

I AM A CN ARTIST

Continuous Contemplations
of Justin Lee



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Preface

BY AARON TEO & TESSA SAM

“All the world’s a stage, and all men and women, merely players...” – *As You Like It*, William Shakespeare

I am a CON Artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee is more than just a solo showcase by a Singapore artist, it is a rare convergence of key agencies in the art ecology namely the artist, the collector, the space and their audience. In a determined attempt to trace Justin Lee’s artistic development in the last two decades, the exhibition locates itself in two spaces, the main showcase at The Private Museum and a one-week special presentation strategically planned for Singapore Art Week (SAW) 2021 in the neighbouring space, 222 Arts Club.

Carved out into three segments within the two locations, the exhibition features past works carefully selected from The Teng Collection as well as a body of new works conceptualised for the exhibition. Although the idea of a two-venue exhibition came about in the later stages of the exhibition-making process, the comparatively larger in size location, 222 Arts Club, was by no means made for mere theatrics. Having an extended larger space was a gateway to a more refined artistic vision—providing tremendous possibilities: a wider mapping of Justin’s art practice, a deeper dive into the collecting methodologies of The Teng Collection, and a further reach to new audiences. Through the generosity of The Teng Collection, the special presentation saw a restaging of three selected monumental installation works signifying important milestones in Justin’s career as an artist in the last decade. In making the fullest of this limited opportunity, the dedicated artist constructed a collaborative three-man performance artwork, in which alongside him, two younger artists with clear generational gaps among all three artists, responded to Justin’s older works, anchored by and part of the installation titled *I Am A Product of Upbringing* (2010).

The seeds of this fateful project were planted along the halls of one of NAFA’s galleries in 2019. It was at the opening reception of Singapore

renowned contemporary artist Tang Da Wu’s solo exhibition, where Justin and one of us (Aaron Teo), both NAFA alumni, discussed the possibility of publishing a book surveying his artworks accompanied by writings of collector Mr Teng Jee Hum. Originally intended to be a standalone publication project by the collector and artist, we (Aaron) proposed a collaboration to take this project beyond. A book launch would simply not do justice to the potential of this project.

So began our process in the making of the exhibition *I am a CON artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee*, right before Singapore’s “Circuit Breaker” period last year in 2020. In the following section we will expand further on the curatorial and exhibition-making process. During our weekly Zoom meetings, where Justin shared about his past works and imagined and proposed new ideas for the exhibition, we were also able to tease out the theme for the exhibition. From big concepts such as culture, consumerism, globalisation, capitalism and meritocracy that needed unpacking, down to the minute details of form, medium, style and period, we were growing more excited with each development yet also nervous especially in such uncertain times of the pandemic. Nonetheless, we were able to translate our ideas, thoughts and visions onto the screen, owing to the advancement of technology, which eventually took physical form in *I am a CON artist*. Once the installation of the artworks was finished, all we needed was the fourth player, our “unsuspecting audience”, as Mr Teng puts it, to complete the entire process.

We open this preface with the phrase “All the world’s a stage, and all men and women, merely players...” Spoken by the melancholy Jaques to Duke Senior in *As You Like It* (Act II Scene VII), William Shakespeare’s pastoral comedy, it compares the world to a stage and life to a play. Throughout Justin’s more than twenty-year art practice, he employs similar motifs, visual and textual. The tone of his works, often humorous and satirical, offer playful commentary on the realities of life. Necessarily, the ideas and themes mentioned above were discussed

during the conceptualisation process for the exhibition, culminating in the artwork that is almost representative of this exhibition—quite literally a stage for all in the world.

Behold, your *Last Chance For Love*. The thrust of the exhibition rolls out its red carpet leading to a stage with the backdrop of pleated velvet curtains. Framing the stage are twenty glistening larger-than-life gold medals on either side, complete with side curtains draped from ceiling to floor, tucked neatly with gold tassels. From a distance, the medals sparkle and reflect their surroundings’ light so intensely they look like stars on a Wall of Fame. The awards feature similar and recurring visual imagery and themes in Justin’s artistic practice that will be expanded upon in Mr Teng’s and Lee Chor Lin’s essay. Visually the installation is of considerable scale, both in size and concept. It is this grandeur that conveys the significance of the work, allowing the participant to question and confront ourselves in a lighthearted and constructive manner that is neither excessive nor tacky. The interactive installation invites us to partake in a ritualistic act of putting ourselves on a pedestal, to capture the moment and immortalise ourselves. The very act is performative, not unlike what we do on Facebook, Instagram or Tik Tok. In fact, it is exactly that. Each “like”, “share” or “follow” is a shot of dopamine, a jolt of excitement, a nod of approval—made available for the world to see, forever. These social engagements online have become the holy grail, the currency in which we measure our worth.¹ In awarding ourselves with our choice of medal (or medals), we become both the subject and object of fame and of glory.

This work, titled *I Am A Product of Upbringing*, is one of three monumental installations shown in the one-week only special showcase that reflects the exploratory nature of Justin’s artistic practice as we can see how Justin works with a plethora of media from towering stainless steel generals

to corrugated cardboard boxes to army uniforms. *I Am A Product of Upbringing* creates dialogue with Justin’s performance conceptualised and performed on 23 January 2021. Running parallel to the exhibition, Justin’s performance involves two other artists and responds to the site-specific installation *I Am A Product of Upbringing*. It explores three generations of Singaporeans—Justin himself (age 58), Isabella Teng Yen Lin (age 31), and Lin Tze Ran (age 8) in the various stages of their lives, or upbringing. In the context of today’s booming online shopping, the cardboard box makes a comeback as an everyday household object of excessive packaging (alongside single-use plastics, of course). The cardboard box has become a product of our upbringing. Toward the end of this publication, Mr Teng expresses his vision for *I Am A Product of Upbringing*, “As I have since successfully acquired the artwork, I resolve to undertake to continue to re-assemble and exhibit this installation periodically... and have its condition examined and documented in detail, so as to sequence the encroaching degree of degradation over time.” The nature and durability of the installation work seem to correspond to that of society’s throwaway culture: short-lived. Justin’s perception and understanding of the world, as expressed in his art, has always been shaped by keenly observing his surroundings and fully immersing in them. This is echoed in both Mr Teng’s and Chor Lin’s essay. Chor Lin opts for a historical approach in *Reconstructing the Visual World of Justin Lee* to interpret Justin’s visual world by retracing his journey as a boy growing up in post-Independence Singapore in Chinatown—taking in all its sights, sounds and smells.

After “Gold” and “Glory” come the third and final ‘G’: “God” as in *Godalisation*.² The word, a combination of “God” and “Globalisation”, is painted neatly in red across two white canvasses with five circular fluorescent light tubes placed to resemble the interlocking Olympic rings. Mr Teng draws

the link between the Olympic rings as a symbol of excellence in the competitive global arena to Singapore’s “constant striving to be number one.” This can be seen, though partially obscured, in Justin’s new work *Instinctively, I Am Yours*. The conquests and colonial projects that came about during and after the Age of Discovery slowly but surely evolved into a sort of neocolonialism to become the cultural encroachment of the West’s soft power that Justin had grown up with, a result of rapid globalisation. While we were having a meal together, Justin and Mr Teng recount an earlier time when having a McDonald’s meal was deemed as a luxury rather than fast food, the quick-fix it has become today. They share that it is because of globalisation and the connectedness of the world that we are able to consume the food and culture of the West. As a critical element of Justin’s identity and heritage as a Chinese Singaporean, we observe how Justin weaves the image of the McDonald’s burger into his artworks *First Meal For Autumn*, *Poster Kids For Happy Meal*, and 崇洋, “*Chong Yang*”. Looking at his past and new works, we find that Justin often returns to images and ideas that have personal and creative impacts significant to him as an artist and member of civil society.

Though the exhibition began to take shape during Singapore’s “Circuit Breaker” period last year, its title had not surfaced until much later. In one spontaneous and spirited online exchange with Mr Teng and Justin, we arrived at *I am a CON artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee*. Consider Justin’s artistic practice. Contemporary, conceptual, contemplative, consequential, and at times controversial—the title leaves room for its audience to contemplate what “con” can mean and who the “con” is within the context of Justin’s practice that spans across space and time. The title also makes reference to one of Justin’s text-based paintings—a large framed white canvas proclaims: *I Am A Con Artist*. It had been right in front of us all this time!

As we examined the roots of Justin’s practice, a fascinating connection was discovered. Out of more than 200 artists, Justin and four other young

Singapore artists were selected to be part of a one-year apprenticeship programme in New York, USA where he was under the tutelage of master printer, Ken Tyler from 1999-2000. His experience in New York influenced his ways of seeing and led to many meaningful encounters with American artists such as Frank Stella. In 1994, our founding chairman Mr Daniel Teo, along with Swedish business partner Mr Björn Wetterling, established the Wetterling Teo Gallery in Singapore.

The pioneering art gallery premiered exhibitions by iconic American pop artists and printers including Ken Tyler, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, Tom Wesselmann, and Frank Stella, which paved the way for many cross collaborations to come between the West and the East at that time. The father-daughter pair who founded The Private Museum, Singapore, though indirectly, had laid the foundation leading up to this important juncture in Justin’s practice.

In the spirit of collaboration, we not only found success in the making of this exhibition and publication, but the lasting friendships forged along the way. On behalf of Mr Daniel Teo, Ms Rachel Teo and our board of directors, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to both artist Justin Lee and collector Mr Teng Jee Hum, The Teng Collection for their utmost dedication towards this project and the the arts, without whom this exhibition and publication would not have been possible.

Aaron Teo & Tessa Sam
The Private Museum, Singapore

¹Don’t forget to follow us @theprivatemuseum and hashtag #iamaCONartist on your posts.

²Historians use the simple shorthand “God, Glory, Gold” to describe the motivations for European overseas explorations and conquests from the early 15th century.

