

A Reflection on *Castings* (2022) by Dionne Lee

Figure 1



Castings, hands

Figure 2



Castings, rock

Figure 3



Castings, shadow

Note. Dionne Lee (2022). *Castings*. [Gelatin Silver Print]. Et Al Gallery. (26 February - 2 April 2022). 620 Kearny Street, San Francisco, CA.

At first glance, *Castings 2022* by Dionne Lee seems simple—a pair of hands, a rock in motion, a shadow falling below (see Figures 1 - 3). The three images suggest an easy narrative: the hands drop the rock, and it falls to the earth; its shadow casts as proof of the act. Yet as I lingered in front of the images, the simplicity unraveled, giving way to questions, contradictions, and ambiguity. What seemed like a clear sequence became for me a meditation on the fragility of truth and the power of perspective.

Castings tells a curious story. The image of the hands, with their fingers spread too wide, seems as though the rock was never held or dropped (see Figure 1). Could they be performing a dance instead—or some forgotten ritual? Perhaps the hands had nothing to do with the rock at all. The rock might have tumbled from a mountain ledge, or been nudged by the wind, or dislodged by a squirrel (see Figure 2). Extending this idea of disconnection, the shadow, too, becomes suspect (see Figure 3). Is it even the rock's shadow, or that of some other object intruding on the scene? As one's eye follows these fragments, the ground beneath

them begins to shift. Between images, the slope of the earth changes and the texture of the soil diverges. The pictures do not share a single moment; they are glimpses of different times and different angles. This quiet inconsistency makes it clear: the shadow we see may not belong to the rock we imagine (see Figure 3).

This disconnect—between what we see and what we assume in *Castings*—mirrors the way history itself is told and reflects the artist’s stated “interest in place, ancestral memory, and survival” (Lee). Like the archivist piecing together fragments of the past, we are given only part of the story and left to fill the gaps with our own assumptions. Lee’s work speaks to how narratives can be shaped, truths obscured, and causation separated from consequence. The hands in the frame could be anyone’s—individual or institution, shaping what we know and what we are allowed to see (see Figure 1).

The title of the piece, *Castings*, invites deeper reflection of Lee’s interest in ancestral memory. In history, the act of casting—whether casting a stone, casting a spell, or casting judgment—has significant associations. In ancient times, casting stones was a method of legal punishment, a tool for execution or public shaming. The act of “casting” conjures images of ritual, divine judgment, and violence. Perhaps the ritualistic associations Lee evokes are a subtle allusion to the way societies cast judgments and how those in power shape the narratives of truth and justice. By drawing from the historical and biblical lexicon of “casting,” Lee’s work connects with centuries-old ancestral practices of determining guilt, power, and truth.

Lee’s work reflects her broader artistic philosophy, which she elaborated upon in a podcast interview accompanying the exhibit. Lee described her work as an interrogation of truth and perception, rooted in her experiences growing up in New York City. For Lee, the city’s architecture served as both a metaphor and a literal example of how institutions shape reality. Even something as basic and intuitive as a horizon is, for her, fragmented by the city’s skyline

and chopped up by buildings that imposed their stance on the landscape (Williams 21:36). Just as New York's skyline reshaped Lee's perception of the environment, the fragmented images of *Castings* reshape our understanding of action, causation, and consequence. The shadow of the rock may not belong to the rock, just as the narratives we accept may not belong to the truths we claim to know. Through this work, Lee challenges us to consider the ways in which power inscribes itself into our environments, shaping not only what we see but also what we believe.

Considered within Lee's artistic philosophy of "conflict of belonging...within the American landscape" and "the histories that are embedded in it," *Castings 2022* becomes a metaphor for how historical narratives are formed (Williams 17:48). The omission of context from a larger landscape—the slope of the ground and the position of the shadow—leaves the viewer to draw conclusions that may not hold. It is a reminder of how institutions and governments alter stories to disconnect action from accountability. The hands could belong to anyone, but their act, or the illusion of their act, has consequences. By staging this ambiguity with such a simple story, Lee forces us to question how narratives are "cast" and who benefits from their construction. Her approach also aligns with her own broader themes of ancestral memory and the "conflict of belonging" in American history. Lee's fragmented frames reflect the incomplete archives of the past, where dominant voices dictate what is preserved and what is erased. As viewers, we become complicit in this selective preservation, filling in the gaps with our own assumptions. In this way, Lee's work critiques not only historical silences but also the processes by which these silences are perpetuated.

Placed at the entrance of the exhibit, *Castings 2022* serves as a prelude, a caution. It teaches us to question what we see and consider what we do not. Truth is rarely complete, and with each frame, Lee shows us that certainty is fragile, and that understanding requires a willingness to confront the unknown. This lesson extends beyond the artistic sphere.

Throughout history, art has been a powerful tool for challenging set narratives and exposing the silences of the past. Lee's work aligns with this tradition, using ambiguity and fragmentation to disrupt our assumptions and provoke critical thought. In doing so, she invites us to engage with broader questions about memory, justice, and accountability.

For example, the relationship between historical justice and legal justice—that ambiguity of casting stones as both legal and extralegal—is thematically central to *Castings*. While legal systems often demand clear causation and accountability, history is rarely so straightforward. Lee's work underscores this tension, illustrating how truth can be obscured by selective framing and omission. By leaving gaps in her narrative, she forces viewers to confront their own biases and assumptions, highlighting the dangers of oversimplification. In Lee's work, I see a lesson in perception: the power of a single image to mislead or reveal, and the necessity of looking deeper. The rock may have fallen, or perhaps it did not. The hands may have acted, or perhaps they only reached. The shadow might belong to something else entirely. As I step away, the questions linger—beautiful, unsettling, and unresolved. This unresolved ambiguity is precisely what makes *Castings* so powerful. Lee's work does not provide answers; it demands engagement. It challenges us to think critically about the stories we are told and the stories we tell ourselves. It reminds us that truth is not a fixed point but a shifting horizon, fractured by the forces of power, memory, and perspective.

As I reflect on Lee's broader body of work, I am struck by its resonance with contemporary debates about politics, culture, and history. In an age of misinformation and selective storytelling, her art serves as both a critique and a call to action. Lee encourages us to look beyond the surface, to question the narratives imposed upon us, and to seek out the fragments that have been left behind. In doing so, *Castings* reminds us of the fragility of certainty and the enduring power of curiosity.

Works Cited

Lee, Dionne. "Dionne Lee *Castings*." <https://etaletc.com/dionne-lee-castings>

Williams, Venus. "Episode 6: Impressions." *Widening the Lens: Photography, Ecology, and the Contemporary Landscape*, episode 6, Carnegie Museum of Art, 26 June 2024, <https://carnegieart.org/resource/widening-the-lens-episode-6-impressions/>.