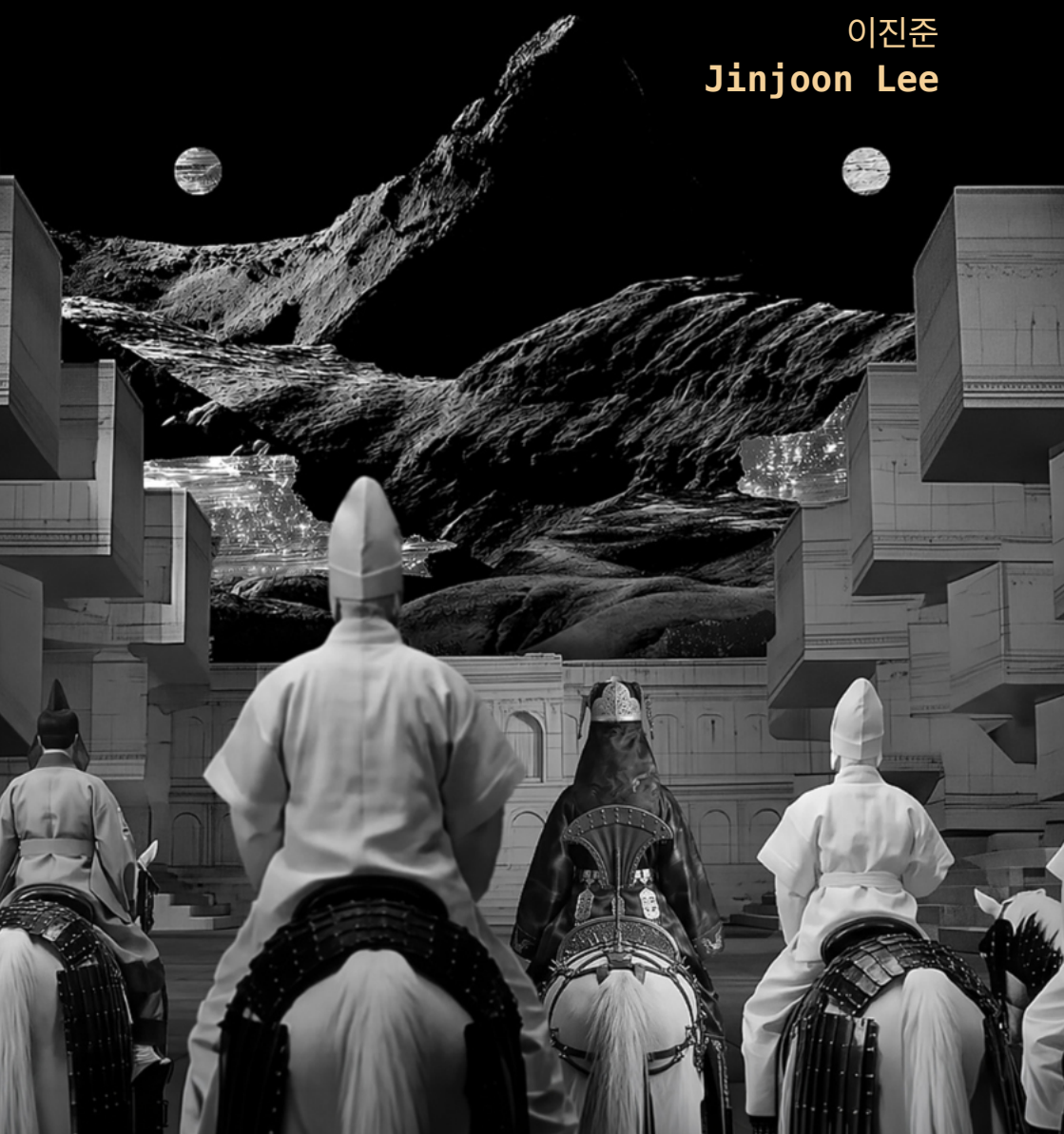
THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

이진준
Jinjoon Lee



THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

The Sacred Mountain

A sansui reincarnated nine times,
passed back and forth between hand and machine,
driftwood that has come through fire,
the connectome of a fruit fly rendered as sound,
a childhood mountain reassembled in points,
a diary of breath in sumi ink,
a short film generated with AI.

