Lighthouse

By Richard Vine

A kind of magic seems to animate Korean-born, US-based AneseEunCho's "Lighthouse"sculptures (2025-ongoing), which at once confirm and subvert every association we customarily have with their memorable title.

A lighthouse is ordinarily a beacon of warning, alerting ships to treacherous reefs and shoals, and guiding sailors to safe harbor. Today the towers are maintained automatically, but in the past they were typically tended by a lone soul with a penchant for solitude.

Cho's "Lighthouse"works, whether standing singly or in groups, have something of the same psychological effect, reminding viewers of the turmoil and treacheries of life, but also evoking a refuge. Constructed according to base-3 numerology, they are composed of a metal framework with LED light tubes outlining a simple domestic abode—a quintessential *house* that quickly becomes a psychic *home* for viewers, regardless of their nationality, culture, or personal history.

Four walls, a peaked roof, one door, and one window—these are the minimalist components of a house. Yet here they are imaginary, conjured by the mind in response to geometric outlines whose spatial relationships shift as the viewer moves.Cho's perceptual construct is, therefore, more powerful,more eidetic and lasting, than any actual house.

While the structures can be deeply experienced in solitude, they inevitably draw pilgrims out of the twilight. People congregate to share the sense of psychological discovery and comfort, often making friendly—and occasionally tearful—connections. The yellow light dispels and warms a pocket of the darkness, radiating the primal appeal of a campfire. Those within thework's luminous sanctuary are both visually and emotionally altered.

Cho's Lighthouses are empty; so the meaningsthat visitors find there are clearly engendered within themselves, prompted but not determined by the radiant shell. The house's stimulative effect distantly echoes that of the black monoliths in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The "Lighthouse" seriesdebuted with a single 14½ -foot-tall structure in the West Texas desert,selected for theMarfa Invitational in 2025. The original is purple in daylight, yellow when illuminated. New editions,in various sizes and colors,are currently slated to appear at the Sea World Culture and Arts Center in Shenzhen, China,and the Four Seasons Hotel in Santa Fe, with additional international venues pending.

The project culminates Cho's previous thematic concerns—especially the contradictory appeal of safety and adventure. Her schematic paintings in the "Recollection" series (2008-11) center on the rolling hills and powerline towers of the artist's Korean girlhood, and the windows through which she viewed them. Her unpeopled "Path" paintings (2008-15)—implying the lure, the felt necessity, of escape—each depict a road enticing the viewer through a stylized landscape toward a distant horizon. Confinement is evoked by the "Box" images (2012-13), showing cardboard cartons sometimes completely closed, sometimes fully or partially opened to a thrilling influxof light. In "Energy" (2014-16), cosmic forces take on abstract,glowing, often vaguely stellar shapes. The "Fragmentation" works (2017-18), featuring both sculptural objects and prints,are dominated by the ample, disconcerting forms of female human breasts, at once erotic and maternal."The Second Floor: Return to the Portal" (2020-22)includes multiple cabinet-like constructions that evoke the neglected upper floor of Cho's childhood home, where she retreated to fantasize about the outside world and the marvels that awaited her there.

Her artistic strategy has diverse precedents. Figures like Salvador Dalí and Frida Kahlo turned their residences into private fantasias.At the contrary extreme, Rick Lowe and six other African-American artists launched Project Row Houses (1993-ongoing), renovating22 shotgun cottages in Houston, which helped to revitalize a neighborhood byintermingling art and artists with local denizens. But Cho has chosen to work with the house form in the interest of neither hyper-aestheticized living nor social activism.Instead, she is closer in spirit to Gordon Matta-Clark, who performed architectural interventions—cutting into houses and other buildings to reveal

their inner structures—in order to meditate upon the relationship between physical environment and selfhood, dwelling and being.

That literally “incisive” approach draws on much earlier theorization. Psychologists Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud both discerned an intimate, latently sexual link between various parts of a domicile and the inhabitant’s multiple states of mind—Freud going so far as to call a house a “diagnostic box.” In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), French philosopher Gaston Bachelard probed the subliminal experiences elicited by rooms, corridors, attics, basements, etc. Martin Heidegger distinguished merely residing in a structure from the rootedness—the livedconnection to place, people, and memory—that engenders true identity. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss made a similar case (architectural structures emblematize social structures and cultural heritage) for the collective self,housed over time.

As a light artist, Cho has yet another rich lineage, beginning in 1930withLászló Moholy-Nagy’s *Light Prop for an Electric Stage (Light-Space Modulator),* a kinetic sculpture that projects rapidly changing light patterns onto various objects and surfaces.The technique naturally took root in America, home of the 19th-century Luminist painters, wheremany viewers grow up awed by huge, sun-altered mountain and prairie vistas, or bedazzled at night by the lights of skyscrapers, Broadway, Times Square, and Las Vegas. US artists like Stephen Antonakosand Keith Sonnier used twisted, zig-zagging neon tubes to, in effect, draw with light in formal dialogue with sculptural and architectural elements. Dan Flavin employed straight, colored fluorescent tubes, singly or in rectilinear configurations, to visually transform countless interiors. Light and Space Movement artists such as Robert Irwin and James Turrellhave subtly orchestrated scrims, apertures, and gels to produce diffuse, otherworldly effects—an approach continued today by the Danish-Icelandic artistOlafur Eliasson.

That effusiveness reminds us that the climax of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*melds light and love as the twin emanation of God’s essence. Seven centuries later, our own age may be secular, but we continue to respond to that mystic fusion, Cho’s Lighthouses attest, as instinctively as any primeval sun worshiper, or any lost soul in the night.

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