

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE | REAL AWARENESS



LESTER LEE



In his latest series, Lee's work delves into the implications of machines becoming more human-like, questioning the boundaries between artificial and real, and between intelligence and awareness. He explores the impact of digitalisation on various aspects of our lives, including social dynamics, personal authenticity, political affiliations, and our sense of security. He uses art to navigate the complexities of the digital revolution, particularly focusing on the rapid development of technologies like artificial intelligence. A recurring motif in this series is the "glitch," visually represented as random groups of small, coloured blocks, symbolising the unexpected problems or faults that arise in technology, disrupting its expected functioning.

Drawing from a blends of Eastern philosophical ideals and Western influences, Lee's art transcends mere aestheticism, offering a profound meditation on the human condition in the digital age. Lee's *Artificial Intelligence I Real Awareness* navigates the complexities of the digital age and how technology shapes our lives and redefines our understanding of the human experience. In a world increasingly defined by digital interconnectedness, his art serves as a beacon of mindfulness, inviting viewers to confront the challenges and opportunities of living in an age of unprecedented technological change. As we manoeuvre the uncertain waters of the digital revolution, Lee's art reminds us of the enduring power of creativity to illuminate the path forward and to forge deeper connections with ourselves and the world around us.



Trapped
2024
Acrylic & Graphite on Canvas
122 x 152 cm



The history of Artificial Intelligence (AI) dates back to 1950 when Alan Turing introduced the Turing test as a criterion for machine intelligence. Since then, AI has become pervasive in all technologies, influencing our daily lives in ways we may not always be aware of. If you have ever said “Hey, Siri,” used predictive text, or utilised auto-correct on your smartphone keyboard, you have used AI. Today, we trust AI with our lives through antilock braking in cars and autopilots in planes.

In his painting *Trapped*, Lee raises questions about what constitutes intelligence: is it the smartphone that stores numbers and addresses, or the person who recalls them for a (distorted) payphone call? Placing these elements against a yellow backdrop encourages viewers to reconsider the concepts of light and knowledge. Yellow often evokes strong emotions linked to experiences like watching the sunrise and sunset. Transitioning to a grey background flanked by blue, the piece prompts reflections on calmness, stability, truth, coldness, uncaring, sadness, fear, uncertainty, and doubt. In the context of love scam conversations depicted, who ultimately possesses awareness? Lee's inclusion of a clock could be interpreted as a commentary on our excessive time spent on digital devices. Alternatively, it may challenge us to consider how our perspectives evolve over time.



Unresolved Gathering
2024
Acrylic & Graphite on Canvas
122 x 152 cm

In *Unresolved Gathering*, Lee highlights the differences between generations, symbolised by the young gaming generation, the midlife conversations in a coffeeshop, and the sturdy rosewood chair from years past. He questions whether the generation gaps are exacerbated by the digital divide, or if they are merely perceived to be larger than they truly are. Lee prompts viewers to reflect on the last time they performed certain tasks, such as dropping off a cheque at the bank, visiting a travel agency to book a trip, or picking up video tapes or DVDs for a movie night. These examples illustrate how technological advancements have made life easier for people of all ages. Lee suggests that the value of technology lies in its ability to improve quality of life, regardless of generation. The fragmented parts of the canvas in his artwork symbolise the human brain's adaptability, capable of coming together despite differences, much like the diverse generations in society.





