The Downward Gaze of Devotion

Larry Sultan Visiting Artisit Lecture: Dionne Lee. Photography courtesy of Theo LaBrusciano-Carris

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By
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Interdisciplinary artist Dionne Lee has had her work exhibited across the United States, but on February 12th, 2025, she visited CCA—her alma mater—for the Larry Sultan Visiting Artist Lecture, held in the Nave Presentation Space. She graduated from the school in 2017 with her MFA and returned to give us a look into the evolution of her artistic practice. She identifies as a photographer, but also dabbles in collage and videography. At a glance, Lee's work appears minimalist, depicting a variety of natural landscapes. However, what makes her unique from other landscape photographers is her focus on the subtler aspects of nature. For example, she often positions the camera downwards to observe how shadows move over the land. In her eyes, the camera acts as a tool that allows viewers to forget her presence and focus on the more minute aspects of life.

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When asked about how the camera affects Lee's relationship to her work, she expressed disdain for the complex technical aspects of operating modern cameras. Lee noted that she doesn't consider herself very tech savvy and admitted to using a camera with "the least amount of buttons" during her talk. She also doesn't use many other tools besides her camera during her creative process. This speaks to her perspective as a photographer; she views the camera as an extension of herself and as an invisible tool. She's often looking closely at her monitor to capture the moments that she finds connect with her own experience of the world. Through her work she has continued to expand upon a topic she divulged during grad school, which she referred to as "exploring [her] relationship to the American landscape." During her talk, I began to think about my own perspective on my artwork and the lens I choose to create from. As a writer, I have always walked the line between speculative fiction and satirical comedies. So it was enjoyable seeing an appreciation of the otherwise minute parts of life that people don't acknowledge as much. As artists, we cultivate our unique viewpoints on the world through our work, and Lee's relationship with the colonial past of the land teaches the viewers about the importance of our ancestors.

In her work *Challenger Deep* (2019), a single channel video, Lee shows two hands holding thin rods used for water witching or divining, a process for locating ground water for survival used in the South. The camera is angled downward onto a field and appears to be on loop. This was one example of what Lee called "the downward gaze," which she often utilizes in her work in protest of the colonial, capitalist artists commonly found in landscape photography. She attributes a lot of big and bold landscapes to a domineering perspective which she actively fights through her artwork. Choosing to focus on her hands engaged in a centuries long ancestral practice in *Challenger Deep*, Lee reframes the perspective of the landscape's colonial past. This concept of survival remains consistent in her artwork. For example, *North* (2019) is a collage of silver gelatin prints that depicts someone with hands raised to the sky, thumb to thumb, pinkies extended. Behind that is a pink box, and behind that is a black rectangle. This references age-old techniques used to navigate the land, similarly to *Challenger Deep*, which reminds readers of our

connection to those ancestors that came before us. I found myself missing my hometown even more after this because coming from a small town to a metropolitan city certainly makes a person feel like they are surrounded by the modern colonial agenda. In exploring self-sufficiency, Lee has gained an appreciation for the generational body which has the ability to create and cultivate so much using the natural environment. She continuously explores her idea of the generational body through studies of personal history.

Photography is often thought of as a moment captured in one perspective, but Lee continuously expands what people consider a work of photography to be. She expanded my perception personally through her fluid presentation of photography. In *Lapse* (2022), Lee organized a grid of eyes pictured milliseconds apart, altogether depicting a blinking eye. This was not only a study of the human body but of time and hyper-local aspects of life. This connects back to her desire to expand what people consider photography; she constructs images that represent a conceptual scene for the viewers. The piece is essentially a collage, but Lee creates a new image by piecing them together. *Fault Condition 4* (2023) also utilizes the familiar collage techniques, only this time she has spaced out each of her collage images over a relief paper with a mandala design across it. Lee utilized her collage technique to visualize an aerial view on fossil formations. She consistently referred to herself as a 'future fossil,' which was an enlightening quip that I loved. Both of these works are new forms of the close-study, reframing initiatives that Lee embodies through her presence. This was the crux of Dionne Lee's work after studying at CCA: being able to decolonize the relationship humans have to the earth.

The seats were full at this talk, demonstrating how Lee has carved a name for herself in the fine art world while pushing the boundaries of what constitutes photography. Through her collage and videography studies, she has shared her unique perspective on survival, colonialism, and honoring ancestors. Through her work she has also gotten to travel, which has further secured her desire for self-sufficiency. She reflects this in her work by paying respect to the ancestors, who saw the importance of working with the land as a method of survival. She makes these observations through her work to decolonize the land and perceive it differently than normal. Lee's connection with history is admirable and inspiring for artists, and has me thinking about how I can pay respect to my literary ancestors.

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Alicia "Ace" Hodrick (BA Writing and Literature 2026) is a writer at CCA with a passion for journalism, memoirs, and sometimes screenplays. The focus for their work often operates through a linguistic lens. They also engage in various crafts. (Any Pronouns).

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