Foreword

BY YVONNE THAM

Justin Lee's works have attracted, teased, inspired and challenged visitors to Esplanade's public spaces from the early days of the national performing arts centre. As early as 2004 and 2005, Justin's *Pillars of Harmony and Our People*, *Our Lifestyle* were installed at the Esplanade concourse and tunnel spaces, respectively. More recently in 2018, Esplanade commissioned *Game of Life*, featuring suggestions of a larger than life Chinese chess board and his recognisable warriors. These public spaces drew a diverse cross-section of society: the young and the old; arts lovers as well as those new to the arts; Singaporeans and tourists from around the world. And because Justin's works deftly incorporate text, metaphor, popular culture, and iconography from Eastern and Western traditions, those who encounter his work, regardless of their background, often find multiple points of access, play and engagement.

Central to the artistic practice of Justin is his long-standing interests in offering an alternative understanding of Singaporean society and identity. At times audacious, the cross-cultural references that are prevalent in his practice are often layered with humour and irony, a comforting nostalgia, or the familiarity of motifs drawn from everyday life in Singapore. As such, while they expose his honest and critical reflections to prevailing societal norms, they also reveal a gentle sense of humanity and regard for others.

I am a CON Artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee presents a combination of newly created works by the artist, in dialogue with Justin's past works from The Teng Collection. The artist's explorations of glory and identity in his practice over the past decades underpin and frame the exhibition. These ideas are further examined in essays by Teng Jee Hum and Lee Chor Lin.

I would like to take this opportunity to offer my heartfelt congratulations to Justin Lee, Teng Jee Hum, The Teng Collection and The Private Museum on the exhibition and publication of this catalogue. In addition to capturing Justin's multifaceted practice and the multiple sources he draws

inspiration from, *I am a CON artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee* also reflects the companionable and supportive relationship between artist and collector, in enabling alternative narratives and platforms for art in culturally diverse Singapore.

Yvonne Tham
Chief Executive Officer
Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay

Give Utopia A Chance: the Art of Justin Lee

BY TENG JEE HUM

Introduction

Justin Lee (b. 1963) is a contemporary artist whose artworks convey his personal take on the nuances of life in “little red dot” Singapore. This island-nation has often been described as Utopia² by the throngs of workers from neighboring countries who came here to work in the past several decades. Like the fictional gardener named Chance,³ Lee’s astute observations, expressed through artworks about Singapore have, unwittingly, earned him recognition as an artist most representative of that section of contemporary Singapore that is uniquely Singapore’s Chinese culture, within the larger multicultural society.

Lee uses popular culture and icons in an often humorous way to put across his message about what being a Singaporean is all about, within the larger scope of social life.

This essay, titled *Give Utopia A Chance*,¹ makes references to a selection of artworks produced between 2003 and 2020.

The Beginnings and Three Takedowns

I first came upon Justin Lee’s work by chance (pun intended!). It was a local newspaper article that caught my attention on how the gallery showing his work had found it necessary to withdraw an artwork of his. The work was an interpretation of Singapore’s national flag in Lee’s easily recognisable style.⁴ It would not be hung with the rest of his other works in that solo show, but clients could ask to see it on private view (retrieved from where it was stored in the storeroom). And it was available for sale. It sold.

On the empty space on the gallery’s wall where Lee’s flag painting had hung (before it was taken down), the hardcopy of the email correspondence

between gallery Utterly Art and the two official agencies of National Arts Council (NAC) and Media Development Authority (MDA) was pasted. Justin Lee refers to it as the “rejection letter.”

The controversy attracted local press attention for almost a week, generating debate in the art community as well as in the community at large. The artist was even asked for his permission by a Singapore Polytechnic lecturer to allow the use of the incident as a case study in a course on censorship.

Given such a rousing start, in a rather sedated Singapore art scene, Lee’s works had received warm acceptance, and through subsequent exhibition exposure, he quickly became known endearingly to many as Singapore’s home-grown pop artist.

This brush with a local authority was to be repeated twice in the ensuing 17 years of his art practice. Although it is not in Lee’s nature to be a social activist, confrontational, or to produce rousing, provocative works with social objectives, his introspective artworks nonetheless have a way of revealing his inner reality and oftentimes find themselves suggesting contextual interpretations that might not find resonance with officialdom.

Most of his art is informed by the aesthetics of his training and work experience as a graphic designer, and this reflection of popular culture is often the first layer of interpretation that his audience encounters. Further layers of meaning would often come later. It is this later feature that, in my opinion, makes that discovery process so affirming that he has his finger on the pulse of his times.

The second episode happened in 2007 at a place called Songzhuang in China. As part of an

¹*Give Utopia a Chance*—translated means—Singapore needs an artist like Justin Lee.

²Utopia, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions. In this essay, the term is used to describe the nation of Singapore.

³Chance is a fictional character played by actor Peter Sellers in a 1979 Hollywood movie. In this satirical comedy, Sellers played an innocent and illiterate gardener,

who learned most of what he knew from watching television, yet ended up becoming the most influential man in Washington DC.—simply by “Being There” as suggested by the film’s title. In the film, Chance was seen making small talk about how he took care of the plants in the garden, and these simple truths, through a comical turn of events, were interpreted by seasoned businessmen and politicians as astute answers to their complex social problems. Prophetically, more recently in real life, a movie actor (in 1981) and a television show host (in 2016) have made it to become the President of the United States! It is notable that in the movie’s closing moments, the camera panned out to a scene showing Chance walking on water.



Fig 1. Shows an image of a similar Flag painting that was commissioned from the artist a short while later.

international group of artists’ exhibition, a series of Lee’s paintings featuring portraits of Chairman Mao, painted on red background and adorned with various items of apparel and headgears (see Figure 2), were ordered to be excluded from the exhibition, leaving other works on show.

Again, more recently in 2019, at the *Polyphony: South East Asia* group show at the Nanjing University of the Arts’ Museum in China, an installation comprising eight army camouflage uniform tops, embroidered with certain Chinese idioms and phrases, was almost targeted for taking down two days after the show’s opening



Fig.2 Paintings from the *Mao Series*.

reception. While Lee’s work was not the issue of contention, it was included in the review for potential political messages.

⁴Under Singapore’s constitution, it is stipulated that the national flag cannot be used or changed in any way as that is an offense punishable by law.

These three isolated incidents, during an art producing period of almost 18 years as an independent artist, are exceptions to the rule. By simply being himself and creating artworks from a place of authenticity, he has a knack of projecting not only a very personal identification with the mundane in his environment, but also managing to imbue it with his unique slant on a particular subject; and in the process, shining a light onto some of society’s prevailing norms. When his work happens to touch on underbelly aspects of society, there is a small risk of run-ins with authority. Otherwise, in the majority of the time, his work speaks eloquently of the times, the zeitgeist, albeit often in a light and humorous way.



Fig. 3 Installation titled *Mental Occupation, Series 1* at *Polyphony: Southeast Asia* exhibition, Nanjing University of Arts, China in 2019.

This eloquence is not always explicit, and while he also does performance art pieces, he is far from being an enfant terrible out to create publicity. My takeaways from some of the best pieces of his artworks came to me on subsequent revisits. On a number of occasions, precisely because a few years had passed, his thrust became clear. We are made to realise that of many possible interpretations of a particular subject that can be portrayed, he has zeroed in on the one that prevails over that time. Lee would seldom assert any particular

interpretation of any work of his over anyone, and the epiphany if any is always mine!

The internationally famous rock band U2 performed on 1 December 2019 in front of a largely ticketed Singaporean crowd with the below image as one of the screen backdrops. Singapore society has indeed come far from that 2003 restraint (mentioned above) placed on the public exposure of his flag painting. Justin Lee has proven he’s ahead of his time, in this instance, by 16 years.



Fig.4 Screen grab of “Singapore flag displayed at end of U2’s performance of One,” YouTube video, posted by “The Straits Times”, November 30, 2019.

2. Motivations of a Singapore pop artist

When asked what contributed most to his development from young to the matured artist that he is today, Lee zoomed in on a few factors. He has always been an avid observer of human behavior, taking great interest in how people around him “eat, dress and play in our society.” Lee is particularly active on social media and he utilises online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram as interactive strategies to apply and test his ideas.

His first job as an Air Force technician had provided plenty of clues for him on how work and life issues often revolved around layers of processes within power structures. His subsequent career switch to graphic design exposed him to pop culture and all the trappings of consumer influence and marketing strategies. Identifying himself with the middle class consumer poses issues of the paper chase, the lure of awards, status recognition, class differentiation, power struggle and the influence of



Fig. 5 General with ear handset

canonisation. These influences and much more made their way into his art, as we shall see in the illustrated works in a later section.

Justin is bilingual and uses both Chinese characters and also English in his art in a way that borrows from popular or street usage. Yet these constructed phrases, on closer reading, would seem to indicate thinking in his mother tongue Chinese before translating into English words and sentences. This is a process that most Chinese Singaporeans would usually do in their daily social and work interactions. Conversing with others is often in Singlish although Singaporeans do not write in that form. Texts in his works often reflect this background.

Considered as a whole, Lee’s oeuvre is predominantly more that of a reflection of a mirror rather than the dispersive unpacking of a prism. Observations of social conditions are reflected back from the surface rather than analysed and digested into a convoluted hilt.

For Lee’s work, you either get it straight away or you don’t. And sometimes you don’t. But that is until the next time or another day, when you suddenly get it and it hits you, right home where it’s most tender or hilarious. There is little sophistry, but your self discovery of the shared “truth” is profound!

Further to an earlier statement I made that Lee is an avid observer, Lee said in reply to a question asked by Tolla Duke for timeoutsingapore.com : “The difference between artists and people with other jobs is that we are more observant. People often neglect to look around and consider their environment...” and

that is exactly what he has been doing as an artist for the past 18 years, expressing the thoughts of ordinary folks in a manner he does best; messages that one can imagine reeks of gems of insight hidden within the words and images of his artworks.

I mined his first art catalogue *A Fantasy in Red*, which was produced in 2005 with images of artworks from 1996 to 2004, and found valuable thoughts and quotes, snippets from famous personalities, peppered and coddled together into an artist statement of sorts. The format suggested to me very much an artist parallel to gardener Chance from that 1979 movie starring Peter Sellers.

Justin intimated, “I never thought of becoming anything great. I would be glad if I could achieve something. If I cannot, I won’t mind...” Neither ambitious nor manipulative, but just concentrating on doing it, for “any attempts, no matter how subtle, to control the outcome [will] prevent the true expression of who you are.” However, he’s also not shy of making a strong statement because “By daring to paint so-called unacceptable images or colours, you build your creative power. It happens when you have touched within yourself some true depth.”