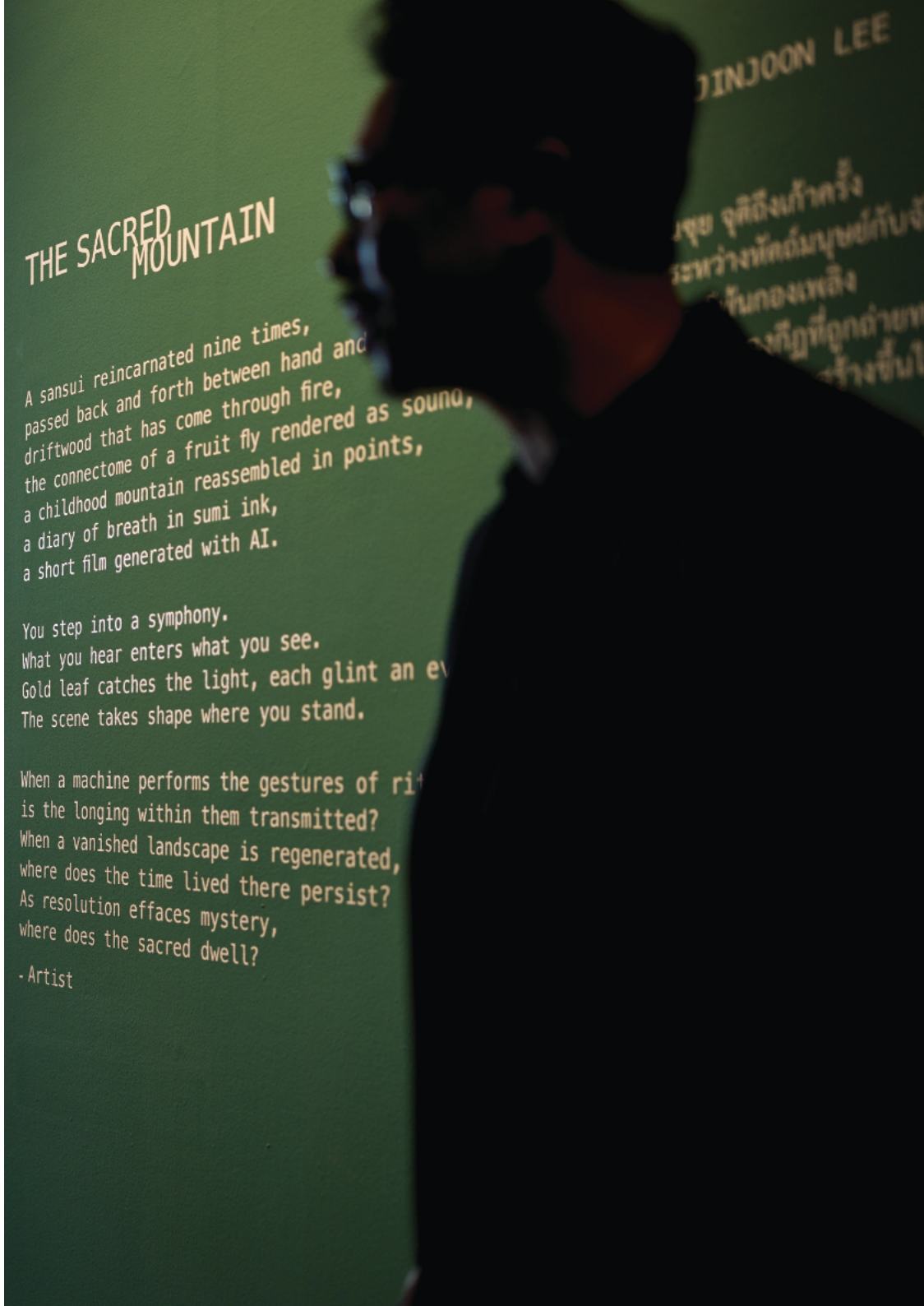
You step into a symphony.
What you hear enters what you see.
Gold leaf catches the light, each glint an event.
The scene takes shape where you stand.

When a machine performs the gestures of ritual,
is the longing within them transmitted?
When a vanished landscape is regenerated,
where does the time lived there persist?
As resolution effaces mystery,
where does the sacred dwell?

Artist

이진준

Jinjoon Lee







The Sacred Mountain

2026
Single-channel 4K video and sound, black and white, AI assisted short film
34 min
Edition of 1/5 + 2 AP

The route of the pilgrimage follows the sixteenth-century Fuji Pilgrimage Mandala of Japan's Muromachi period, which depicts the pilgrim's way up Mount Fuji. But the pilgrims in this film are not human. A figure with a veiled face dismounts from a white horse and climbs the stairs. It drinks the mountain reflected in a teacup, breaks the cup and reads the cracks. It passes through a hall of mirrors and between totem poles; masked figures dance beneath the stars. They enter the water, beat drums, and antlered figures offer rites before a landscape screen.

Arrows are shot, and the trees grow larger at their wounds, until every tree is felled, piled and burned. Figures carrying charred driftwood climb a snow-covered peak. At the summit wait a snake, a rooster and a pig: the three beasts that bite each other's tails at the centre of the Wheel of Life, greed, hatred and delusion. The mountain erupts, the mountain burns, and the stage on which the mountain was built burns with its lights. The last image is the burning mountain reflected in water.

The movements of the beings in the film are subtly awkward. Bowing, dancing, drumming, climbing: every motion is calculated, and each movement looks different but is in fact the same motion repeated. The individual differences that belong to humans disappear, and in these bodies that perform every human rite without omission, only the plausibility stands exposed.

An AI-generated image holds two things at once: the ability to make anything look plausible, and a strangeness that sits slightly off within that plausibility. The film exposes both instead of hiding them.