K1
2024
Inkjet Print, Acrylic & Charcoal on Canvas
61 x 77 cm



P2
2024
Inkjet Print, Acrylic & Charcoal on Canvas
61 x 77 cm



X3

2024

Inkjet Print, Acrylic & Charcoal on Canvas
61 x 77cm



T4

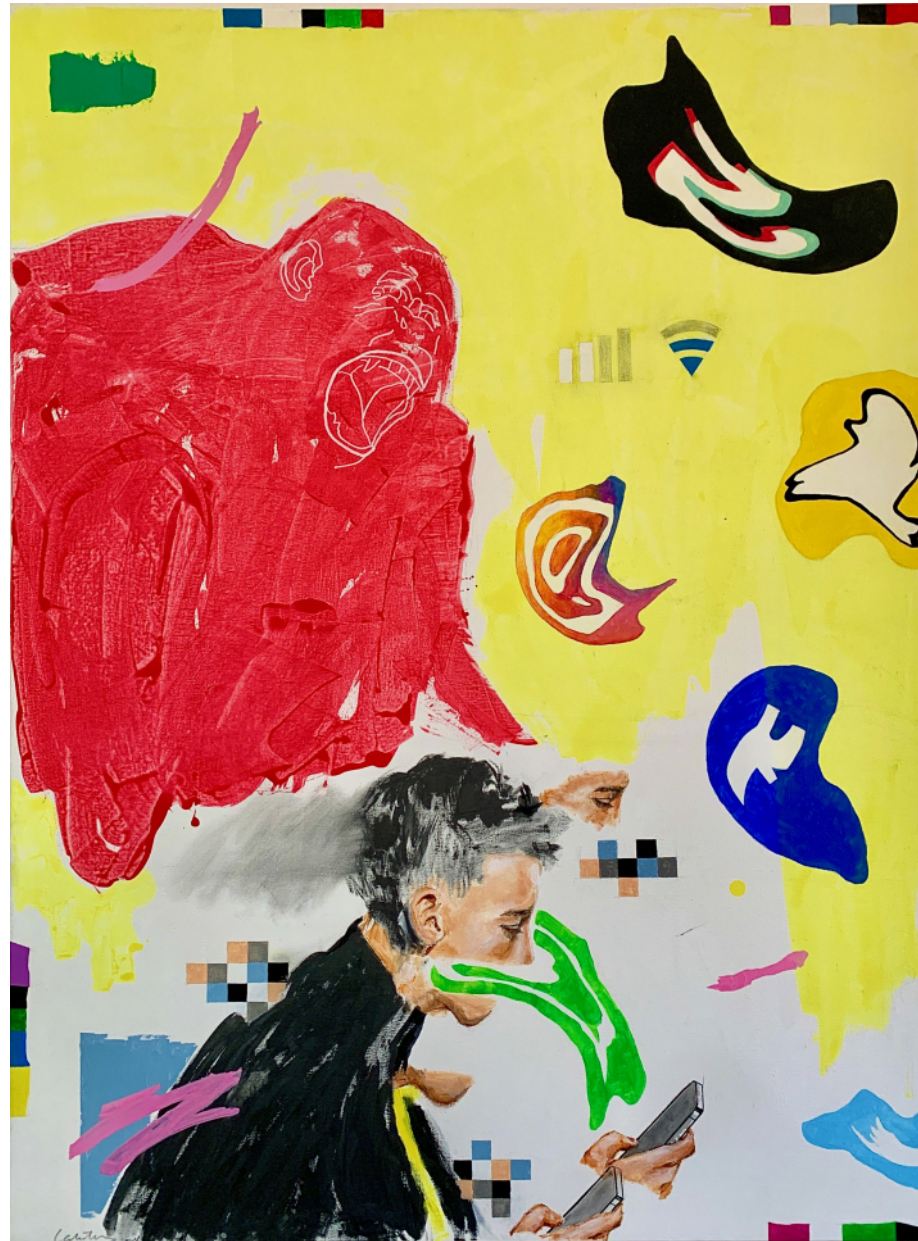
2024

Inkjet Print, Acrylic & Charcoal on Canvas
61 x 77 cm



In *K1/P2/X3/T4* by Lee, our attention is immediately captured by the words "I love AI," which are mirrored and upside down. The artwork features world leaders depicted with their signature hand gestures, their faces obscured by strips of maps of their countries. This portrayal suggests that the adoption of AI is not merely a technological decision but also encompasses economic, social, ethical, and potentially political considerations. The artwork prompts viewers to consider the main factors that influence leaders when adopting AI. Are their decisions driven by the interests of their country or the political party they represent? To prevent AI from being trained with biases or hallucinating, there is increasing pressure on big tech companies to establish guardrails based on principles of transparency, fairness, accountability, and privacy. The artwork also raises questions about holding human leaders to similar standards. How much are they accountable for ensuring that AI is used responsibly and ethically?

The Face of Digital Failure
2024
Acrylic & Graphite on Canvas
91 x 122 cm



In *The Face of Digital Failure*, Lee delves deeper into the impact of social media platforms beyond time spent on digital devices. He questions whether increased connectivity on these platforms leads to heightened feelings of loneliness and depression, represented metaphorically by a grey cloud over the mind. Additionally, Lee questions whether certain online comments and behaviors can provoke intense emotional responses, likening them to transforming into a red raging gorilla. The distortion of social media logos such as Tik-tok, Slack, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter suggests a confused and unstable state of mind. The relatively empty yellow and white background, with only a few connectivity icons, amplifies the conflicting emotions experienced by the figure in the artwork.