Another quote (from Anonymous): “When you paint from intuition, the deep meaning is never written on the outside of the package.”

Other quotations also come thick and fast, like Confucian or Chance’s (depending on one’s perspective!) wise sayings, laid out like those one-a-day offerings in a do-it-yourself manual/journal:

- “Competition rules our lives. Even toys have to fight!”
- “Looking can make you want, and wanting can get you thinking, and wanting more.”
- “Don’t hesitate to consider even the craziest of ideas today. They could be your ticket to a new life...”
- “What do you feel is the true size of your image? Not the real size, the true inner size”
- “Watch out for the trap of product: it may close in on you before you have time to close it.”
- “Is what happens inside you that is important,

- not what occurs on your painting”
- “Imagination is better than knowledge.”
- “I don’t mind straight people as long as they act gay in public.”
- “When was the last time you look at the sky?”

The Vocabulary of Justin Lee

As artworks are treasured for individual expression and style more than the high volume quality of unsigned crafts and cultural artifacts, artists strive to achieve their own “look” for their finished work. The development of an artist’s brand is therefore an important attribute to success. Justin Lee, with his diasporic Chinese heritage, his training in Western design and American pop culture, and his Singapore home of great multicultural diversity, has plenty of inputs to choose from. Which is what he has indeed exploited to maximum advantage, in the spirit of Contemporary Art’s celebration of the appropriation of the found object (after Duchamp), and the mix of multiple elements using a collage approach.

Below, I venture to make a (non-exhaustive inventory) list of the icons from multiple sources appropriated by Lee in developing his vocabulary.

The alphabets of his vocabulary:

- A for Astronaut, AstroBoy, Award Society, Andy Warhol
- B for Bruce Lee
- C for Colour (red, white, black, green), Coca Cola, Chair, Cage, Court Ladies, Recycled Corrugated Cardboard, Cloud, Chess, Crest
- D for Double Happiness, Door, Dustbin,
- E for Elmo, Embroidery
- F for Flag, Fishes, Fabric
- G for God, Generals,
- H for Headset, Hamburger, Housing Development Board (HDB) Flat
- I for Installation
- J for Joker, Journey to the West
- K for King

- L for Light bulb, Lightning, Laser-cut
- M for McDonald’s, Mickey Mouse, Mask, Mao, Medals
- N for Nanyang style
- O for Olympics
- P for Pac-Man, Playing Cards, Paper-cut, Painting, Performance, Printing
- Q for Queen
- R for Red, Resin
- S for Samsui Woman, Stainless Steel
- T for Tin Can, Toys, Tiara, Text, Terra-cotta
- U for Uniform
- V for Vase, Vanity, Video
- W for Window, Wonder Woman
- X for X (no entry)
- Y for Yin/Yang
- Z for Zebra

If there is one style that can be said to be recognised by collectors, art professionals and the interested public of Justin Lee’s art, it must surely be the “Double Happiness” symbol. Through persistent and creative usage, Justin Lee has largely made it his own logo.

In traditional Chinese weddings, the use of Double Happiness has been fairly widespread; however, this has been on a declining trend in modern Chinese weddings and almost never appeared in contemporary art or calligraphy (ever since 1949’s Communist Party takeover of China and the subsequent shredding of all things traditional/bourgeoise). Here, the placing of two similar characters 喜 for “happiness” side by side to make a new composite character cleverly symbolises the marriage of a couple united in bliss. In contemporary art, Justin has very cleverly appropriated it as a symbol of a “new” kind of relationship, that of the marriage between similar kinds, in terms of sexual choice.

There is further word play on “happiness”, which in the past was synonymous in English with the word “gay”. While “gay” was once used to denote or describe light-heartedness or bright colours, now it largely relates to sexual or romantic attraction to

others of one’s same sex. This appropriation of the special character occurred around the time of Lee’s solo show in the early 2000s, another move that has turned out to be quite prescient as the Gay Rights Movement has, since then, been moving strongly to the social front in many economically developed societies.

Looking back with today’s 20/20 hindsight on Justin Lee’s art creations of the period 1996 to 2015, we can with certainty say that many “statements” from his artworks have been spot on. At the same time, many of the cultural, commercial and consumer icons that he has employed in his artworks have come into subsequent acceptance and use for socio-political commentary.

Quite often images and texts used in his artworks, such as toys, games, bottled beverages, consumer brands, comic superheroes, cartoon characters, sports events, playing cards, trophies and medals, fashion items and uniforms, God and celebrities, etc. have no trouble at all being linked to issues and concerns deemed central to Singaporeans. Of specific note is his use of collage materials, army uniforms, discarded corrugated cardboards, resin and clay figurines, to name but a few, to tell different stories.

From his body of artworks, we can deduce that core to Justin’s concerns are issues of identity (national and individual, including gender), gambling, clash of American and Chinese cultures, rat race and economic striving, children’s games and aging, leadership styles and impact of official policy decisions on common folks.

Highlights of selected important artworks

SINGAPORE FLAG

Using elements from his vocabulary, Lee would compose his artworks. The first artwork that I am going to write about is *Singapore Flag* (see Figure 1). This is a painting not drawn to scale of the original national flag. It is heavily covered over the top half with his artistic icons. The official narrative

has it that “The Flag of Singapore consists of two horizontal halves, red above white. Red symbolises universal brotherhood and equality of man; white stands for pervading and everlasting purity and virtue. In the upper left corner, a white crescent moon and five white stars form a circle. The crescent moon represents a young nation on the ascendant, and the five stars depict Singapore’s ideals of democracy, peace, progress, justice and equality.”

In Lee’s work, the red space in the top half is replaced by a white background, on top of which are then added many red paper-cut icons from traditional Chinese culture. The character of Double Happiness, painted in different sizes, dominates this space with the most repetition over all other icons. Across the entire base of this top half is the jagged silhouette of buildings that suggests the urban cityscape of Singapore. In the bottom half of the painting are faint images of a number of scattered butterflies embedded in white.

As a whole, I consider Lee’s “version” of the flag to have added many additional layers to the reading of the national flag. Singapore’s population composition of 75 percent of Chinese descent with inherited Confucian values is aptly depicted by the red paper-cut icons. To the promise of the 5-star values is added a double dosage of happiness (Double Happiness) of Lee’s hopes for his fellow countrymen. The crescent moon, reinforced by his addition of butterflies, represents a young nation in a time of transformation amidst rapid metamorphic changes.

ARMY SERIES

As a young nation with little independent history or identity, especially after the political separation from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore chose to build its own armed forces from scratch. All male citizens have had to do 24 to 30 months of uniformed national service. Justin Lee has frequently depicted this important aspect of Singapore’s life rigorously from the vantage point of its personal effects on him.

As military conscription is based on conventional medical and physical screenings and reviews, Lee gave voice to a suffering minority whose gender or sexuality may deviate from the norm, but who, on top of the fear of being found out, are still required to go through the same rigorous training as others. It is left to our imagination what kind of physical and emotional traumas might have been experienced by such individuals. The artist considers this as an expression of an “unheard inner voice”.

Figures 6A and 6B illustrates a selection of his works from the *Army Series*. The torso-only mannequin with two Double Happiness patches covering the breasts and a two-piece stitched bow-tie and underdress made from army fatigue and worn around the neck and from the hips, makes a powerful installation. It gives the informed viewer a sense of the “silent scream” that any individual unfortunate enough to find himself in the bizarre situation, had to endure.

A few minor square canvases dressed in army fatigue have adornments such as brooches and accessory pins attached onto them, signifying feminism below the displayed masculinity. Another canvas has the word “QUEEN” embroidered in gold across it. Lee’s exhibited awareness of suppressed sexuality that is considered not the norm comes very early for a traditional Asian society such as Singapore’s.



Fig. 6A Justin Lee, *Double Happiness in National Service* (2004)



Fig. 6B Justin Lee, *Queen* (2006)

MCDONALD’S HAPPY CLOWN

The geopolitical worldview from the time of the breakup of the USSR in 1991, was that of the soft power extension of American influence to the rest of the world, a process now known as globalisation. For Lee, the opportunity came at the right time for his training at the Tyler Graphics Ltd. in New York City in the year 2000. This exposure cemented the influence of the design-focused Pop Art culture of America (most famously represented by artist Andy Warhol) on Justin Lee’s own art practice.



Fig. 7 Justin Lee, *Happy Clown* (2005)

In Figure 7 is the work titled *Happy Clown*. It alludes to the iconic clown as the symbol of the McDonald’s food chain penetration into the daily meals of many Asian societies. This new way of eating made great inroads, with its aggressive advertising, into most Asian cities, chief of which was Singapore, whose labour force of workers with traditional Asian tastes, successfully accepted western industrialisation methods as well as eating cultures. Justin Lee did a painting in 2005 of a McDonald’s clown with a red nose, grinning clown’s mouth/ lips and M-arcs for eyebrows, which are then superimposed onto the features of an Asian face. Lee’s own red Chinese emblems cover the Clown’s frizzy hair. This East-West combination suggested Asia’s submission to this ubiquitous American brand.

Yet in a subsequent performance video five years later, titled *Eat Fast Food Fast*, he is shown

blending the full contents of a McDonald’s Burger Meal — into a trashy-looking liquid — which he then proceeded to torturously gulp down. That he almost choked at the end of the video suggests that the meal was not entirely digestible. In my view, this is a Singaporean enjoying the benefits of — yet not totally swallowing — the soft power hegemony of American globalisation. Remember that this was 2010. Fast forward 10 years to today and witness the recent roll-back of globalisation, and the challenge to American soft-power domination by various Asian economies, with their accompanying cultures. We have had J-pop, followed by K-pop, and recently “Crazy Rich Asians”!

The next two major works that I will be describing here deal with the salient statements made by the artist on the zeitgeist of the last 55 years of modern Singapore.



Fig. 8 Justin Lee, *Eat Fast Food Fast* (2010)

GODALISATION

The first work touches upon how all the internal factors of Singapore were organised, on a level of genius that is attributed to founder Lee Kuan Yew, to correctly take advantage of international geopolitical trends, resulting in taking the local economy onto the world stage, and winning recognition and accolades from many of the world’s eminent entrepreneurs and statesmen.