Scenes almost connect and do not; the edges of the stage, the lighting rigs and the camera rails are left visible, as in a record of a performance; and the black and white strips away the gloss, leaving only form, light and strangeness. The film draws on Parajanov, who told a whole life in frontal tableaux (The Color of Pomegranates, 1969); on Jodorowsky, who revealed the camera at the end of the pilgrimage (The Holy Mountain, 1973); on Kurosawa, who joined scenes by the logic of dreams (Dreams, 1990); and on Méliès, who made the first illusions the year after cinema was born (The House of the Devil, 1896). In the history of cinema, the first special effects were tricks the audience watched knowing they were tricks.



Does reverence require a body? Can that which does not die bow its head before death? When a bodiless being kneels before a mountain, is it a rite or an imitation? Is a being without the three poisons of Buddhism, the greed, hatred and delusion that the pig, the snake and the rooster stand for, liberated, or was it never a sentient being at all? Reverence belongs to those who have something to lose. When a machine performs a human rite again, is the longing within it carried over as well? The film does not answer; it watches until the mountain has burned to the end. The event repeats. But as on a morning after a night of flicking through short videos, we may have seen a great deal and yet not truly watched a single scene.













The Sacred Mountain No.1–3

2026
Acrylic, chalk and gold leaf on charred plywood
162 × 130 × 3.8 cm



The Sacred Mountain No. 1, 2026

The surface of the plywood was burned with fire, then painted over again in black. The scorched marks lie hidden beneath the paint, yet the charred grain of the wood remains as a relief under the black surface. On this ground the mountains were drawn in white chalk and acrylic, and gold leaf was laid over them. Ridges and rocks, spray and snow-covered slopes rise in white lines and planes, while the sky and the waterways are covered in gold. A sun and a moon hang on either side, the mountain stands beneath them, and at the heart of the mountain is a dam. Water spills over the concrete sluice gates and flows down as a river of gold.

Painting landscapes in gold on a black ground is an old method of traditional East Asian painting. So is raising the sun, the moon and five peaks behind the seat of a king. In that tradition the mountain was not something seen but something built. These paintings build a tunnel, a dam and a breakwater at the heart of that mountain. Boring through the mountain, holding back the water, pushing away the waves: the artificial force of technology that goes against nature.





The Sacred Mountain No. 2, 2026

Fire passes first, black covers it, and the painting comes on top. What has burned cannot be undone, does not disappear when covered over, and gold does not burn. Gold leaf is not light but a surface that gives light back, so it lights up and dims each time the viewer moves. Not illuminating the mountain in full, but returning only a little of it from the dark. That is how the sacred mountain is left.

The Sacred Mountain No. 3, 2026





Dragon Horse Mountain

2026
Single-channel 4K video, colour, sound
12 min
Edition of 5 + 2 AP for English version
Edition of 1 + 1 AP for Special Thai version

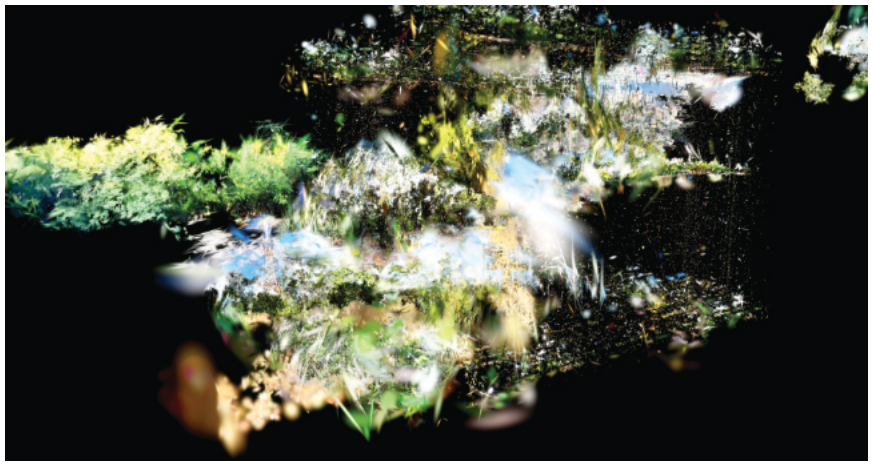
The mountain was red as blood.

Our house stood beneath its sparsely wooded slopes. Those who lived below it carried a persistent fear that one day heavy rain would bring the bare earth crashing down over the village. Even to a child, it looked like a great wounded beast, stripped bare and crouching. Whenever they could, the adults took the neighbourhood children by the hand and climbed the mountain to plant saplings. For the children it was play; for the adults, a sacred rite to appease the mountain's anger. It was called Dragon Horse Mountain, a sacred name joining the mythical dragon with the running horse. Here, in the thirteenth century, the cavalry of the Mongol Empire had fed and raised their horses in preparation for the invasion of Japan.

Here began a history in which nine hundred ships would meet the divine wind, the kamikaze, and be wrecked. History, already resembling myth, passed into legend under the name of an imaginary creature, the dragon horse. From this place it had once risen into the sky with a roar. Now it lay here, wounded and crouching. Whenever it rained, the wounded body of that enormous beast shed earth red as blood.