Dopamine Nation, 2024, Acrylic & Graphite on Canvas, 320 x 152 cm (122 x 152 cm x 2 + 76 x 152 cm x 1)



Despite the name, AI is more about predicting probabilities than actual intelligence.

Machine learning as in artificial intelligence, is different from the plasticity of the human brain.

"Imagine a world in which people focus on activities that are personally meaningful to them, like art."

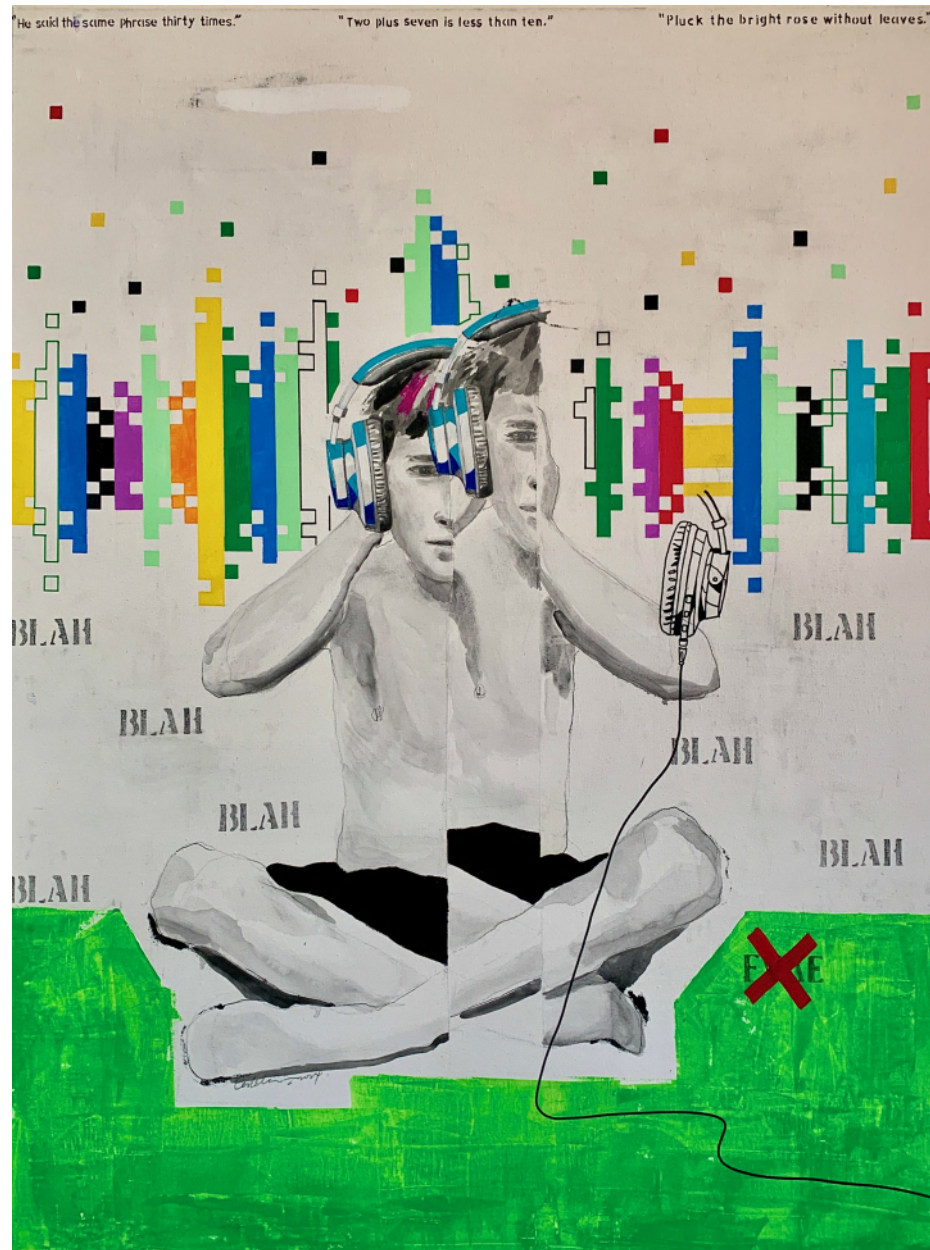
- Oren Etzioni, CEO, Allen Institute of Artificial Intelligence