During most of the 1960s to the end of the century, the word “God” is often whispered during private conversations to refer to the seeming

genius of Lee Kuan Yew in country management. During this time, American power too was extended globally. In 2008, in a fit of inspiration Justin Lee the artist fused two words, the word “God” and the word “Globalisation”, together into one word — “Godalisation”.

He then made the symbol of the Olympic Games, i.e. with its five overlapping rings, which stood for excellence in world competition, pointing a finger at Singapore’s constant striving to be world number 1 in many fields. The rings are made of fluorescent light tubes. Below this installation is a painting of the word “GODALISATION”, painted red on white in Justin’s paper-cut style. This work is dated 2005 (see Figure 9).



Fig. 9 Justin Lee, *Godalisation* (2005)

Into that one composite word, and by the image of one composite installation, Justin Lee has managed to collapse the total universe of what it means to be a Singaporean, under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, during the greatest times of Singapore’s existence, under American global domination. Justin’s use of the word God has also triggered in me a fond remembrance from long ago: in the movie which I have dredged out to draw a parallel to Justin Lee’s art, there is a closing scene when Chance the gardener was seen walking on water.

I AM A PRODUCT OF UPBRINGING

The next work is a large-scale installation work titled *I am a Product of Upbringing*. This monumental work (see Figure 10) is made of 96 corrugated brown cubic cardboard boxes stacked into a 6 high by 8 long and 2 deep structure, measuring an overall 3 metre X 4 metre X 1 metre in dimension. On one of its broad sides is the text stencilled in black “I AM A PRODUCT OF UPBRINGING” and on the reverse side are various international brand symbols — products of a consumer society. At one end of the block are six Chinese characters 站不高, 看不远 translated as “Only by standing tall can we see far.” The high stacked boxes exhort us to stand on the shoulders of giants from the pioneer generation, to share in their vision. At the opposite end of this, right at the top is a stencilled symbol of a basketball backboard. This suggests setting a high target and lofty expectations. Furthermore, the scale of work requires the viewer to walk around the whole installation in order to take in all its details, including backing up quite a bit to see it in its entirety.



Fig. 10 Justin Lee, *I Am A Product of Upbringing* (2010)

This work condenses the two generational embryonic relationship between the founding of independent Singapore (from 1965) to its founding father and first Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

The work encapsulates within its material and volume, the grand design behind how one man brought a whole nation from the third world to first, and in the process constructed almost everything that influences the lives, thoughts and attitudes of two generations of its citizens (hence the Upbringing).

As it is made of corrugated cardboard boxes, this also poses the crucial question of how long this piece of work, referring to both Justin Lee’s artwork and Lee Kuan Yew’s system of government, might be expected to last. The choice of using cardboard boxes for building up the installation has already proven to be quite prescient on the part of Justin Lee, as cardboard boxes became a political issue, about five years later, in subsequent political discussions over whether old Singaporean folks who collect them for resale are doing it for a living or for exercise to keep fit!⁵

THE GAME OF LIFE

In 2019, Justin added the method of stainless-steel laser cut into his repertoire as substitution for his paper-cut style of paintings. This adaptation, besides being an innovative use of new technology, also allows him the opportunity to scale up the size of his works, and this is exactly what he did for the mammoth installation project at the open lobby of the Esplanade — Singapore’s premier performing arts complex.

In a work entitled *Game of Life* (see Figure 11), Lee drew observations and lessons from life and likened it to the game of Chinese chess. 18 large stainless-steel generals (a continuation of his earlier *Army Series*, with a new layer of added meaning, pointing to the predominance of ex-army generals in local political leadership) were hung by cables from the ceiling, hovering over and barely touching the floor. Plastic dividers made to look like the squares of a Chinese chess board are placed around the space to simulate the entire installation as a game of chess.



Fig. 11 *Game of Life* at the Esplanade (2018/19)

The generals are each laser cut according to rank, with a higher rank equating to a taller figure.

This way of looking at Singapore life introduces a degree of complexity to local social observation within the larger global geopolitics. By the time of the passing in 2015 of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore had made it as a developed country economically, although many are of the opinion that it still has ways to go before it can be one with its own distinct identity and shared destiny. That Singapore is administered along declared meritocratic lines, the gradual rise over the decades of an elite class of leaders through the public scholastic system lends credence to the narrative of this power structure as a crucial part of the “Asian Alternative” model.

Globally, the rapid economic rise of China has also introduced tensions in many spheres of Singapore’s foreign relationship. It now has to contend with big power trade frictions, territorial tensions in the South China Sea, and more assertive neighbours. Domestically, due to leadership renewal efforts, many younger leaders who are drawn from military backgrounds have been recruited. Life, in the eyes of Justin Lee, has become a game of chess in many respects.

During the installation, the various coloured spotlights falling onto the generals, shining on them, reflecting from them, as well as shining through the perforations in the cut sections, all acted together to produce an element of fluidity, mystery and

⁵Referencing Minister Tan Chuan Jin’s Facebook post in 2015.

uncertainty for the future. Is this the new face of the aftermath of *Godalisation*?

BONSAI IN DANGER:

In early 2020, Justin Lee made a work titled *Home Series - Bonsai In Danger* (see Figure 12A). In the past, as a part of nation- and identity-building, different icons have been nationally proposed and two have indeed been selected to represent the idea of a new nation-state for Singapore. We thus have the hybrid orchid Vanda Miss Joaquim as the national flower. Later, a commissioned monumental sculpture named *The Merlion* was installed in a very prominent public place. It represents a mythical beast with the head of a lion with the body and tail of the mermaid. This icon merges well the narrated histories of Singapore as a lion city with a great seaport.

To me, the bonsai tree, a plant artificially stunted in its growth and treasured for its compacted wholeness, could also represent Singapore well. It being the world in miniature; a microcosm — multiracial, multilingual, east-west meeting place, man-made water falls, man-made animal habitats, climatically-controlled indoors Gardens by the Bay, with man-made SuperTrees etc. In this work, Justin made a bonsai-sized, stainless-steel laser-cut tree sculpture (standing on a clear acrylic base) — with a tree trunk and a body of branches and leaves that took the shape of the old coastline (map) of Singapore. Additionally, the words of the ubiquitous “Danger - Keep Out” signboard (in four official languages) were cut into it.

In geopolitics, since 2016 under President Trump, the world has further retreated from



Fig. 12A Justin Lee, *Home Series - Bonsai in Danger* (2020)



Fig. 12B Justin Lee, *Trees Series - Danger Keep Out* (2020)

globalisation, as “Make America Great Again” results in fragmentation and more division amongst the family of nations. As the world has become spatially smaller, rather than larger as in the prior globalisation era, the stunted bonsai tree is an apt choice as the icon to represent the present times.

Other works:

The above choices are works that make particularly strong statements, yet they are seldom in your face or event-specific but rather contain elements that suggest views made on deep thinking, and that further suggest lasting attributes and trends, rather than strong and emotional but fleeting outbursts.

Another major recurring theme is his *Award Series* — countless reiterations of trophies, badges and medals of all shapes, sizes and materials — all relating to the striving for excellence, to be the best, to always be number one. This social ambition, set from topdown, has often resulted in the stress of sustaining the rat race, the single-minded focus on money and economics, and the intolerance of dissimilar views. Related images often used by Lee are those of a bird in the cage, the HDB flat (another cage?), and army generals wearing sound-muffling headsets!

From early on, Justin Lee has also employed powerful personalities to put across his points — thus he has Bruce Lee, the Empress Dowager, and Wonder Woman to contrast between femininity and masculinity, and finally, arriving at God.

Conclusion/ Give Utopia a Chance

In summing up, I look back and take stock of what I have written so far. I hope I have successfully put across Justin Lee as an artist who, as he lives his life in contemporary consumer society, makes careful observations of how others behave all around him, what his own responses are; and from these observations and personal experiences, makes art from a place of authenticity, communicating from what he calls a deep inner voice.

That he is able to make quite a lot of accurate hits on quite a number of areas of contemporary

society is such a marvel that I find myself drawing a parallel of his outputs and impacts to that of the fictitious character Chance. It is particularly important for me to state that he manages to do it without resorting to discourse to explain his works and make them accessible to art professionals and the general public. He has done little of that, and continues to make his art according to his internal compass. So his artworks are left to speak for themselves, until now as I take it upon myself to write this essay to share my impressions from the more than 15 years of following his progress and occasionally collecting his art.

I believe that the true nature of zeitgeist, or the spirit of the times, can or will only be revealed from the advantage of perfect hindsight, not through present analysis or eloquently expounded foresight. The time period covered by this essay is from 2000 to the present time of 2020 [at the time this essay was written]. Twenty years of art would be a satisfactory condition to support my conclusion that Justin Lee has often been prescient, in my assessment, in making art that is truly representative of his time. From my perspective, I would think that his artworks would, in time to come, be seen by later generations of Singaporeans and others, as art historical, and not only pass the test of time, but also be relied upon to narrate, in a visual medium, this golden period of independent Singapore’s existence.

In terms of its aesthetics, Justin Lee’s art is ahead of other Chinese artists but not totally unique as paper-cut and Double Happiness icons are not unique just to Singapore. As such, it can be spread elsewhere. Just as American Pop Art (led by Andy Warhol) had been influential worldwide - through the process of soft-power globalisation following the spread of western style consumerism. Justin Lee’s art, on the other hand, can be spread to other areas with Chinese culture, through the Chinese diaspora, on the heels of rapid economic development following Singapore’s brand of economic and public administration.

Epilogue

Sometime in 2006, Justin Lee did a work based simply on the statement “I AM A CON ARTIST” (see

Figure 13). The text, in red bold capital letters, covers almost the entire space of the 139 cm by 96.5 cm canvas. To complete the work, the artist had it framed in a simple gold painted wooden frame. Lee seemed to be making a big statement of sorts at the time. It was a self-portrait but in words. We can all guess that he was pointing to something other than a tongue-in-cheek play on the words “con artist.” The words superficially allude to the impression the general public has that artists who sell their works for exceptionally high (read that as ridiculous) sums are probably some kind of con men.