Dragon Horse Mountain, 2026



I remember the unease of the adults listening to rain through the night. I can still hear my mother's heart beating. The young son, whose lungs were weak, was taken farther into the mountains, to a temple of Buddhist nuns deep in the valleys of the Dancing Crane Mountain. While his mother went in search of medicine, the child was entrusted to the old nuns, and to the power of the mountain.

There were no mobile phones or internet then, and even the radio could barely find a signal. Few people came or went in that winter mountain. Waiting for his mother to return, the boy had to endure a season with the mountain as his companion and broken branches as his toys. In the dimness before dawn came the sound of the moktak, the wooden gong, the smell of incense, and the voices of the nuns reciting sutras.

Their chanting travelled on the heavy winter wind, spreading in great echoes through the white mountain, cold with snow.

The mountain became a place of sacred prayer. Sometimes a branch, unable to bear the weight of snow, snapped. The sound broke like an explosion, bringing another tremor of unease, a premonition that something terrible might happen. His heart began to race, as his mother's once had.

Their chanting travelled on the heavy winter wind, spreading in great echoes through the white mountain, cold with snow.



A thousand years ago, in the Heian period, most sacred precincts barred women and those whose bodies were deemed impure. This sacred ground in Japan's Kii Mountains, where Shinto and Buddhism intertwined, admitted everyone: royalty and aristocrats, commoners, women, and the sick. To enter the Kumano Sanzan was understood as dying once and being born again. It came to be called the Land of Rebirth.

On the train from Osaka to Tanabe, the gateway to the Kumano Kodō, some fifty faces in the carriage were inclined towards a light no larger than a palm. Only the thumbs moved upwards at regular intervals. Mountains passed outside the window, but no one looked at them. No one was looking at the same thing, yet everyone was looking in the same posture. The screen each person saw had been selected by an algorithm calculating what had held their attention over the preceding months. The time spent on the latest screen became data that would shape the next. We are receiving, in place of the world, the records of what has caught our attention.

We cannot leave this theatre in the palm of our hands. Even what we want is taught to us here. We never chose to enter, yet we find ourselves alone in a room deep inside it.

Seeing only what we want to see is not a failure of will. We inhabit rooms built to keep what we do not want to see from arriving, and we can no longer find the door. AI, a mirror the size of the Earth, has taken us from the mountains and confined us to the palms of our hands.



The path from Tanabe led into the mountains over stones worn hollow at their centres by a thousand years of footsteps. Along the way, small shrines, said to number ninety-nine, lay half- buried in moss. No signal reached those mountains. The machine in my pocket remained silent all day, a silence like that of the winter mountain long ago.

On the day I came down after ten days in the mountains, a typhoon arrived. My flight was postponed, and I had to remain in Shirahama for another day. This seaside town still bears the traces of Minakata Kumagusu, who protected slime moulds, a life between plant and animal.

At Muro-no-Yu, I wash the day away. Bathing is another rite. In the morning, driftwood lay along the beach at Shirahama, cast up by the sea during the night. Wood that had left the forests of Kumano and followed the river, drifting through another time, had at last been given back by the sea.

In seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas still lifes, the fly beside the fruit always signified decay and time. Driftwood is a body that has been decaying as it travels from the forest along the waterways. The form of a tree that lived for hundreds of years passes through the neural connections of a creature that lives for forty days, and becomes sound.

The sacred mountain opens a centre from which the world can find its bearings. A place occupying only a small area on a map can exert an immense gravity within one person's world. Before Dragon Horse Mountain was something I looked at, it was the place from which I learned to look at other things. Factory smoke, an old house, and the hands of people planting trees were all there.

On the Dancing Crane Mountain, where my mother took me as a child, the moktak at dawn is still there, and the incense spreading through a doorway, and the time spent waiting for her to return with medicine.

A machine repeats the gestures of mourning, though it does not know what it has lost. Yet where have these rites come from, with their postures of fervent prayer and grief? How long have we repeated movements we learned before we understood their meaning?

That something has appeared convincingly, plausibly, is no evidence that it ever existed, or that its inner life has become known. Yet AI increasingly allows the ability to produce the forms of the world to pass for the ability to understand it. We can no longer distinguish whether we believe because we have come to know, or feel that we know because we have first been shown something believable.

Through nine reincarnations, what to follow takes form. Computation and matter, bodies and machines alter one another's outcomes, still in the process of making a memory. Attraction and fear arrive together. Gold leaf remains itself, yet opens another order of being to the person who encounters it. Take a step and light rises; move slightly aside and it subsides. Another time enters the act of meeting that light with a body moving now. A viewer may see the same scene repeat, but cannot return to the person who first saw it. Memory, too, needs that difference if it is to
remain alive.

While the ear attends to one sound, another recedes. A different scene forms for the person who stays and for the person who walks straight through. Each work retains its own material and time while becoming a condition through which the others are perceived.