"I am very much influenced by eastern philosophy such as Zen Buddhism. My works predominantly are reflections of our everyday life situations, the environment and happenings around me. They are observed, filtered and recomposed in a fragmented yet cohesive manner on canvas. I work intuitively and spontaneously, in between representation and abstraction. Each series of images is unique and I have no established process. I do not do preliminary sketches as every idea is worked out in my mind. I search for images around me and on the internet and work progressively as I go along; I let the painting tell me when to stop!"

- Artist Lester Lee

See No Evil (3+1)
2024
Acrylic & Graphite on Canvas
91 x 122 cm





Hear No Evil (3+1)

2024

Acrylic & Graphite on Canvas

91 x 122 cm

Say No Evil (3+1)
2024
Acrylic & Graphite on Canvas
91 x 122 cm





Do No Evil (3+1)

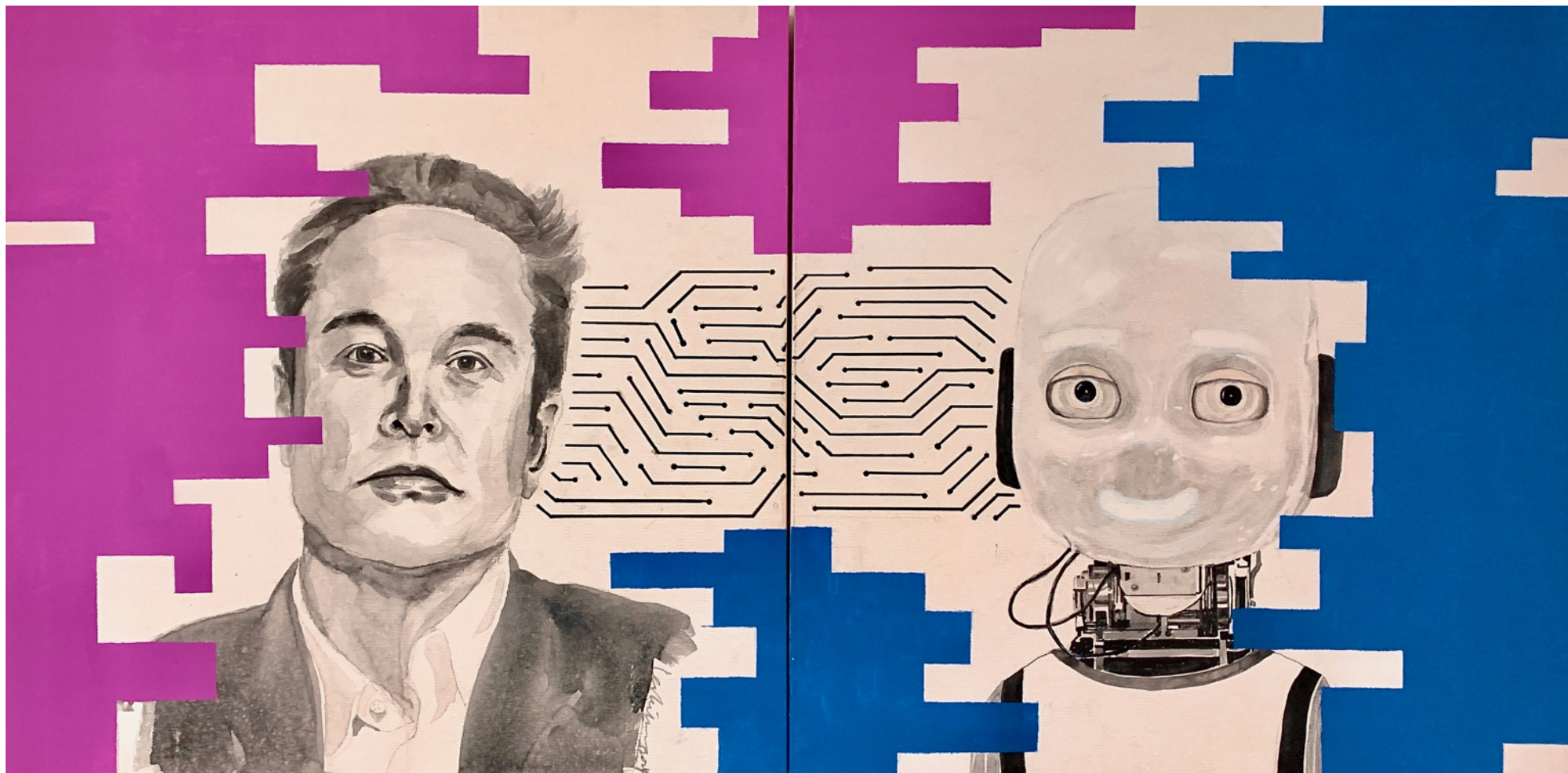
2024

Acrylic & Graphite on Canvas

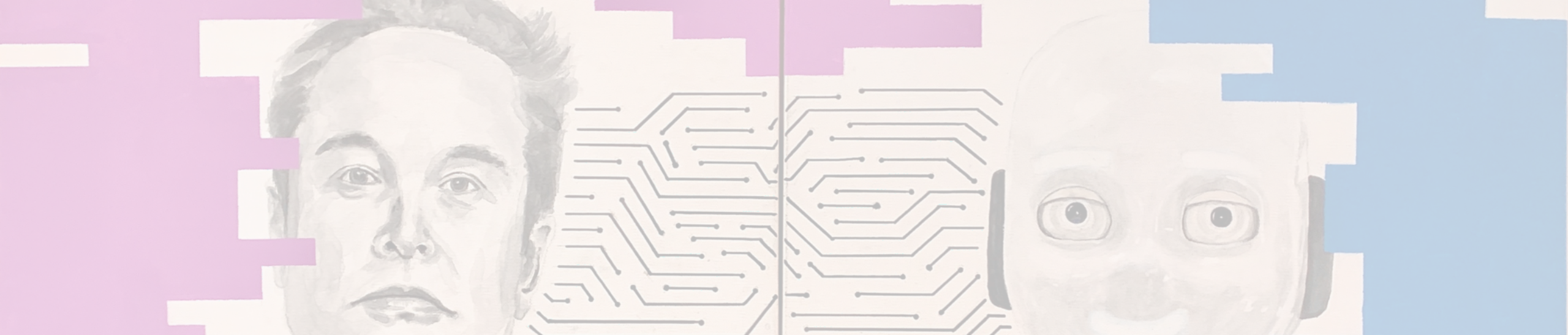
91 x 122 cm



Similar to the Hippocratic Oath, which compels doctors to prioritise "First, do no harm," Lee's quadtych of four paintings *See No Evil / Hear No Evil / Say No Evil / Do No Evil* resonates with the Confucian ideal of proper conduct "Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety; make no movement which is contrary to propriety" (非禮勿視, 非禮勿聽, 非禮勿言, 非禮勿動). The doctor's oath continues, "*...into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm...*" Given the immense power that technology wields in the present and foreseeable future, should those who hold its reins be bound by a similar ethical framework and code of conduct?



Technological Singularity, 2024, Acrylic & Graphite on Canvas, 102 x 51 cm (51 x 51 cm x 2)



The concept of technological singularity represents a theoretical future moment in time when technological advancement becomes uncontrollable and irreversible, leading to unforeseeable outcomes for human society. Lee's diptych painting *Technological Singularity* visually explores this idea. The integrated circuits at its centre calls to mind Moore's Law, which describes the exponential growth of computing technology from integrated circuits, tracing back through transistors, vacuum tubes, and electromechanical computers. This progression suggests that the next phase could be the exponential growth of superhuman intelligence, often cited as a key factor in the predicted arrival of the technological singularity.

