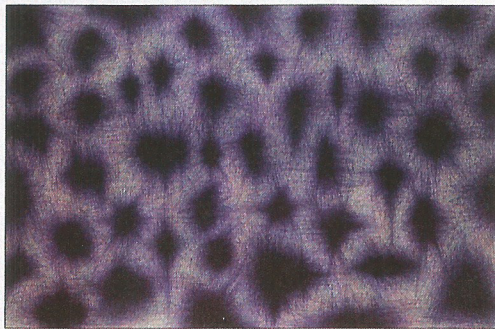
## ARTTALK

### A Few Good Pens

The only time **Il Lee** uses a pencil is for his signature. For a quarter century, the South Korean-born artist has been coaxing massive webs of line from disposable ballpoint pens. In an aggressive twist on the more reserved ink traditions of his heritage, Lee builds up his “paint” so thickly that the paper warps. He smooths it by spraying the back with water and taping it facedown, a technique he borrowed from printmaking. When the tape peels up, Lee smacks it into place. “I am always holding the spoon,” he says, naming his weapon of choice.

For his solo show “Ball-

point Drawings,” on view at the Queens Museum of Art through the 30th of this month, Lee created his largest



Il Lee's ballpoint-on-canvas *BL-071*, 2006.

work yet: *BL-090*, a 5-by-50-foot installation that wraps around a curved wall. He devoted three weeks—and 600 blue Paper Mates—to scrawling out the dark thickets of ink, which curl across the paper and bunch up like a

snake coming to a sudden halt.

Despite the strong graphic structure of his works, in which rich hard edges abut razor-thin cilia and dense hair balls, Lee explains that he begins with gestures, not ideas. “Premeditating, that’s not my way,” he says. “I am just ready to paint and”—he makes a charging motion with his fist—“attack right away!” When the battle is over, he keeps all

the carcasses: ten years’ worth of spent pens had accumulated in his Brooklyn studio until he shipped crates of them to the San Jose Museum of Art for a retrospective of his work earlier this year. Approximately 3,000 were

packed into a Plexiglas box and displayed alongside a clump of black pens that Lee had melted together.

He melts ink, too—with his hand. As he grips the pen, the ink heats up and flows more freely. “In wintertime I have to dump the ballpoint pens into warm water,” Lee says.

His other works on view at the Queens Museum include 7-by-12-foot canvases and a group of 77 small drawings clustered on one wall. But the exhibition’s star is the 50-foot installation, which guest curator **Joanna Kleinberg** had hung high for visibility—and its own safety. “Earlier it was hanging lower, and some students came by and got out their pens,” says Kleinberg. “We were like, ‘Oh, no! Put those away.’”

—Lamar Clarkson