14 years later, in January 2021, the title of the solo show organised by The Private Museum, is borrowing this statement in its billing as in *I am a CON artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee*. The presentation is a quadripartite coalition event between four art entities - the socially-adept artist, a consummate collector, an enlightened institution and their unsuspecting audience. The resultant showcase is but one variation out of a multifarious possibilities of interactive chemical reactions. The audience takes away an unforgettable experience of sights, sounds, performance, large scale installations and make-believe play acting. We are in real danger of being jolted by a sense of epiphany that our everyday life is lived as a con job.

In his own inimitable way, Justin Lee has displayed his class.



Fig. 13 Justin Lee, *I Am A Con Artist* (2006)



**I AM A
CON
ARTIST**

Selections from
The Teng Collection



Exhibition view of *I am a CON Artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee*
The Private Museum, Singapore.



Godalisation (2005)

Fluorescent circular light bulbs and acrylic on canvas (diptych)
 Acrylic: 57 x 100 cm
 Fluorescent lights: 47 x 90 cm
 Canvas: 91 x 61 cm each



No Entry Except Authorised Personnel (2006)

Light box, 66 metal tags sewn on canvas
102 x 77 x 8 cm



Danger – Keep Out (2005)

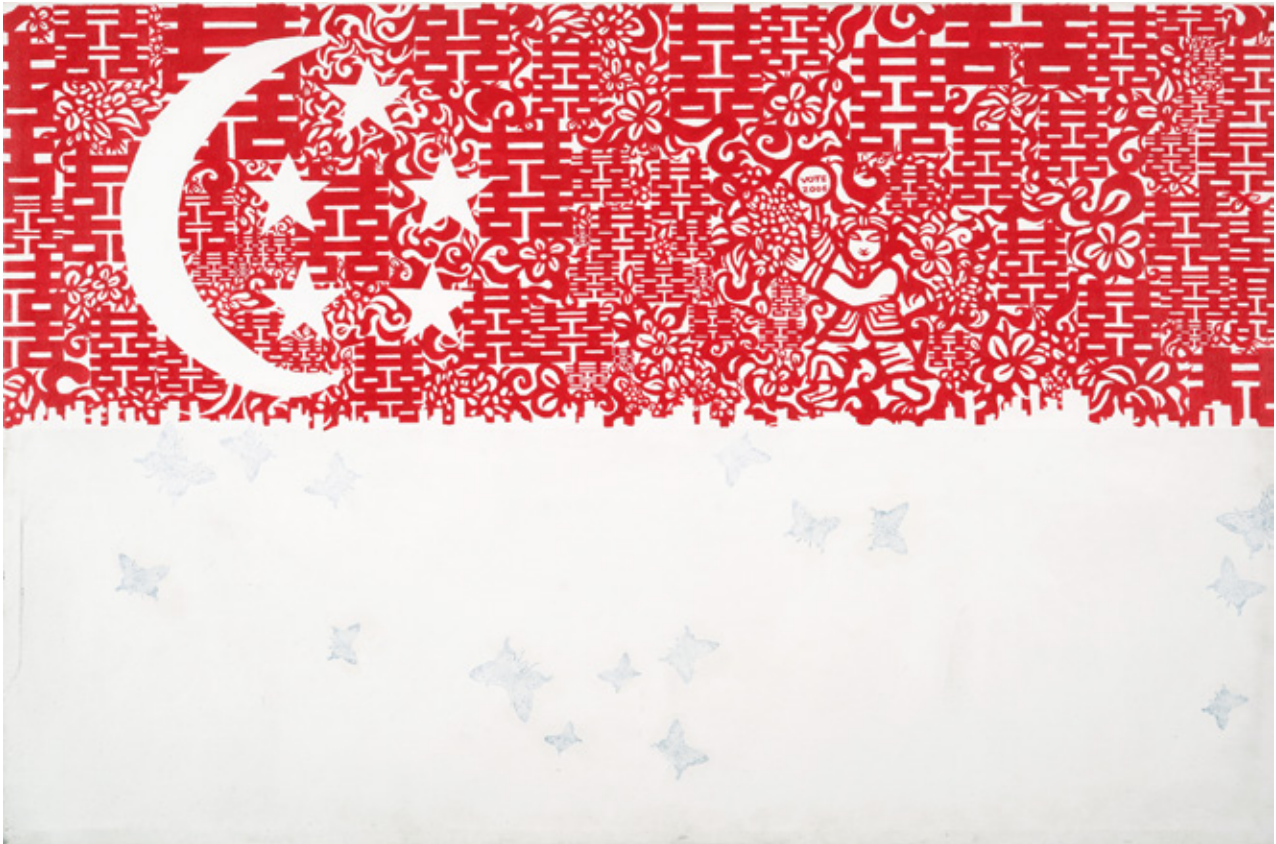
Acrylic on wood, framed
77 x 107 cm



Happy Warrior (2012/2015)



Fibre glass
35 x 13 x 11 cm each



Singapore Flag (2006)

Mixed media on canvas
100 x 150 cm



Queen (2006)

Embroidery on fabric on canvas
46 x 61 cm



Double Happiness in National Service (2004)

Paper and fabric collage on mannequin
155 x 40 x 40 cm



I Am A Con Artist (2006)

Acrylic on wood, framed
140 x 97 cm

The Teng Collection

Founded by Teng Jee Hum and June Ong, with the first artwork acquired in 1993. Through continual collecting and periodic rationalising of its purpose, the collection confines itself to the art of Asia, with a particular focus on the art-historical. This can also be described in another way as trying to collect artworks that speak of the spirit of their time. Included in the collection are works of Modern as well as Contemporary Asian artists.



GLOBALISATION



I AM A
CON
ARTIST

Continuous
Contemplations
of Justin Lee

Reconstructing the Visual World of Justin Lee

BY LEE CHOR LIN

This exhibition, *I am a CON Artist*, pairs Justin Lee's latest works with older works from The Teng Collection. It is a good selection to understand some of the critical elements of Justin Lee's artistic career and his way of art.

The artist – the making of

Justin Lee was born in 1963 and grew up in the heart of Singapore's original Chinese enclave — The Big Gate (Damenlou, Tua Moong Lao, Dai Moon Lau 大門樓). The “Gate” is said to refer to the majestic façade of the Yeung Cheng School, symbol of philanthropy and the progressiveness of the Singapore Cantonese in early 20th century. Nestled between Club Street and Ann Siang Hill, both famous for leisure clubs of wealthy Chinese merchants and trade guilds, this building was the centre for Justin's Chinese world, which lingered on in post-independence Singapore, finding its last bastion in this neighbourhood, with its rent-controlled quarters, where countless households carved out spaces in grand shophouses, shared utilities and music playlists, games and fights, joys, woes and secrets.

As Justin grew, the Old World lustre built up by the towkays was crumbling, exacerbated by the rapid transformation of Singapore's economy from entrepôt trading to industrialised modes of production, with attendant American-style commercialisation, often by way of Japan and Hong Kong. This change meant a loss of sense of purpose amongst communities who had hitherto oriented themselves around dialect-based identities and ways of doing business.

To understand Justin's art, one needs to appreciate the visual environment that shaped his perception of the world. It was never neatly compartmentalised into an East, a West and a zone of contact in high art, where Chinese ink sits in harmony with Cubist attitudes or Abstract Expressionist gestures. That visual world spared no patience nor mercy for the children of Singapore, circa 1965 to 1975: images and sounds collided, mixing up basic tenets and boundaries, audible sounds amid cacophony. Shop plaques

engraved with words of aspiration by distinguished calligraphers were lit by the exuberant neon signage of night clubs. TV blasted jingles of Dumex milk powder commercials, intersecting Astro Boy, Ultraman and Lydia Sum as she pranced around in Citizen Watch-sponsored variety show. Such was a snapshot of the visual excitement one lived days on end in Singapore of 1960s and 1970s.

Hence, to say that Justin grew up consuming popular culture is not an exaggeration. In fact, Justin's first expression of art, as a young child, was doodling and re-drawing the figures and faces he had seen on movie posters, and in the movies he had gone to watch with his press photographer grandfather, who often received complimentary tickets. The world of Chinese entertainment that his grandparents knew, Hong Kong movies, martial arts, and ping pong tournaments were a sort of alternative Chinese Buena Vista Social Club, and they were to become constant sources of imagery that fed into Justin's nascent visual ‘human-scape’. Later, while finishing Primary Six at Telok Ayer Primary School, he became the librarian, in charge of sets of beautifully illustrated books of European princes and princesses, fairy tales and fables, all of which provided him with a daily dose of image and narrative. It was around the same time Justin's artistic inclination was discovered by an art teacher, who assigned him to make illustrated teaching aids for their geography classes, and who, after applying for Justin to enter the United Overseas Bank art competition, took upon herself to usher him around on weekends to sketch along Singapore River, luncheon and snacks provided. These may have been the critical moments to decide this young mind on a life-long career in art.

However, Justin took a circuitous route to his eventual professional artist career. In 1978, armed with an ‘A’ in art and a ‘B’ in Chinese as a 2nd Language (CL2), he began the mandatory national rite of passage for all young Singapore males of his age, the two-and-a-half-year military training and service. He signed on as a regular, working in engineering support in the Singapore Air Force. One

day, in the daily tedium of maintenance work on missiles for Singapore's F16s, he had a revelation that pushed him to take up night classes on graphic arts. This led to his first jobs after the Air Force — in graphic design and window display. He also enrolled himself in part-time classes at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts to better his art-making skills more systematically. Scrutinising Justin's long pursuit in art helps us understand his works and appreciate the lead-up to the images we see in them.

Medals and taglines

One of the most notable visual elements that would catch on with Justin was the medal, the most visible symbol of the recognition our society hands out to reward and approve positive outcomes — one's good luck, one's achievements and excellence, as well as one's conformity to prescribed social mores and standards. His seven-year experience in the Air Force was a window for Justin to understand how powerful such recognition can be, especially within the rigidity of military organisation. Each stripe, colour, star and medal carries highly codified approval to advance an officer's career. Needless to say, the competitive mindset and sometimes inflexible determination of what is deserving can be a major source of anxiety in any given environment, and is amplified in the military.

