



**LEE WEN**  
 Performance art veteran  
 keeps creating  
 despite Parkinson's

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PART **C**

# Life!

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## KEEP ON moving

Parkinson's disease has not stopped Cultural Medallion recipient Lee Wen from staging his first large-scale survey, now on at the Singapore Art Museum.  
 HUANG LIJIE reports.

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DESIGN: LEE CHEE CHEW PHOTOS: ASHLEIGH SIM, LIANE WANBAO, MARVEL, LUSHINGTON ENTERTAINMENTS

Lee Wen is racked by Parkinson's and scoliosis but remains dogged in pursuing his art

huang lijie

An offbeat flapping sound announces the arrival of pioneering performance artist and Cultural Medallion recipient Lee Wen. When the 55-year-old comes into view, you realise the sound is his black flip-flops slapping the ground amid his jerky, shuffle-drag gait. But this is not another multi-media act by a poster boy for the once-controversial form of performance art. Lee is best known for his Yellow Man series where he strips to his briefs and covers himself in yellow paint, as an exploration of cultural stereotypes. He took it internationally during the National Arts Council's 10-year non-funding phase for performance art that was instituted in 1994, after a performance by Josef Ng who snipped his public hair with his back to the audience. But today, the Yellow Man is blue, green, purple - and frail. Lee greets *Life!* for the interview at the arts council's art housing project, the Telok Kurau Studios, wearing a blue-green tie-dyed shirt, black harem pants and a purple tie-dyed beanie over his greying, wavy shoulder-length hair. In a mock-serious tone, he tells you he came dressed for the interview as a born-again hippie, his latest performance art project. He later confesses: "I ran out of clothes, I sent my clothes to the laundry the other day so I went to Peninsula Shopping Centre to buy new ones." He adds that he chose the tie-dyed look, popular with hippies in the 1960s and 1970s because they speak to his artistic interest in the theme of cross-cultural exchanges and hippie culture. However, beyond the wry humour, there is a certain pathos. He was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, a brain disorder that causes tremors and difficulty in movement, in 2007. This morning in mid-April, he is stooped, the hunch of his back exaggerated by scoliosis, which is an abnormal curvature of the spine. You can hardly spot vestiges of the sturdy built man immortalised in early images from his Yellow Man performances, a striking work that cemented his status as a pioneer of Singapore performance art. In performance art, the artist makes a live presentation, drawing on types of art such as acting, poetry or painting.

Lee's infirmities, however, belie his mental agility, devotion to art and indomitable spirit. He is candid about his life with Parkinson's. With no bitterness or defeat in his voice, he says: "I try to live with it, I try to work with it." While physical afflictions have claimed some of him, he has also mined them for inspiration in his work. He has developed a performance persona with the darkly humorous name of Stagger Lee, born of a friend's nickname for him after Parkinson's caused him to stagger. Stagger Lee is also the title of a popular American folksong about a murderer of the same name and Lee, in his performance pieces as Stagger Lee, questions the persistence of political dictators. He acknowledges that the disease slows him down but he resists it stoically. He pops 17 pills every day, at four-hour intervals, to ease his muscular movement and he spends about \$400 a year on the two types of Parkinson's medication. He also plays the guitar daily - he has two acoustic guitars and an electric one - as a form of physical therapy. He has no time for professional therapy sessions but his unorthodox method of strumming a guitar helps him relax the muscles in his hands and relieve them of tremors. And he continues to make art at the same pace, whenever he is inspired. "The problem with me is that I don't stop once I start making art and I have a tendency to forget that I need to rest," he says. Recently, he was haled up in his studio, which occupies part of a stage in the former school building in Telok Kurau, preparing furiously for his first large-scale survey at the Singapore Art Museum. The show, Lee Wen: Lucid Dreams in the Reverb Of The Real, opened on April 20 and runs till June 10. The windowless rectangular nook, illuminated by fluorescent ceiling lights, is a mess. Canvas, cardboard boxes and a



ST PHOTO: ASKECH SAH

# Lucid dreamer

guitar amplifier lie on the floor. You see only the metal legs of a long narrow table on one side of the room - every surface of the tabletop is covered with stacks of paper, documents and books. Dominating the space is a 2m-long drawing on the wall, Lee's bespectacled face starts out blankly from the centre of the graphite drawing, while a smaller copy of his face occupies the bottom left corner. Next to the work is a body-length mirror with a photograph of Lee's portrait tucked on.