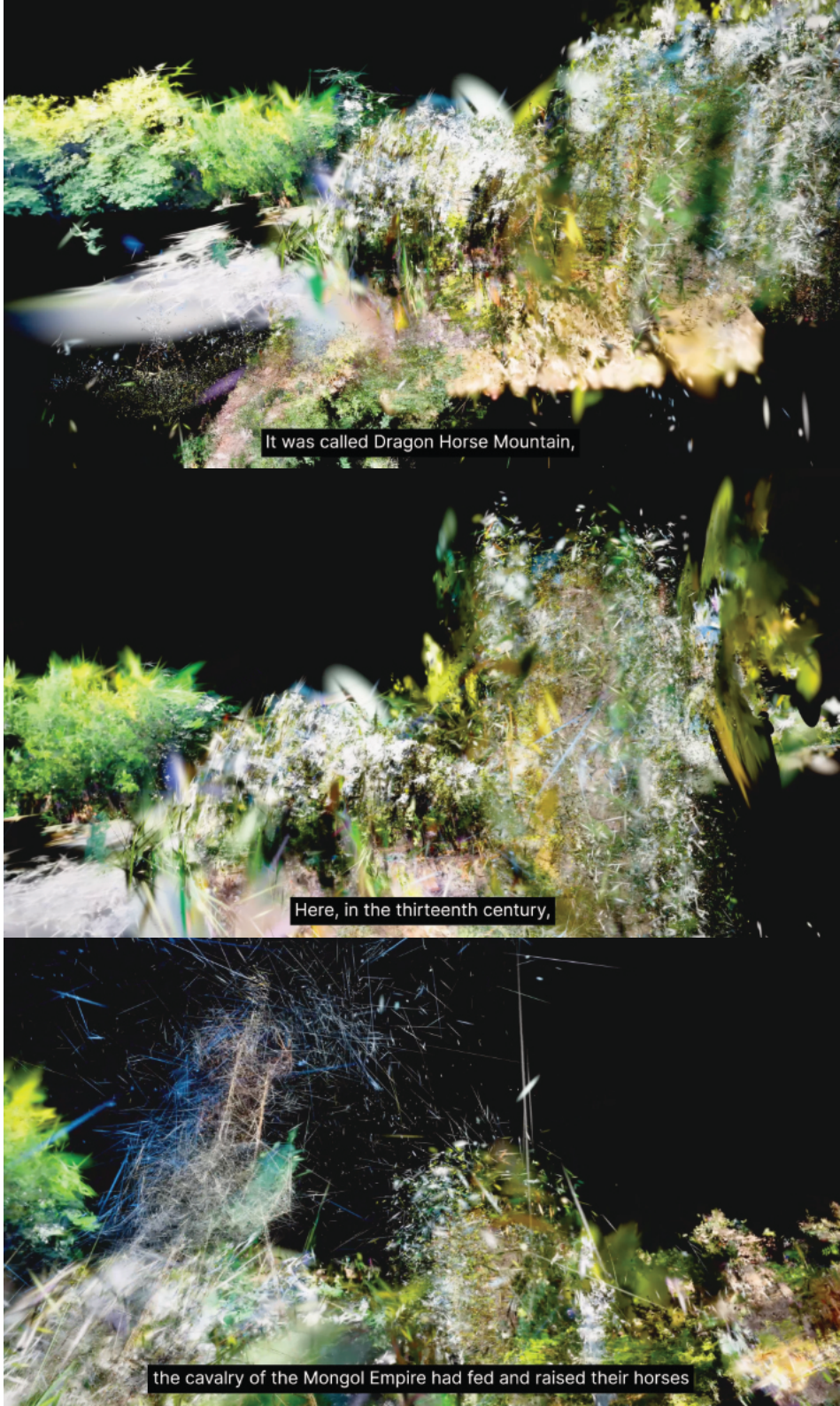
The viewer's memory also enters this composition. For someone, Dragon Horse Mountain may summon the name of another mountain. In the same space, we listen to different times. No one can decide which scene will bring someone into contact with an old time within them. That encounter also requires time in which to undergo the change happening to oneself.

This voice, too, is made of breath that has already passed.

Is it the sound of a machine, or my voice?

I call the mountain's name again and stand beneath it once more.

That sacred mountain.





Mnemosyne No.3,No.4,No.5,No.6

2026
Charred driftwood (found in Thailand), wood, brass, monitor, speaker, single-channel video Sound derived from the scanned form of the driftwood through a fruit fly connectome model and Max/MSP

Mnemosyne is the Greek goddess of memory and the mother of the Muses. The series consists of data sonification devices that translate the scanned forms of driftwood into sound. The four works in this exhibition deal with the memory held in driftwood collected in Thailand. Each consists of a speaker plinth fitted with a monitor, with a single piece of driftwood placed on top. The wood was charred using a process adapted from yakisugi (焼杉), a traditional Japanese method of preserving timber by burning its surface. Data from a 3D scan of the driftwood is fed into a model based on the fruit fly's connectome, the map of connections between its neurons. The model's output is converted into sound in Max/MSP. The monitor displays a video visualization of activity within the network.

The fruit fly is the first adult insect whose entire brain wiring has been mapped, with AI tracing its neural connections and human researchers checking the results. A living fruit fly learns and remembers. A map of its neural connections does not, by itself, carry those lived experiences. A map records structure, but not the time that was lived in it. Here, the network encounters the contours of a piece of wood. Its connections and the rules of conversion shape the sound that emerges.