In this exhibition, Justin seeks to counterbalance this anxiety with a series of medal forms. To start, he presents *Last Chance For Love*, an installation of 40 die-cut gilt acrylic medal-plaques intended for audiences to wear for a selfie on a stage setup. It is clearly a theme of the early 2000s and a part of the iconic Double Happiness series. These new medals hold keys to the visual mindscape of the artist, and concerns about scoring points, reward systems and valorisation. Graphical, literal and whimsical, the medals invite reactions from the viewers at the sight of a Soviet-styled star, a "1ST", "HONOUR" and the Playboy Bunny. Seen in smaller groups, they can be puzzling too — a meditating yogi (or Buddha), next to "The Artist", "The GOH" (Guest of

Honour) and "PAP" (presumably People's Action Party). One might be tempted to commiserate with the loser being awarded the iron medal in a series comprising the characters for Gold, Silver, and Bronze (金银铜铁). Nevertheless, at this installation, the audience member will choose their own reward, and no judgement is required.

If *Last Chance For Love* medals represent permutations of personal glory or claims to fame, the two sculptural specimens (*We are Family* and *We Want More*), executed in stainless steel and dressed with fabric ribbons made of vintage patterns of the 60s and 70s, suggest the process by which the artist digests the U-turn phenomena in us: of how Singapore embraces the emerging superstar, China, who was rejected and denied based on Cold War political bias when Justin was growing up; and of how we are now seeking to unravel the effects of the infamous "Stop at Two" policy, trying to boost our declining birth rate.

Amused by how neon lights had returned to the scene, Justin tried his hand to add an edge to his Club Street nostalgia in two works. In one of these, he emblazoned the same stainless-steel medal with a cheeseburger, depicted with twisted neon tubes in perfect economy of lines, its filling shouting the characters "chong yang" 崇洋, (blind worship of all things foreign). The judgemental and morally loaded notion, perhaps slightly outdated in our present globalised milieu, figures exceptionally well for a retrospective look at the artist's childhood in Chinatown.

At Mei Chin Secondary School, Justin was singled out by his art teachers to produce the school's posters as part of government-led social engineering campaigns — for inculcating courtesy, public cleanliness, dental health, team spirit, etc. Thus groomed as the purveyor of campaign posters, Justin learned the art of infusing messages with imagery to effect a desired behavior and collective belief. Later in life, this skill turned into an art, with a healthy irreverence for words, texts and idioms — Justin loves to play with puns. This passion is most jubilant on *You Drive Me Crazy*, made with a

Mercedes bumper and the titular phrase in neon, pun intended. All those tricks he picked up in making school posters Justin now deploys to make perfect symbiosis between text and image on this very work.

Returning to painting pictures

In this exhibition, Justin returns to the beginnings of his artistic calling, reminding us of his innate talent for the figurative. Justin chooses to display his painting skill with an homage to the Flemish school of portraiture celebrated for its minute true-to-life realist depictions not only of the sitters, but the architectural interiors of their dwellings, material possessions and luxurious clothing. Justin takes a shot at black-on-black for a portrait of a Flemish merchant (*Instinctively, I Am Yours*), wearing a voluminous black woollen robe (for black was one of the most expensive colours to achieve on fabric in those days), white millstone ruff collar of stiffened lace, the softer bobbin laces of the inner cotton tunic drooping from the sleeve cuffs of the black robe – all trappings of expensive couture in the 16th century. He tries, with some difficulty, to transform the man's face into one of an Asian idol, as his intention was to signal the ascent of Asian wealth and success, which yet often relies on borrowed European idioms to express it. A group of five 'Justinian' medals loom in white like Olympian logo, emerging subtly under the thick raven-coloured background.

The companion portrait (*Will You Marry Me For The Money*) seems like Justin's imagination of Princess Leia as the wife of a Flemish merchant who made his fortune in the Southeast Asian spice trade. Unexpectedly, even with his skills in academic sketching and painting, Justin discovered that the rose pink damask dress would become a nightmare. That particular shade of pink was a complex mixture of pigments impossible to replicate, if he were to run out before the image was completed. Justin had to paint the dress in one go, toiling and labouring over hours on end.

Justin still wants to invoke the flatness of graphic art even as he engages in traditional

picture painting. This is achieved in *Poster Kids For Happy Meal*, which is completely immersed in turquoise, Justin's favourite colour. In *Poster Kids*, the brilliance of the mineral hue flattens out all the painstakingly rendered details, which are executed in a range of tints nuanced between black, blue, grey and white, skilfully and cleverly manipulated with chiaroscuro. For Justin, this flattening effect helps draw attention to the teaming of images from two extreme genres — the healthily chubby babies from propaganda posters of the Cultural Revolution period, the epitome of Socialism; and the succulent double cheese Big Mac, the symbol of capitalism and Americanisation. Justin's emulation skill is impressive, as the work resembles a collage of images appropriated from magazines and posters, except that it is an original pictorial feat.

An albumen print from a glass negative of the late 19th century is most probably the blueprint of *First Meal For Autumn*, which features a mother and son dressed in late Qing period outfits. Like *Poster Kids*, this painting is immersed in a turquoise tint, but this time the goal seems not to flatten but to add depth to the placidity and sombre mood of the portrait. The artist captures well that certain immobility inherent in such photographic images, but injects his own brand of humour with a display of McDonald's food on the table. Justin's signature graphic element is inserted surreptitiously around the woman, whose wide-sleeved details suddenly turn whimsically stencil-like. The artist's intention is unclear, but this unsettling element is as much a puzzle as a device to nudge the viewer to look closer and imagine freely — seeing Justin's panache as a portraiture, of how both mother and child must have had to sit still for the long exposure of the camera, and connecting the painter with his maternal grandfather, Tai Yew Kuan, who worked as a staff photographer of the dailies before and after World War II.

Artists often revisit their old haunts, the habits they picked up years ago and techniques that first released their artistic potential. In doing so this

time — using orthodox methods of painting to inject a new spirit to his signature staple of graphical pop art — Justin seems to be blazing a new trail. Considering the richness of his visual vocabulary and the depth of his sources, what we see today may well be the start of a powerful trajectory to come in Justin Lee’s art.

Lee Chor Lin

A museum professional since 1985, Lee Chor Lin was senior curator at the Asian Civilisations Museum (1993–2002), Director of National Museum of Singapore (2002–2013), and CEO of Arts House Limited (2013–2016), which also ran the Singapore International Festival of Arts. She currently works independently and selectively, researching and writing on prewar Singapore Chinese artists, Indonesian Chinese diaspora in batik trade, and food writing as a cultural memoir in modern Chinese literature. For her dedication to the arts and museum work, she was conferred Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government in 2009 and Cavaliere, Ordine della Stella d'Italia by the Italian government in 2012.

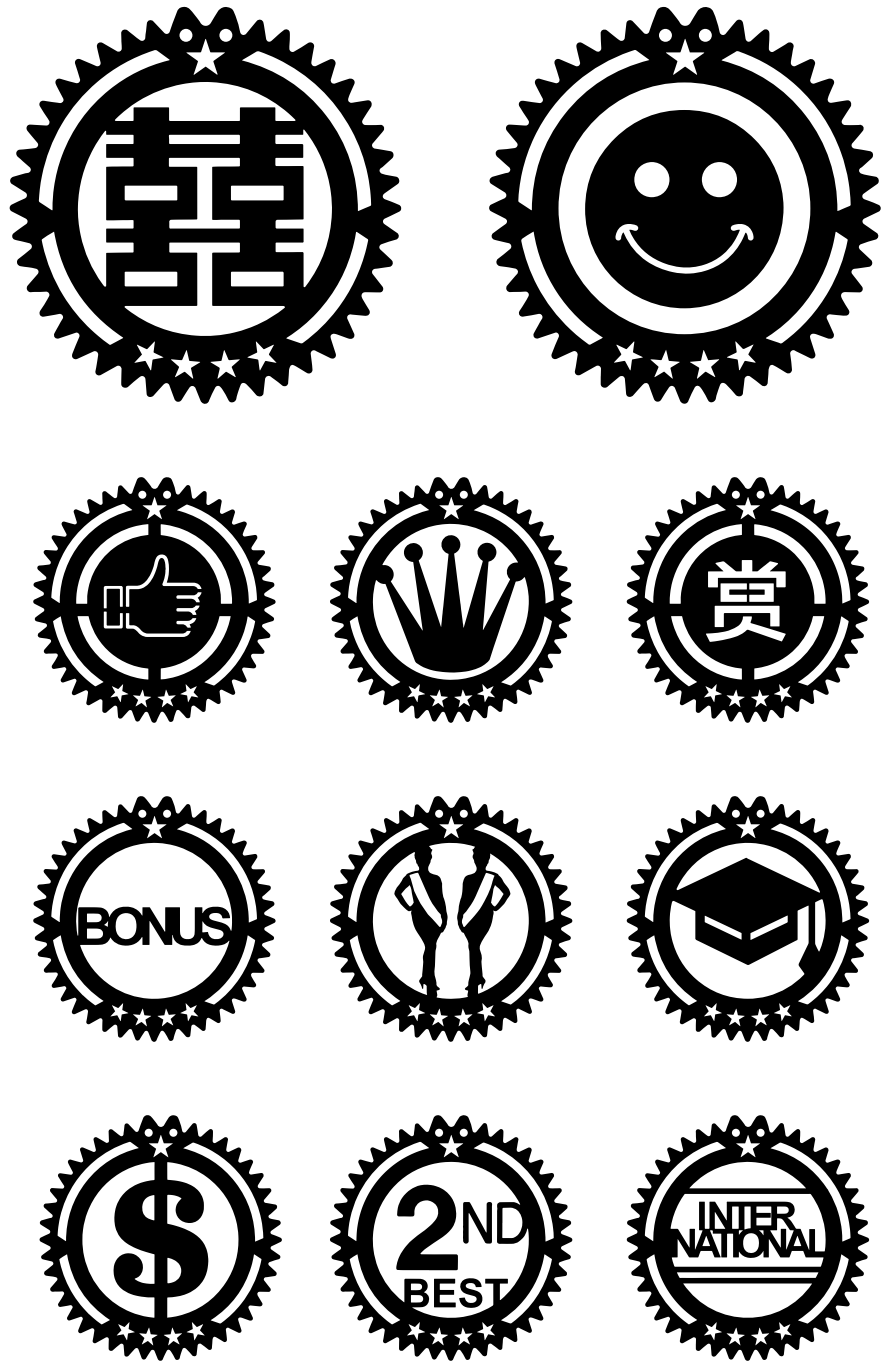


Exhibition view of *I am a CON Artist: Continuous Contemplations* of Justin Lee
The Private Museum, Singapore.