The drawing, Erasing Self-Portrait, is a new work made for the survey and in its finished state, the portrait is partially rubbed off. While he is known for his performance art, Lee is an artist who works in various mediums including painting. He says the process of making Erasing Self-Portrait is a means for him to reassert his independent identity as an artist, erasing the projections others place on him of who he is as a Cultural Medallion recipient and what his work as a performance artist stands for.

In the eyes of Singapore Art Museum director Tan Boon Hui, however, he is among the generation of pioneering contemporary artists who introduced performance art to the public in the late 1980s and 1990s and who deserves to be recognised for persevering selflessly in his craft.

Mr Tan says: "He is also one of the most internationally known performance artists from Singapore, but we don't appreciate how much he has flown the flag in Europe and Japan."

Lee's works have been shown at more than 30 international arts festivals and biennales in countries such as France, Germany, Japan and China. His exhibition at the museum is the third in a series of annual solo shows featuring established local contemporary artists who emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The earlier two exhibitions featured his contemporaries, artists Vincent Lee and Amanda Heng. Although Lee is heartened by the museum's recognition of his contribution to the arts, he adds matter-of-factly that

the survey should have been done at least five years ago, before Parkinson's started slowing him down. "Sometimes I have a last-minute inspiration and I have to work 24 hours. In those days, I could handle it but nowadays, after 24 hours, I am kind of shaky and I can't walk properly."

Indeed, with preparations for the survey going ahead at full speed - his cellphone rings several times during the interview from calls by the crew installing his works at the museum - he has not had very much time to rest.

Mid-way through the interview, he pauses to take his medicine and excuses himself for a guitar break.

He picks up an acoustic guitar and tries to strum it. But his hands are so jittery, he cannot finger the chords properly. He gives up for a while, rolling and bouncing a stone sculpture on the guitar strings. Then he tries again, this time successfully playing a few cheery chords. He agreed to the show because of the generous space he would get to exhibit his works. His previous solo shows were held in smaller galleries and alternative art spaces such as The Substation. At the museum, his works spill over two floors and four galleries.

## the monday interview with Lee Wen

### my life so far

"My mother looks at me and says in Teochew, "You're being naked for nothing." But when I do a nude performance, it's not about exhibitionism. Clothes to me represent a certain kind of social pressure. When I remove them, I am revealing myself as I am naturally."

Lee Wen performing nude in his work, Journey Of A Yellow Man



Lee Wen as a child at around eight years old (above), and with his wife Satoko Sukemari and son, Lee Masatoshi (above right), at Mount Takao in Tokyo in January. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF LEE WEN



"To accept it was a way to help open up possibilities that this kind of practice, performance art, can be accepted more widely even though there was talk that I was selling out. On how he grappled with the decision and finally accepted the Cultural Medallion in 2005

"At campfires, you tell stories and sing songs. My friends and I would put on sketches. They'd not make sense but they would make people laugh. I think that was the beginning of it."



"When I first sent my sister photographs of my Yellow Man performance in London, she sent me a Bible. She thought I was doing something satanic"

On the type of responses his performance art, such as his first Journey Of A Yellow Man performance in London in 1992, provokes

He admits that bringing his performance art pieces into the museum is not without challenges. "Working in the alternative scene, we already have believers in our audience, we are preaching to the converted," he says. "But to be put in the museum context, the works are opened up for the larger society to reassess them."