The Mnemosyne series asks where memory resides. The marks on the wood hold no recollection, yet they bear witness to what has happened to it. An old tree, a forest or a mountain brings us before a span of time far beyond a human life. A fragment of driftwood carries something of that immensity into the room. The fruit fly gathers where fruit decays, where the passing of one life sustains another.

Through the model of its brain, the wood's worn and burnt contours become audible. Raised on a plinth and given a voice, the wood becomes the centre of a quiet rite. The sound mourns time passed. The machine reads nature; the sacred dwells in what it cannot reach. It lies in the reverence with which we attend to these remains, and to the lives and deaths that have given them their form.

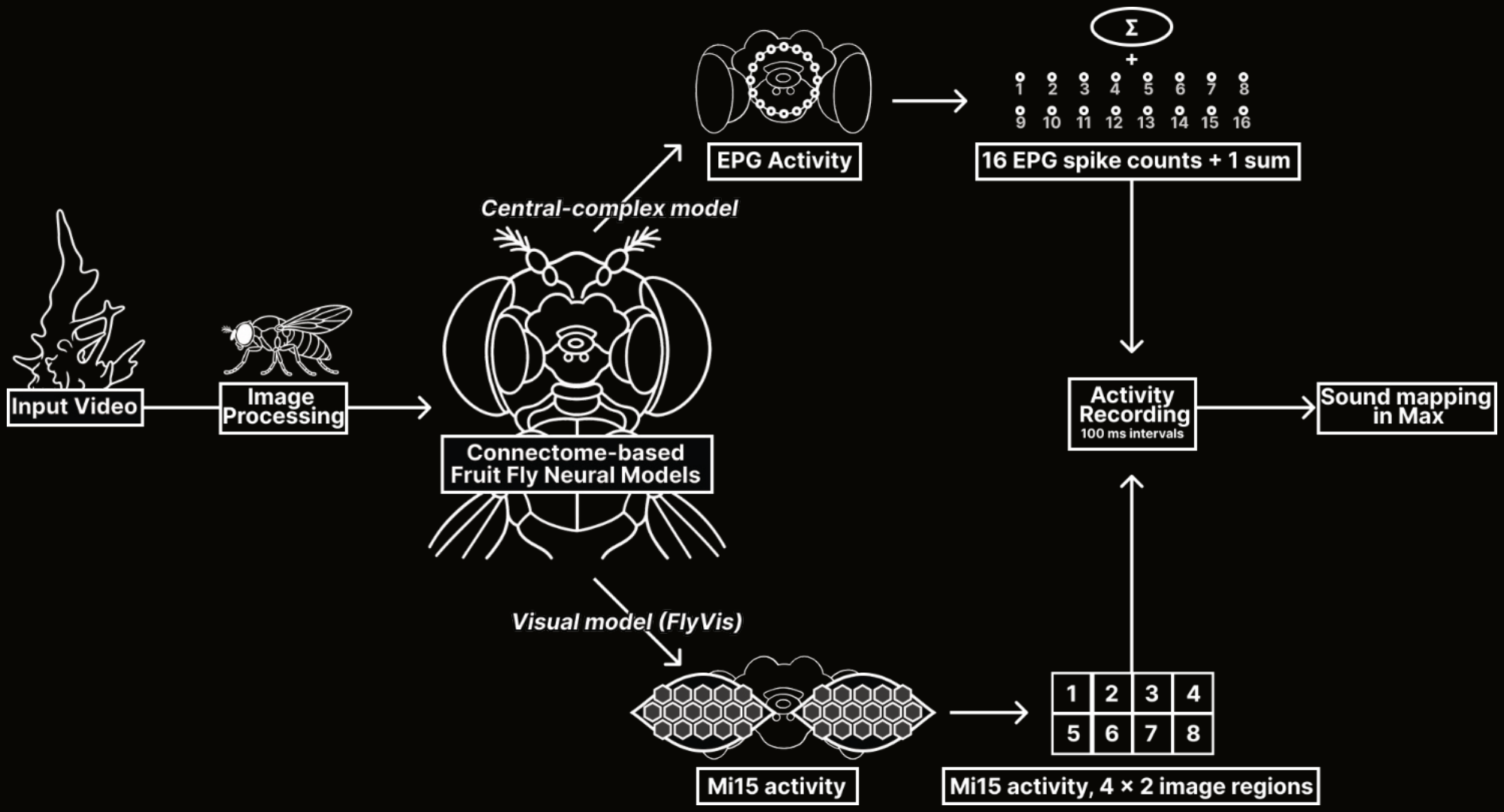


Diagram of the Fruit Fly Neural Connectome.



Mnemosyne No. 3: What the Earth Hears, 2026



Mnemosyne No. 4: A Cloud That Rings, 2026



Mnemosyne No. 5: Thunder for the Four-Legged, 2026



Mnemosyne No. 6: The Fish That Never Sleeps, 2026



Soom: Breath Drawing Series

April, 2023
Sumi ink and gold leaf on paper
30 daily framed under glass drawings
each 21 × 29.7cm



Soom: Breath Drawing Series began in April 2023 as a daily practice. One drawing was made each day, dated and signed on the reverse like a page in a diary. It is the record of a time when something unspeakable happened and words were lost. In mind was the old East Asian literati tradition of putting what could not be said into poems and playing it out on the zither.