Last Chance For Love (2021)



Stage, curtains, carpet, 40 acrylic medals
Dimensions variable, acrylic medals 19 x 19 cm each



Vector outline of
Last Chance For Love



Closeup shot of
Last Chance For Love



Will You Marry Me For The Money (2020)

Acrylic on canvas, framed
140 x 120 cm



Instinctively, I Am Yours (2020)

Acrylic on canvas, framed
159 x 120 cm



Exhibition view of *I am a CON Artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee*
The Private Museum, Singapore.



First Meal For Autumn (2020)

Acrylic on canvas, framed
123 x 133 cm



Poster Kids For Happy Meal (2020)

Acrylic on canvas, framed
93 x 112 cm



崇洋, “Chong Yang” (2020)

Stainless steel and neon lights
100 x 100 cm



I AM A CON ARTIST

Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee

19 JANUARY 2021 — 21 MARCH 2021

The Private Museum (TPM) Singapore is pleased to present *I am a CON artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee*. The exhibition is a special collaboration between artist, collector and space, locating itself in two spaces with a main exhibition and special showcase happening in conjunction with Singapore Art Week 2021.

Alongside a selection of past works from The Teng Collection, a new body of works will also be exhibited, building upon Justin Lee's continuous contemplations on his identity as an artist and member of civil society. The artist employs visual and cultural references to provide social commentary on the perennial issues of consumerism and individualism, which in today's digital age of instant gratifications and everyday glorifications become exponentially magnified.

Composed of paintings, text-based artefacts, performance and interactive art installation, the exhibition confronts its audience not only with the ceaseless forces of rapid globalisation and hyper digitalisation, but also challenges them to examine their individual complicity in glorifying and immortalising one's self in the everyday.

Through this special collaboration, TPM expands beyond its scope as a home for private collectors by merging its artist and collector platforms to present the interconnectedness and intimate relationships that form between artists, collectors, art spaces, and their audiences.

PART OF
SAW
SINGAPORE ART WEEK



Exhibition view of *I am a CON Artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee*
The Private Museum, Singapore.



We Are Family (2020)

Stainless steel and fabric
153 x 90 cm





Exhibition view of *I am a CON Artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee*
The Private Museum, Singapore.

The background is a solid dark red color. It features several concentric white circles of varying diameters. Overlaid on these circles is a white line-art illustration of a person in a dynamic, expressive pose, possibly dancing or performing. The figure's arms are extended, and its legs are in a wide, grounded stance. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic.

**I AM A
CON
ARTIST**

**Selections from
The Teng Collection
— A Special Showcase**

On *I Am A Product of Upbringing:* A Collector's View

BY TENG JEE HUM (2012)

When I first came upon this work in the spacious hall of Ion Gallery, my first impression was its monumental size: 96 corrugated brown cubic boxes stacked into a 6 high by 8 long and 2 deep structure, measuring an overall 3 metre X 4 metre X 1 metre. My next impression was “Is it art?” — made up as it is of a degradable packaging material and therefore not expected to last in the normal conservation sense that artworks are supposed to endure.

In the context of a busy artist's group exhibition with many artworks on display, the message “I am a product of upbringing” did not, at the time, stop me in my tracks to reflect upon it, for after all it is merely a statement of fact, is it not? But over ensuing weeks and months, I find the words turning over and over in my mind, especially when I happened to be thinking about or viewing Singaporean artworks, never mind that they were not Justin Lee's. In the context of Singapore developing into the unlikely nation that it has become, since 1965, and in the context of founder and ex-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's strong opinions on the nature-vs-nurture debate, the words took on, for me, increasing poignancy! This unlikely nationhood, the trials and issues, the accelerated development progress, the fluid and changing population dynamics etc. all contributed to make the Singaporean a unique creature in a consumer-cum-netizen society that transitioned from third to first world. Indeed, we ARE a product of upbringing!

Needless to say, a nation is also about a group of people, requiring teamwork to get things done. So it is that to see far, Singaporeans need to stand on a wall of shoulders to enable the last person at the top to have an uncluttered helicopter view. Thus the symbolic stacking of individual boxes into a monumental block!

The above train of thought had gravitated towards me seeking a meeting with Justin to inquire about possession of this significant work/idea of his. That was when we came to confront the degradation feature of

the artwork. What followed was a healthy exchange of opinions between us as to the durability (his), or non-durability (mine) of the corrugated paper material. Obviously this issue could have been the reason why this work had not been quickly acquired by an institution, since a senior curator had expressly “liked” the work. On my part, I even explored with Justin as to why he hadn't thought of casting his boxes in synthetic resin, but then wouldn't that be copying the works of Chinese artist Jiao Xingtao?

Back alone with my thoughts, I resolved to address this issue of degradation and survival of the artwork, and hopefully come to a decision on whether or not to acquire it. In our conversation earlier, Justin had mentioned when he last examined the disassembled work a little earlier, he was pleasantly surprised and reassured that two years of the work's existence in travel, display and storage had not introduced any visible signs of deterioration. I remembered challenging him by asking how about 10, 50 or 100 years later? Incidentally, this same line of challenge was posed in the run-up to the 2011 General Elections by PAP candidate (popularly nicknamed) “kee chiu” (a Hokkien phrase meaning “hands up”) minister-wanabe when he made many awfully senior colleagues play an awkward game of poll on how many more years into the future can the nation of Singapore survive?¹ Surely the art of managing a nation for survival cannot be compared to the conserving of a degradable artwork for posterity? Nonetheless the very thought is intriguing!

As I have since successfully acquired the artwork, I resolve to undertake to continue to reassemble and exhibit this Justin Lee's installation periodically (perhaps at a minimum once in two or three years around the National Day period) and have its condition examined and documented in detail, so as to sequence the encroaching degree of degradation over time. In keeping with the spirit of the artist in creating this artwork, we hope to conserve the physicality of this

¹Referencing a speech by Chan Chun Sing at the YP 25th Anniversary Rally, dated April 17, 2011.

artwork in a manner we think the founding father of Singapore would want his creation to endure.

As a final resort, we can always seek to replace the work with a brand new one, as Damien Hirst did for his deteriorating formaldehyde shark.

To quote from the article ‘Damien Hirst: “I Still Believe Art Is More Powerful Than Money”’²:

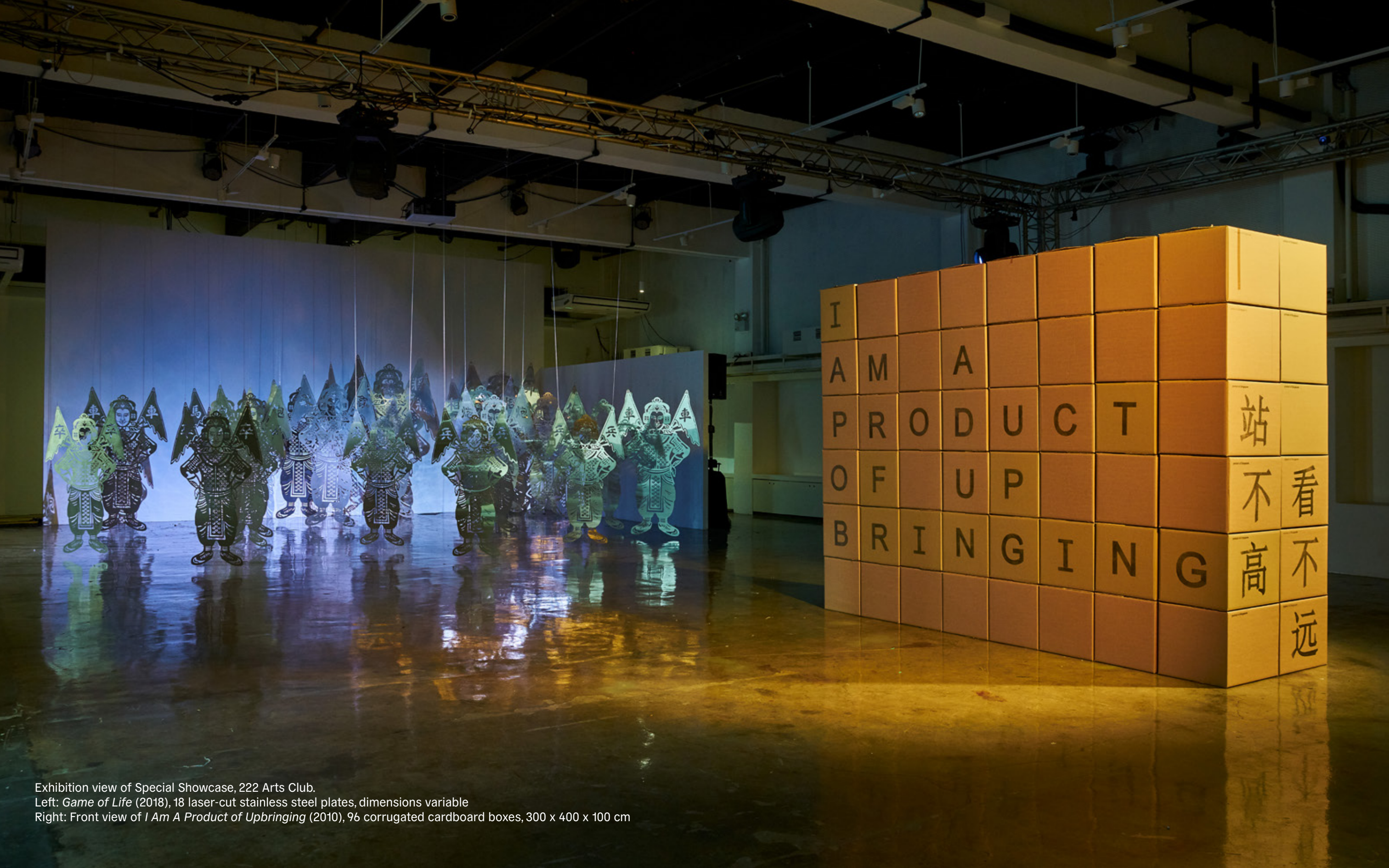
“Having been bought by Saatchi for £50,000, the shark in the formaldehyde-filled vitrine became an icon of contemporary art of the 1990s and perhaps the defining work of what would come to be known as the YBA movement. (“£50,000 For Fish Without Chips” ran a headline in the Sun at the time.) In 2004, the work was sold to an American collector, Steven A Cohen, for a reputed \$8m. In 2006, the original shark, having deteriorated, was replaced at Hirst’s insistence by a new formaldehyde-injected one, which was then loaned to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It is that shark that visitors to the Tate Modern show will see. (Both Hirst and Cohen seem unfazed by the big art-historical question of whether a replacement can ever have the import of the original art work. Only time will answer that one.)”

