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Vilcek Foundation Exhibition Features Monumental Works in Ballpoint Pen by Immigrant Artist Il Lee

"Il Lee—Energy and Flow: Abstraction of Movements" honors the artist's prolific 50-year career

New York, NY, May 29, 2025—The Vilcek Foundation is proud to present their latest exhibition [*Il Lee—Energy and Flow: Abstraction of Movements*](#), which features twenty-six works and explanatory materials from South Korean-born contemporary artist Il Lee. The widely acclaimed artist is known for his large-scale, abstract compositions created using ballpoint pen on paper and on canvas. This is the foundation's second exhibition of works by Lee at their headquarters in Manhattan.

"Il Lee's art defies simple description—its scale, complexity, and emotional depth can only be fully grasped in person," says Vilcek Foundation President Rick Kinsel. "To stand before his pieces is to encounter both precision and expansiveness, discipline and imagination. The Vilcek Foundation is thrilled to present *Il Lee—Energy and Flow: Abstraction of Movements* and offer visitors the opportunity to engage directly with the intensity and exactness that define his practice."

After studying with vanguards of the monochrome painting movement (*Dansaekhwa*) in South Korea, Lee immigrated to the United States to earn his MFA from Pratt Institute. While in school, Lee began experimenting with an unconventional "painting" technique: ballpoint pens, which he has continued to use as his primary medium since.

Many of the artist's drawings are massive—using hundreds of pens for a single work. Over the past 50 years, by using only the most humble of instruments, Lee has created an extensive and vast vocabulary that is appreciated and inspires diverse audiences around the world. Made in reference to the style of traditional Asian ink paintings, Lee's pieces evoke images of nature, such as mountains shrouded in mist, neural synapses, or a copse of trees. By creating such immense pieces from such a small medium, Lee captures the sensation of balance in his work.

Emily Schuchardt Navratil, the foundation's curator, collaborated with guest curator Suzie Kim, PhD, associate professor of art history at Mary Washington University, to create a second exhibition of Lee's work. An immigrant from South Korea, Kim specializes in modern and contemporary Korean and Japanese art and architecture.

In *Il Lee—Energy and Flow: Abstraction of Movements*, Kim poses the question: Who continues the legacy of abstract art in New York City? Building on Jackson Pollock's action paintings, Lee's practice becomes a dynamic, ongoing dialogue—a conversation between the artist's physical act of creation, the marks on canvas, and the viewer's internal responses to the work. His works are an invitation to witness, feel, and participate in the continuous, flowing dialogue between artist and viewer, where abstraction transcends its material form and becomes an immersive experience.

"We are delighted to host *Il Lee—Energy and Flow: Abstraction of Movements* at the foundation headquarters and give audiences the opportunity to experience these incredibly intricate and complex

works up close,” says Navratil. “Kim’s presentation of Lee as an action painter provides a new dimension to our understanding and appreciation of his art and process—inviting the viewer into the dialogue between artist and artwork.”

As part of its mission to amplify immigrants and the arts, the Vilcek Foundation has provided support for publications, programs, and acquisitions of Lee’s work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Crow Museum of Asian Art, the Queens Museum, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Jung Lee Sanders, founder of Art Projects International and a former board member of the Vilcek Foundation, was a steadfast champion of Lee’s work. An advocate for the arts, particularly contemporary Asian artists, Sanders curated the inaugural exhibition at the Vilcek Foundation in 2008, which featured Lee and Iranian visual artist Pouran Jinchi.

Highly regarded, works by Lee are now represented in prominent museum and institution collections around the world and span his five decades as an artist.

// Lee—Energy and Flow will be on display on the first and second floor of the Vilcek Foundation until September 2025. A subset of the exhibition will be available to view on the first floor through May 2026. The exhibition is by appointment only. Guests can sign up for a tour by emailing exhibitions@vilcek.org.

The Vilcek Foundation raises awareness of immigrant contributions in the United States and fosters appreciation for the arts and sciences. The foundation was established in 2000 by Jan and Marica Vilcek, immigrants from the former Czechoslovakia. The mission of the foundation was inspired by the couple’s respective careers in biomedical science and art history. Since 2000, the foundation has awarded over \$15 million in prizes and grants to organizations and individuals.

The Vilcek Foundation is a private operating foundation, a federally tax-exempt nonprofit organization under IRS Section 501(c)(3). To learn more, please visit vilcek.org.