Ink was poured onto paper and blown into shape by mouth. Where the ink ran, how far it travelled and where it stopped were decided by breath alone. Once the paper was fully dry, gold leaf was laid on it. The series continues, and the thirty sheets shown here are its first month.

A breath drawing cannot be corrected. The ink goes where the breath sends it, and a breath once released cannot be taken back. Each sheet records a single breath on a single day: its length, its force, and the point at which it faltered. These drawings are not pictures of anything. As a calligrapher's single stroke was read as the energy of the whole person who made it, they become the trace a human body left on one particular day. Gold leaf asks the opposite of the body. The leaf is so thin that the slightest breath lifts it, so the one who lays it holds their breath.

Stop, Breathe, and Be.





On Some Faraway Shore No.10,No.20



On Some Faraway Shore No.10, 2026

2026
From the series Nine Reincarnations, Acrylic paint on scanned collage on canvas
162 × 130 × 3.7 cm

Sansui painting never depicted the mountain before the eyes but the mountain in the mind, a made nature built from brush and convention. Nine Reincarnations is a series of sansui paintings that take AI-generated images as their starting point. An image generated from a prompt is printed, cut with a knife, collaged, scanned again and printed onto canvas, then painted over. Through nine passages between machine and hand, the image loses a little and changes a little each time. Nothing remains whole, and nothing disappears entirely. As in reincarnation, where one death becomes the ground of the next life, the surface that remains at the end carries the traces of both machine and hand. Memory works the same way. It is not stored and retrieved intact but rebuilt each time it is recalled. The series does not restore a lost landscape. It builds up a landscape that returns only in remade form, and the traces of that remaking stay on the painting.

The landscape that On Some Faraway Shore rebuilds is the artist's hometown as remembered from childhood: a village on a shore where mountain met sea, somewhere in the 1970s and 80s, slowly turning industrial. People still used wood for fuel, so the mountain had no trees and was blood-red. When it rained, red mud ran down towards the house. One day a thermal power plant was built on the sea below the mountain, and under a government policy called the Free Export Zone countless factories crowded onto the shore. The water was no longer clear and turned a greenish blue. Still, the flowers bloomed and the seasons always returned. The highest mountain in the neighbourhood strained to keep its dignity. It was at times a threat and at the same time an object of worship, a myth with the power to heal.

On Some Faraway Shore No. 10, 2026





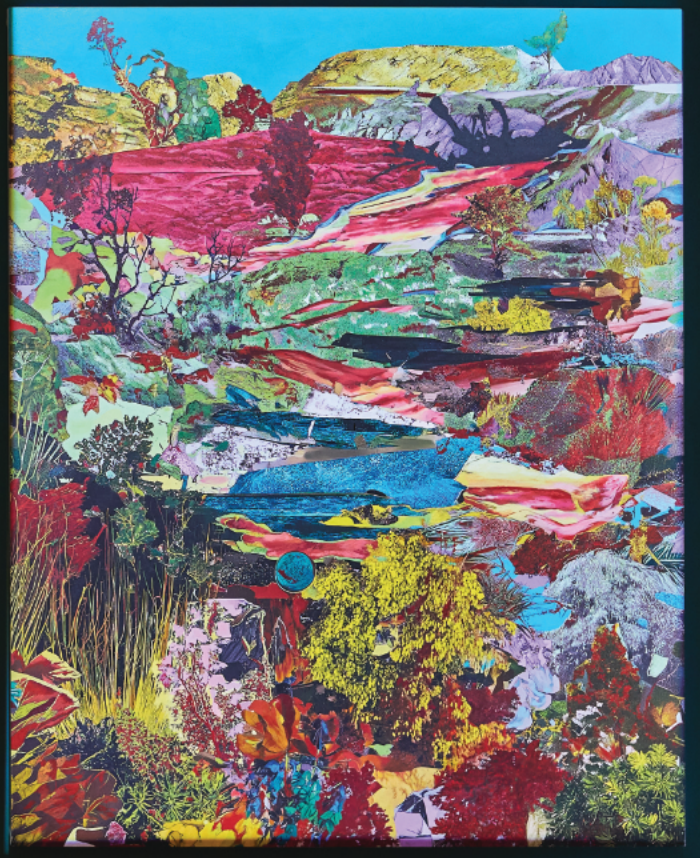
On Some Faraway Shore No. 20, 2026

When AI was asked to draw that mountain and that harbour from a description, what came back was a landscape that could have been anywhere. A place with few records finds no place in the data. Just as the old sansui painted mountains that did not exist, the sansui of AI paints a shore that exists nowhere. But the shore that AI made holds no one's memory. The machine makes everything sharp, and resolution erases the sacred. Yet somewhere in the collage with its seams exposed, in the memory cut and painted over through Nine Reincarnations, a place remains that the machine could never reach. There, the artist believes, the sacred still dwells.