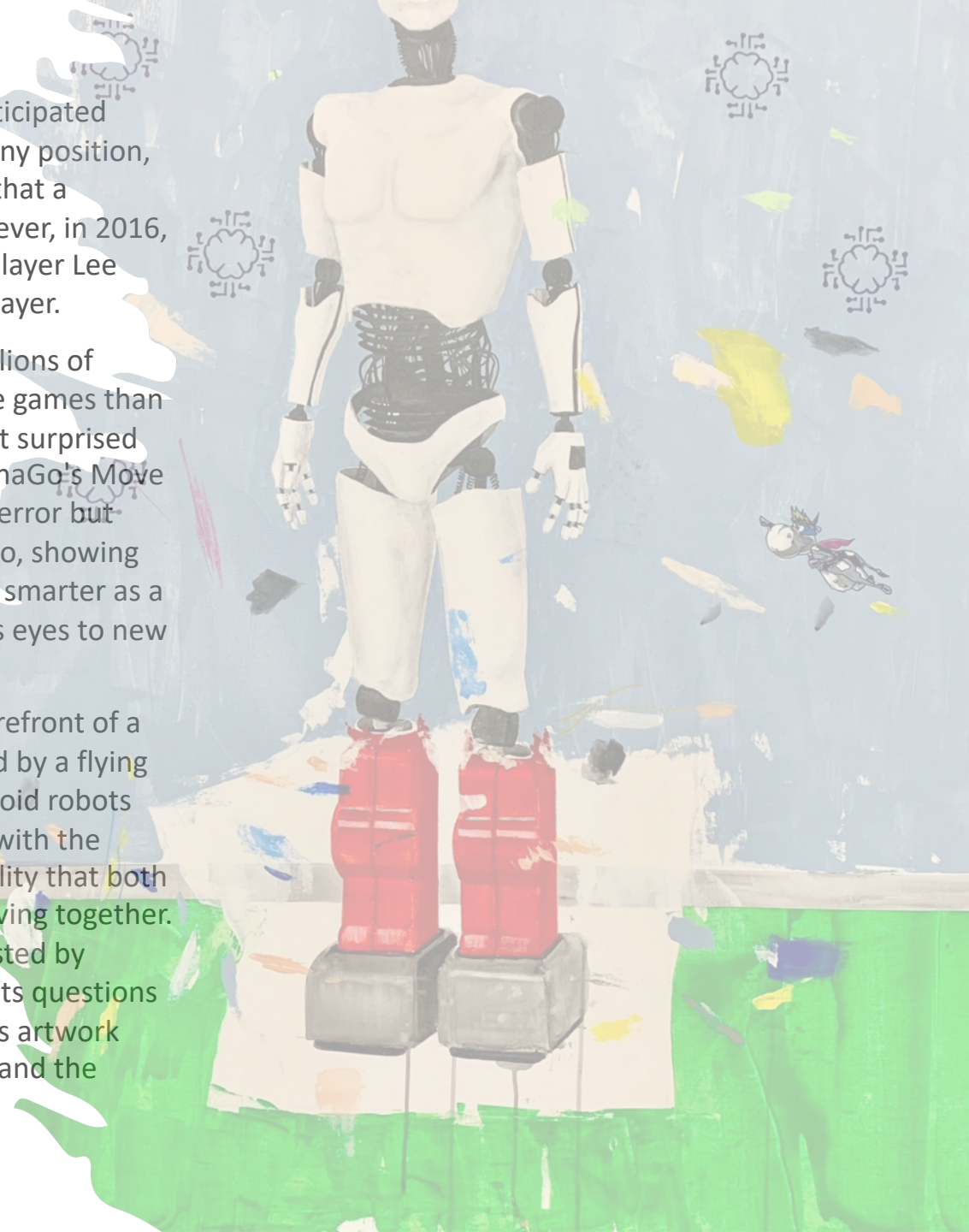
The painting portrays two key elements flanking the integrated circuits: an intelligent humanoid machine and a prominent human technological visionary (who made progress in technologies covering spaceflight services, electric vehicles, solar energy, AI research, neurotechnology and social media). This juxtaposition invites viewers to contemplate the potential outcomes of a technological singularity. Will it be the amplified intelligence of humans through methods like bioengineering, genetic engineering, cognitive enhancement drugs, and direct brain–computer interfaces, or will it be the result of upgradable artificial intelligence undergoing a positive feedback loop of self-improvement, ultimately leading to a superintelligence surpassing human capabilities?

The artwork prompts viewers to consider the implications of these possibilities. Would the dominant intelligence in a singularity event be an amplified human or a superintelligent machine? Physicist Stephen Hawking further questions: does it matter if machines achieve true intelligence, or is something resembling intelligence sufficient if the outcome is the same? These questions encourage reflection on the potential future of technology and its impact on humanity.

