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Lee Ufan looks for rocks for his Guggenheim Museum exhibit; below, "Relatum — silence b" features a stone in front of a steel plate.

## With an Artist's Eye, Divining the Essence of a Stone

By TED LOOS

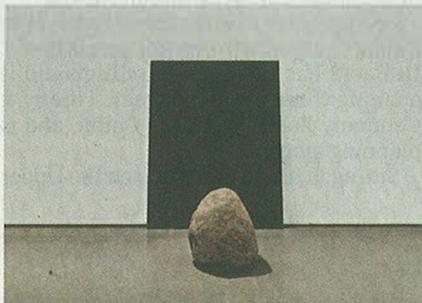
BRIDGEHAMPTON, New York — If an artist is going to create an installation for a major museum show using only an industrial steel plate and a rock, then the rock had better be just right.

So it was that Lee Ufan was carefully culling stones in a large field at a garden center on Long Island. He studied huge, gray, 635-kilogram boulders that had to be removed by forklift. He bent down to gaze at brownish medium-size stones, turning them over to examine them as if they were precious diamonds.

Mr. Lee, and his half-dozen helpers and associates, had spent the previous day picking out these rocks from a nearby quarry, and were now at work on the second cut, with the goal of finding 52 that were fit for the Guggenheim Museum exhibition "Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity," which opened on June 24, Mr. Lee's 75th birthday. It was the first large retrospective of his work in the United States.

Mr. Lee has enjoyed considerable recognition in Europe and in the Far East. Last year the Lee Ufan Museum, designed by Tadao Ando, opened on the island of Naoshima, Japan.

There was something of the shaman in the spry Mr. Lee as he tried to understand



the purpose of each rock.

"He can see things we can't see," said Alexandra Munroe, the Guggenheim curator who organized the exhibition. "When his antennae go up, it's wonderful to behold."

But a decision was imminent, as if he were casting for a Broadway show; not all the assembled stones were going to make it. One, a taupe beauty with whitish veins, bothered him.

He walked over to it and stared at it. The stone had paper labels taped to it, noting its vital statistics and the work it was being considered for: "Relatum," formerly "Situation" (1971), a series of three stretched canvases on the floor, each topped by a single stone.

Mr. Lee, who was born in Korea and now

lives in Kamakura, Japan, shook his head. "The presence of this rock is weak," he declared in Japanese. Someone behind him yelled, "He's changing stones!" A large X in blue masking tape was applied to the rock.

"It's a funny thing," Mr. Lee said later that day. "There is no good or bad stone. It just depends on where it's going to be placed. But I have a concept in mind, and I know it when I see it. Making the selection of the rock — that is art."

"Marking Infinity," which runs through September 28, features Mr. Lee's paintings and drawings too, but he is best known for the continuing and frequently rock-filled series in which every work, like the series as a whole, is called "Relatum."

"The point of the work is to bring together nature and industrial society," Mr. Lee said as he moved among the stones. He was referring to pieces like "Relatum — silence b" (2008), in which a rock sits on the floor in front of a steel plate leaning against a wall. "The viewer is to experience the tension between the rock and the steel plate."

The works require a commitment of contemplation; they do not grab the viewer.

"At first they looked casual and unintended and without interest for me," said

the sculptor Richard Serra, who first encountered them in the late 1970s when he and Mr. Lee shared a gallery in Germany.

"But I walked by them every day for months, and over time they became much more meaningful to me than some works that intend so hard to elicit a response."

The "Relatum" series bears the strong stamp of the Minimalism and Conceptualism movements of the 1960s and '70s. A philosopher and the author of 17 books, Mr. Lee was a prime theorist of the Tokyo-based Mono-ha (School of Things) movement of the same era.

He said the purpose of Mono-ha was to "combine what is made with what is not made," bringing together man-made objects with natural ones, like the rocks, to animate the space between them in a kind of performance.

Finding the right rock is key. Mr. Lee pointed to a big gray one too big for him to carry. "When the stones are too natural-looking, I'm averse to that," he said. "They should be natural but neutral."

This is the paradox of the rock quest: Mr. Lee spends a lot of time looking for rocks that don't really stand out at all.

"It can't be a singular rock," he said. "It has to be able to be interchanged with other rocks."