Lee is the youngest of five children - three boys, two girls - born to a writer father and a housewife mother. His father, Lee Xue Min, was a respected figure in the local Chinese literary scene and the family lived in a Housing Board terrace house in Jalan Bahagia. But he lost his dad to high blood pressure-induced haemorrhage when he was four.

To make ends meet, his illiterate mother, Lee Mee Lan, worked as a school janitor and the family moved to a one-room flat in Whampoa. She later ran a drinks stall in a vocational school canteen.

Despite the hardship, Lee recalls an idyllic early childhood spent spinning stories from his doodles to entertain himself. He attended the now defunct Kim Keat Primary School and Raffles Institution. After completing his A levels, he worked as a logistics officer, a computer operator and a bank officer. All the while, he pursued art on the sidelines.

In 1981, after he knocked on the doors of several publishing companies here, home-grown publisher Select Books released a compilation of his drawings accompanied by poetic captions. The book is titled *A Waking Dream*. Of the 1,000 copies printed, a few hundred were sold. Lee, however, continued with his day job because he did not think he could turn his love for art into a profession.

At the age of 30 though, he mustered enough courage to quit his job and enrolled at the then Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts. He says: "I wasn't a bad worker but I felt unhappy. I wanted to live my life passionate about work and I realised, yeah, all along I wanted to do art."

But he did not tell his mother of his career switch for fear of her disapproval. The truth came out only weeks later when she asked him why he was wearing his hair long to work. She was disappointed with his decision and even today, as dementia robs the 68-year-old matriarch of memories, she still chides him in Teochew for "giving up a proper job."

While at Lasalle, Lee was introduced to the prominent contemporary artist Tang Da Wu and he later moved into the artists' colony Tang founded in 1988 called The Artists Village in Lorong Gambas, Ulu Sembawang.

For him, the place was a fertile ground for inspiration and education. He observed artists making different types of works, collaborated in their creative projects and was mentored by senior artists such as Tang.

In 1990, he participated in a sculpture symposium in Dusseldorf, Germany, and stayed in the country for two years to pursue a diploma in art and design at the City of London Polytechnic. To save money, he stayed in a rundown squat with punks.

It was on the London campus that he performed his seminal work, *Journey Of A Yellow Man*, a 30-minute performance where he wrestled and bound himself in long red chains.

The work emerged from the stereotypes people had of him while he was in London. "People thought that because I look Chinese, I am from China and they expected me to speak Mandarin," says Lee, who can speak the language but is not fluent.

"The work caught on, got me connected with the performance art network and other invitations came. I was still doing other things such as paintings but my invitations to shows and festivals were mostly for performance art, so I guess I became a performance artist by default."

The overseas invites came at an opportune time amid the arts council's 10-year non-funding rule from 1994. Although Lee continued to do performance pieces here during that period, the foreign invites helped to ease the lack of funding he faced and it also gave him a wider reach.

It was also through a foreign invitation to show in Japan that he met his wife, Satoko Sukemari, a sculptor working as a kindergarten art teacher. They were introduced in 1994 by mutual friends in the arts and married in 1999.

In an e-mail interview, his wife, 49, says in English that she was attracted to him because he is "thoughtful" about others around him and is "very pure" about his art. She adds: "He is an incredibly hard worker and also a great father and husband even though he is always worrying that he is not." The couple have a 13-year-old son, Lee Masatoshi.

Lee relocated to Japan after his son was born and he made the country his creative base for three years before deciding to split his practice between Singapore and Japan, because there were more openings for him here as an artist.

He grows quiet when you ask how he copes with being away from his son and wife. It is a struggle. But they chat online as often as they can and Lee shuttles between both countries, sometimes squeezing in a stopover en route to festivals and shows in other countries. His wife and son also visit during school holidays. The last time he saw them was over New Year's in Japan and they are here until early next week to catch his solo show at the museum.

Lee does not consider the survey, however, to be the final chapter of his work. He says: "People here are more interested in art and culture now and there are a lot of things changing in the local arts scene. "If I don't give my input, it might go in the direction I don't like, so I want to stay and be part of this change."

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