As to Justin’s work, this option of replacement is always available to us (at least in the foreseeable future). But the implications on the issue of authenticity is tremendously intriguing. Will the title of his work be more appropriate then, if changed to “I Am A Product of Replacement”? After all, the original creation of Singapore of the period 1965 to 1990 could either have been allowed to develop “organically” over time or as actually happened, systematically infused with new migrant “foreign talents”, who were evaluated and selected probably along genetic criteria. Will we get a better product? Again, only time will tell.

²O’Hagan, Sean. 2012. “Damien Hirst: ‘I Still Believe Art Is More Powerful Than Money’”. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/mar/11/damien-hirst-tateretrospective-interview>.



Exhibition view of Special Showcase, 222 Arts Club.
Game of Life, detail (2018), 18 laser-cut stainless steel plates, dimensions variable



Exhibition view of Special Showcase, 222 Arts Club.

Left: *Game of Life* (2018), 18 laser-cut stainless steel plates, dimensions variable

Right: Front view of *I Am A Product of Upbringing* (2010), 96 corrugated cardboard boxes, 300 x 400 x 100 cm



Exhibition view of Special Showcase, 222 Arts Club.
Left: *Mental Occupation, Series 1* (2019), 8 army uniforms, 78 x 55 cm each
Right: Back view of *I Am A Product of Upbringing* (2010), 96 corrugated cardboard boxes, 300 x 400 x 100 cm



Exhibition view of Special Showcase, 222 Arts Club.
Front view of *Mental Occupation, Series 1* (2019), 8 army uniforms, 78 x 55 cm each

About the Collection

THE TENG COLLECTION

Founded by Teng Jee Hum and June Ong, with the first artwork acquired in 1993. Through continual collecting and periodic rationalising of its purpose, the collection confines itself to the art of Asia, with a particular focus on the art-historical. This can also be described in another way as trying to collect artworks that speak of the spirit of their time. Included in the collection are works of Modern as well as Contemporary Asian artists.

Artist's Biography

JUSTIN LEE CHEE KONG 李志

Justin Lee (b. 1963, Singapore) completed his Master of Fine Art at the Lasalle College of the Arts Singapore/ Goldsmiths, University of London (2016), his Bachelor of Arts at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore (2005), and completed his Diploma in Fine Arts at the Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts (1999). He also received scholarships such as the Georgette-Chen Arts Scholarship and Lasalle Scholarship. His practice explores the everyday life of Singapore society and its people, and his works often reflect a visual blend of east and west cultures. Justin Lee believes that art plays an important role in helping people grow and become more aware of the pervasiveness of encroaching ideas that may threaten our heritage and identity. As such, he has recorded, documented, and presented on themes such as globalisation, individualism, consumerism, allowing his audience to question how texts and images constructed and manufactured by mass media (i.e. signages, billboards, consumer products) control our thoughts and expression. Justin Lee was awarded the Mont Blanc Young Artist Patronage Project (2007) and the NAFA 68th Founder's Day Commendation Award (2006), among many others. His works have been exhibited at multiple exhibitions in Singapore, Malaysia, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea, and can be found in public institutions as well as private collections around the world.

EDUCATION	
2016 Master of Fine Arts, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore/ Goldsmiths University of London	2018 9 th Solo Exhibition <i>Game of Life</i> , Installation Art, Esplanade Concourse, Singapore
2006 Bachelor of Arts (Fine Art - Western Art) Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore in partnership with University of Huddersfield, UK.	2012 8 th Solo Exhibition <i>Ten Years of Art and Craft</i> , Art Seasons Gallery, Singapore
2000 Internship of Singapore Tyler Print Institute. Tyler Graphic Limited - Mt Kisco, New York	2008 6 th Solo Exhibition <i>Beijing Goes West</i> , Utterly Art, Singapore
1999 Diploma in Fine Art, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore	2007 5 th Solo Exhibition <i>Sweet and Sour Pop</i> , Utterly Art, Singapore
PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE	2006 4 th Solo Exhibition BA degree show, Solo exhibition/performance art, Nanyang Academy of Fine Art, Singapore
2003 – present Full-time Artist	2005 3 rd Solo Exhibition <i>Our People, Our Lifestyle</i> - Esplanade, Singapore
2012 – present Part-time lecturer, LASALLE College of the Arts (FCVA)	2003 2 nd Solo Exhibition <i>Toy Nation</i> , Utterly Art, Singapore
2013–2018 Artist Mentorship Scheme - NAC/ STAR	1st Solo Exhibition <i>Double Happiness - Fantasy in Red</i> , Utterly Art, Singapore
2013/14 Artist in residence with Studio Kura, Fukuoka-Japan/Youkobo, Tokyo-Japan	SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2013 External assessor for LASALLE College of the Arts BA programme	
2012 Art Community Project - Silver Arts Weekend - Activity Stations	
2008 Korea Kaywon Art and Design Symposium	
SOLO EXHIBITIONS	<i>In the Mood of Serenity</i> , Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre, Hong Kong
2020 10 th Solo Exhibition <i>They Used To Be My Playground</i> , Art Seasons Gallery, Singapore	

2017 <i>Meta-graphy</i> , MEME Art Space, Taipei-Taiwan
<i>The Circle of Life</i> , Japan Creative Centre, Singapore
2016 <i>South by Southeast</i> , 5 group artists exhibition - Yibo Gallery, Shanghai China
2015 Art Now Live Tour - 2: Group Traveling Show, Beijing, Tianjin, Shenzhen, China
2014 <i>The Third Print</i> - Total Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea Seoul
<i>iLight Marina Bay</i> - Asia Sustainable Light Art Festival, Art Science Museum, Singapore
2012 <i>Art Garden - The Art of Imagination - Children Season</i> , Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
2011 <i>Life After Death</i> Art installation, Asia Civilizations Museum, Singapore
<i>Art Garden - Mummy Dearest - Children Season</i> , Singapore Art Museum, Singapore
<i>Asia Pulse, 10+1 Art Tactic</i> - 2011, Thailand, Bangkok
2010 <i>2010 Asia Contemporary Art/ Now & Next</i> , Group exhibition, Gwang Ju National Museum , Korea
2009 <i>Lost in the City</i> - <i>Sculpture</i> installation, National Museum Singapore
2004 <i>Reconstructions of a City</i> , A vision and illusions exhibition - A group exhibition

PERFORMANCE ART	LTA Maxwell station
2020 <i>Instinc - De: Voted</i> , Art Space Helutrans, Singapore	EDB 50 th Anniversary 2011
2019 <i>Wuwei Performance</i> 4, 51 Waterloo Street, Singapore	AWARDS / NOMINATIONS & GRANTS
<i>ASIALIVE SINGAPUR 2019</i> No.3, Lublin Poland-Galeria Labirynt.	2015 Lasalle Scholarship - Master of Fine Art
2012 <i>Itoshima Arts Farm 2012</i> , Itoshima, Fukuoka, Japan	2007 Mont Blanc Young Artist World Patronage Project 2007, Hamburg, German
2006 Solo exhibition <i>BAdegree show</i> and performance art Nanyang Academy of Fine Art, Singapore Art Residency	2006 Nominee for President's Design Award: Singapore Design of the Year
2018 Arts Itoshima, Takeo , Japan	NAFA 68 th Founder's Day Commendation Award 2006, Singapore
2017 Studio Kura, Itoshima, Fukuoka, Japan	2005 Singapore Motorola Style Awards
2015 Studio Kura, Itoshima, Fukuoka, Japan	Visual Arts Award Winner
2013 2-Artists residency art show <i>Robotic Love</i> , Youkobo Art Space, Tokyo Japan	Philip Morris Singapore Art Awards, Highly Recommended Award
2012 <i>Sense</i> , Residency Art Show – Studio Kura, Itoshima, Fukuoka, Japan	NAFA Scholarship (BA Degree Studies), Singapore
COLLECTIONS	2003 UOB Painting of the year, Highly Recommended Award, Singapore
Singapore Art Museum	1998-1999 Georgette Chen Arts Scholarship (Diploma Studies) Singapore
Private Collections	
COMMISSIONS	
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Tessa Sam

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ARTIST
Justin Lee

COLLECTION
The Teng Collection

EXHIBITION TEAM
Aaron Teo
Tessa Sam
Kelsie Tan
Nurshafiqah Zainudin
Gladys Chua
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**ARTWORK & EXHIBITION
PHOTOGRAPHY**
Studio W Photography

PUBLICATION DESIGN CONCEPTS
Aaron Teo
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Wong Chun Sing





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The Private Museum Ltd
51 Waterloo Street #02-06
Singapore 187969
O: (65) 6738 2872
E: mail@theprivatemuseum.org

  @theprivatemuseum
www.theprivatemuseum.org

The Private Museum is a non-profit private museum in Singapore founded by Singaporean philanthropist, art collector and real estate developer, Daniel Teo, together with his daughter Rachel Teo in 2010.

Fuelled by passionate patronage for the arts, the museum aims to establish an alternative platform to bridge different communities, private and public. It supports the exchange of ideas across cultures, educational initiatives, artistic and curatorial collaborations with practitioners of the arts as well as art collectors.

With a vision to promote art appreciation, the independent arts space engages local, regional and international audiences from all walks of life. The Private Museum is a registered Charity and Institution of a Public Character (IPC) since 2010 and 2015 respectively.

