singapore biennale 2025

pure intention

ARTIST FOLIO
(For Educators)

Seung-taek Lee

SECONDARY: Visual Arts History Geography

THE ARTIST

- Seung-taek Lee is a pioneering figure in Korean contemporary art.
- His multidisciplinary practice spans sculpture, painting, performance, photography and environmental works, often using humble materials such as rope, stones, hanji or rice paper and tree branches to engage natural elements like wind, fire, water and smoke.
- Rooted in Korean shamanistic traditions yet resonating with global avant-garde movements, his work questions what defines art and challenges social norms. The term avant-garde refers to the innovative and experimental artistic art movement that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
- His works are in major collections, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; M+, Hong Kong; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea; and the Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney.

THE ARTWORK

Installation view of Seung-taek Lee's *Earth Play* (1989), as part of Singapore Biennale 2025: *pure intention*. Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum.

Earth Play
1989
Acrylic on PVC balloon
Collection of Korea Advanced Institute of Science & Technology (KAIST)

THE ARTWORK

- In his artistic career, Lee challenges the idea of art, inverting objects, his worldviews and pushes the boundaries of artmaking by using unconventional materials.

- Developed from his experimental practice, *Earth Play* reflects a broader shift in contemporary art away from permanent objects and toward process, audience participation and ecological awareness.

- Created during a crucial transition phase in South Korea marked by rapid industrialisation, *Earth Play* quietly questions ideas of progress by introducing ecological vulnerability.

- *Earth Play* is composed of a large PVC (polyvinyl chloride) balloon painted to resemble the Earth. This artwork is inspired by satellite images taken in the late 1960s and 1970s that continue to shape the public perception of Earth and our relationship with it.

- The choice of PVC, a petrochemical plastic, creates a contradiction. The Earth appears natural, yet is made from an industrial material, echoing modern environmental dilemmas.

- Lee makes *Earth Play* inflatable, light and unstable. The balloon can be rolled, pushed and carried. This reflects how Earth is shaped by natural forces like the human touch, reinforcing the idea that the earth is dynamic and vulnerable, rather than fixed and permanent.

- *Earth Play* treats play as a serious method of engagement where the entire world is reduced to a toy. Through movements like rolling and lifting, participants experience environmental responsibility not as abstract information, but as something felt in the body and as shared responsibility.

- *The Earth Performance* series (1989 – 96) has travelled around the globe, across different national borders such as China, Germany and Japan. By rolling this same "Earth", Lee highlights how we all share the same ground, unconfined by geography and politics. As part of the Singapore Biennale, this artwork is hosted at National Gallery Singapore and will have a performance activation during “March On 2026" as organised by the Esplanade.

- The artwork continues to physically change, stains and marks on the balloon becoming part of the artwork itself. These traces record movement, touch and repeated action, revealing how human contact and time leave visible imprints.

THE ARTWORK

DID YOU KNOW?

- "The Blue Marble" is a series of photographs that inspired the painting of Earth on the balloon. These images were captured by the Apollo 17 mission crew in 1972 and were monumental in shaping societal perspectives of planet Earth. It was the first time Earth was showcased as a fully formed globe that floated in space, and was also the first-time humans were able to capture the entire Earth's globe in full illumination.

- His eco-aesthetic grew in the 1980s, leading to artworks like the "Greening Campaign" series, which connected art to environmental care and restoration.

- "Earth Play" is part of a broader series of performances in the late 1980s and 1990s that include "Earth Performance" and "Resting Earth". These interactive performances invited participants to physically interact with large Earth balloons to highlight the fragility of our planet.

- Lee's art has been re-enacted and performed internationally, including an Earth Day-inspired event that invited audience engagement with his Earth-shaped forms.

- Lee's work bridges global art movements and Korean traditions, reflecting his belief that the local can be global.

ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS

PRE-VISIT:

Imaginative Play

While the Earth balloon cannot be physically moved beyond performances, it can be explored through the imagination.

- Picture yourself rolling it, lifting it or passing it to someone else. Would it feel light, heavy or wobbly?
- Imagine how you and others would work together to move it safely.
- Notice how playful it feels to think about interacting with the Earth and how this method of play helps you to understand care and responsibility.

Elements

Lee works with natural forces like wind, fire, water and earth, instead of just traditional materials like stone or metal.

- Why would an artist choose to work with materials they cannot fully control?
- How does using air, gravity or movement shape what the artwork can become?
- Does giving up control change what art can do or what it can teach us?
- Imagine how these invisible elements act on the Earth balloon and shape it over time. How might each of these elements leave visible traces or marks on its surface?

Environmental Care

Think about an environmental issue in your own community, such as pollution, extreme weather or waste.

- How could artworks such as *Earth Play* help people notice it in a new way?
- Do you think imagining, touching or moving a model of the Earth could change how people feel about these issues? Why do you think so?

ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS

DURING YOUR VISIT:

As you view *Earth Play* in National Gallery Singapore, notice how you are standing in front of a giant inflatable Earth. The Earth balloon is constantly changing.

When activated through performance, the Earth balloon becomes something that can move, shift and be shaped by the forces around it.

Both manners of display reflect how our Earth is a living and breathing thing that is always changing.

Look closely at the surface

- Examine the surface of the Earth balloon.
- Where do you see dips or uneven areas?
- Do they remind you of mountain ranges, fault lines or even scars?

The invisible

Earth Play is a type of participatory performance art where the globe is shaped in real-time by the audience, changing with every movement as it travels through space:

- The air inside it, keeping it inflated
- Gravity pulling it downward
- Wind or surrounding movement
- Which force would feel strongest in this moment? How can you tell?

Performance and participation

Earth Play is a form of performance art where live action and audience participation shape the work. It changes through movement and interaction.

- If you had a chance to roll “Earth” through different parts of Singapore, where would you roll it to, and why?

ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS

POST-VISIT:

Earth Play is an allegorical artwork that uses both visuals and action to express the complex relationship between the Earth and humans.

View the video *Seung-Taek Lee "The earth performance" in Gallery Hyundai, Seoul:*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxoxkctpSak.

In the space below, discuss what are three literal actions and their possible metaphorical meanings.

FIND OUT MORE:

ARTIST

- *Singapore Biennale - Artist Profile*

https://singaporebiennale.org/participants/seung-taek-lee

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *March on 2026 - Esplanade.* n.d. https://www.esplanade.com/marchon
- Lee, Seung-taek. *2023. Earth Performance Reenactment. Canalprojects.org. 2023.* https://www.canalprojects.org/programs/the-earth-performance-reenactment
- Lee, Seung-taek. *2023. Artist Profile: Seung-taek Lee. Canalprojects.org. 2023. Lee, Seung-taek. 2023*. Earth Performance Reenactment. Canalprojects.org.
- Mediacity Seoul. *2022. Greening Campaign Series by Lee Seung-taek. Mediacityseoul.kr. 2022.* https://mediacityseoul.kr/en/yesterday/artworks/greening-campaign
- Lee, Sook-Kyung. 2014. *Seung-Taek Lee*. Frieze, September 16, 2014. https://www.frieze.com/article/seung-taek-lee.

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