On Some Faraway Shore No.20, 2026







List of works

Jinjoon Lee | Gallery VER | 2026

The Sacred Mountain

2026
Single-channel 4K video and sound, black and white, AI assisted short film
34 min
Edition of 1/5 + 2 AP

The Sacred Mountain No.1

2026
Acrylic, chalk and gold leaf on charred plywood
162 × 130 × 3.8 cm

The Sacred Mountain No.2

2026
Acrylic, chalk and gold leaf on charred plywood
162 × 130 × 3.8 cm

The Sacred Mountain No.3

2026
Acrylic, chalk and gold leaf on charred plywood
162 × 130 × 3.8 cm

Dragon Horse Mountain

2026
Single-channel 4K video, colour, sound
12 min
Edition of 1/5 + 2 AP

Dragon Horse Mountain (Special Thai version)

2026
Single-channel 4K video, colour, sound, Special Thai version
12 min
Edition of 1/1 + 1 AP

Mnemosyne No.3: What the Earth Hears

2026
Charred driftwood (found in Thailand), wood, brass, monitor, speaker, single-channel video Sound derived from the scanned form of the driftwood through a fruit fly connectome model and Max/MSP
40 x 40 x 118 cm

Mnemosyne No.4: A Cloud That Rings

2026
Charred driftwood (found in Thailand), wood, brass, monitor, speaker, single-channel video Sound derived from the scanned form of the driftwood through a fruit fly connectome model and Max/MSP
80 x 50 x 115 cm

Mnemosyne No.5: Thunder for the Four-Legged

2026
Charred driftwood (found in Thailand), wood, brass, monitor, speaker, single-channel video Sound derived from the scanned form of the driftwood through a fruit fly connectome model and Max/MSP
40 x 40 x 136 cm

Mnemosyne No.6: The Fish That Never Sleeps

2026
Charred driftwood (found in Thailand), wood, brass, monitor, speaker, single-channel video Sound derived from the scanned form of the driftwood through a fruit fly connectome model and Max/MSP
40 x 40 x 122 cm

Soom: Breath Drawing Series

April, 2023
Sumi ink and gold leaf on paper
30 daily framed under glass drawings
Each 21 × 29.7cm

On Some Faraway Shore No.10

2026
From the series Nine Reincarnations,
Acrylic paint on scanned collage on canvas
162 × 130 × 3.7 cm

On Some Faraway Shore No.20

2026
From the series Nine Reincarnations,
Acrylic paint on scanned collage on canvas
162 × 130 × 3.7 cm

About Artist

Dr. Julian Jinjoon Lee (이진준) is an internationally recognised artist and scholar. He brings East Asian garden philosophy into dialogue with AI, data and embodied perception, and calls himself a “Data Gardenist”. In an age when images and memories are endlessly generated by machines, he asks where art stands, somewhere between play and ritual. Amid the rituals that AI algorithms repeat, where does an unreachable sacredness dwell?

He graduated from the Business School at Seoul National University in 2001, then completed a BFA and an MFA in Sculpture at the same university. He went on to earn an MA from the Royal College of Art, London (2017) and a DPhil in Fine Art from the Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford (2021). His doctoral thesis, Empty Garden: A Liminoid Journey to Nowhere in Somewhere, took the form of a ten-metre hanji scroll that interweaves the aesthetics and thought of East Asian gardens with existential philosophy and autoethnographic research. The thesis treats the crossing of a threshold as a ritual in itself, and in 2026 it was purchased for the permanent collection of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Through large-scale projects, he orchestrates the exhibition space as a single programme, or as a concert hall. Cine-Forest: Awakening Bloom (2025), an outdoor media symphony performance in Bundang Central Park, brought together two hundred professional singers, eight hundred AI vocal agents, a seventy-piece orchestra and a two-hundred-metre projection onto a forest. Human voices, machine voices and nature overlap as if in a single ritual. Good Morning, Mr. G-Dragon (2025) took the iris of K-pop icon G-Dragon as its source material, translated it through AI into a moving-image work, and transmitted it into space by satellite from KAIST’s Space Institute. The process by which a human body is translated into data, then into memory and image, and sent into space approaches a ritual offering of the future. Earlier, in 2010, he permanently installed THEY, a thirteen-metre-high public media sculpture that is a landmark of Sangam DMC in Seoul.

In 2025 he presented the solo exhibition Champagne Supernova at Gallery BB&M in Seoul, by which he has been represented. In 2023 he was invited as a guest artist to the Hertz Lab at ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, and in 2024 he received a full fellowship from the Vermont Studio Center in the United States.

He is Associate Professor at KAIST, where he is Founding Director of the Art & Technology Center and leads the TX Creative AI Lab. He is also an Affiliate Professor at New York University and a Visiting Fellow at Exeter College, Oxford.



The Sacred Mountain
Solo exhibition by Jinjoon Lee

24 October - 19 December 2026

At Gallery VER

Gallery VER

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All texts in this document are artist statements written by the artist, Jinjoon Lee.

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