In 1997, IBM's Deep Blue made history by defeating Garry Kasparov in a highly anticipated chess rematch. Critics noted that chess involves fixed moves for each piece from any position, allowing a machine to calculate permutations faster than a human. Some argued that a machine could never beat a human in the game of Go (also known as *weiqi*). However, in 2016, Google DeepMind's AlphaGo proved them wrong by defeating the legendary Go player Lee Sedol, who had won 18 world titles and was widely regarded as the greatest Go player.

Unlike traditional rule-based programs, AlphaGo learned to play Go by playing millions of games against itself. Its superiority over humans came from its ability to play more games than any human could in a lifetime. AlphaGo even exhibited creativity, using moves that surprised Go masters and opened up new possibilities in the game. One such move was AlphaGo's Move 37 in Game 2 of the match against Lee Sedol, which initially seemed like a system error but turned out to be the winning move. In Game 4, Sedol's Move 78 surprised AlphaGo, showing that the machine did not anticipate such a move. Both players became better and smarter as a result of their interaction, with Sedol acknowledging that AlphaGo had opened his eyes to new ways of playing.

For Good, or For Bad, Lee presents a striking image of a humanoid robot at the forefront of a canvas adorned with cloud icons intertwined with electrical circuitry, accompanied by a flying hero donkey. Lee challenges viewers to consider the potential evolution of humanoid robots and its implications. Is this evolution beneficial or detrimental? Drawing parallels with the transformative interaction between AlphaGo and Lee Sedol, Lee raises the possibility that both humans and AI could mutually benefit from their coexistence, evolving and improving together. This prompts contemplation on the readiness for AI-human coexistence, as suggested by collaborative names given to Microsoft's CoPilot and Google's Gemini. This prompts questions about whether we are delegating too much decision-making to AI too hastily. Lee's artwork invites viewers to reflect on whether their perspective on AI-human relationships and the impact of AI on society will change over time.





For Good, or for Bad?
2023
Acrylic & Graphic on Canvas
122 x 152 cm



Identity
2023
Acrylic & Graphic on Canvas
122 x 152 cm

About the artist

Lester Lee is a contemporary interdisciplinary artist based in Singapore and a three-times award winner of the prestigious UOB Painting of the Year competition.

2022 Painting of the Year Award (Established Artist category)

41st UOB Painting of the Year, Singapore

A Painting of Nothing and Everything – where he painted without preconceived ideas or concepts, relying on mindfulness to capture and compose images on canvas. The “glitch” element from his previous work gained prominence in this piece, intertwining with blocks of colours and images.

2021 Gold Award (Established Artist Category)

40th UOB Painting of the Year, Singapore

Childhood – in soluble graphite and a “glitch” element (as a response to the ever-growing digitalisation and the pervasive influence of technology on daily life).

2013 Gold Award (Established Artist Category)

32nd UOB Painting of the Year, Singapore

Digital Vertigo – a painting with grey-dominant scheme and contrasting hues.

Lester Lee is a three-time award winner of the prestigious UOB Painting of the Year competition. Hailing from Singapore, Lee's artistic journey has been shaped by a diverse array of influences, ranging from his formal training in watercolour under esteemed mentors to his transformative experiences studying contemporary practice at the University of Huddersfield. Throughout his artistic odyssey, Lee has demonstrated a commitment to pushing the boundaries of artistic expression, embracing a multiplicity of mediums and techniques in his quest to capture the essence of the human experience in the digital age. From performance art to installation and sculpture, he has continually expanded the horizons of his practice, blurring the lines between traditional and contemporary modes of artistic creation. In doing so, Lee has forged a distinctive artistic voice that resonates with audiences across cultural and geographical boundaries, transcending the confines of conventional artistic categorisations and inviting viewers to embark on a journey of introspection and discovery.

About the curator

Theresa Tan is a member of the UK's Association for Art History. She holds a Bachelor of Science (Computer and Information Sciences) from National University of Singapore and Master of Arts in Asian Art Histories (Distinction) from Goldsmiths, University of London.

Outside of her interest in art history, Tan's day job to help clients with their digital transformation, including experimenting and implementing artificial intelligence (AI) projects. Theresa Tan is on Microsoft Copilot early partner global program and Google DuetAI early access.

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