

Artist Interview: Justin Lee (Singapore)

Source: Pop intellect, Home Concept, July 2007, page 20 & 21



pop intellect

Described as Singapore's leading pop artist, Justin Lee is a humbling paradox of sharp, savvy businessman and brilliant, eager artist

TEXT HUANG NICKMATUL PHOTOS COURTESY OF JUSTIN LEE



... history always repeats itself, and this is especially true with artists. I like reworking people's approaches

A RECENTLY CONCLUDED GROUP EXHIBITION at Marina Mandarin included local artist Justin Lee, who also has several solo exhibitions to his portfolio, and has received commissions from companies the likes of Absolut and Tangs. He has often been described as a thinking pop artist; you may feel like you see all that his works have to offer at first glance, and often there is a humour that makes you grin, maybe even giggle. On closer inspection, however, there is an edgy intelligence that a casual observer might miss. In that respect, Justin's works almost resemble the man himself: a reflective yet practical mind veiled by a humble, unpretentious manner and a friendly smile.

You describe yourself as a 'graphic designer turned Fine artist through education'. Can you explain?

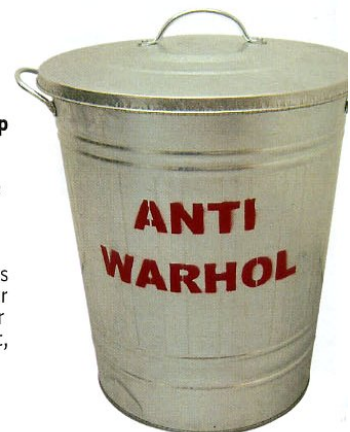
Let me give an example. I used to call myself a 'Fine Art artist' but a lecturer told me it was 'Fine artist'. If you are self-taught, you can only draw on your own experience and your own insights. For a longer journey as an artist, you must have a firm foundation – teachers give you knowledge and the technique necessary to be good enough for a long career.

You previously worked as a graphic designer. How different is that from being a practicing artist?

A graphic designer is a commercial artist and sometimes you have to add in so much input from others that the art is no longer yours. As an artist, everything I do comes firsthand from me. I share my own thoughts, feelings and concerns with the world. However, my past work experience also means I know more about good presentation – how to present myself and my art, and how to sell my art. Art directors in ad agencies almost always have a foundation in fine art, and have a fine art perspective. I think that is something I need.

Would you still describe your work as pop art, after the 'anti-Warhol' piece you did a while back?

I don't resist the 'pop art' label. It's the closest way to describe my work, and I am very interested in popular culture. The 'anti-Warhol' piece was actually one of my final year projects. It's always good to refer and be referred to another artist that has done good work, and our works do have some similarities. In fact, Andy Warhol also used to be a graphic designer. I think I would definitely say



Artist Interview: Justin Lee (Singapore)

Source: Pop intellect, Home Concept, July 2007, page 20 & 21

hot seat



I'm a postmodernist. Of course, history always repeats itself, and this is especially true with artists. I like reworking people's approaches.

Are there any subject matters that you consider taboo and will not explore in your art?

Politics and religion, though I know that whenever you want to avoid something, the more closely you come in contact with it! As an artist, I think it's important that I am always honest in my art, and with how my issues and concerns get reflected in my work. However, I also think it's necessary to find a tactful way to show any concerns you have. I believe that art is about sharing your views and your issues, and it's all about understanding and respecting each other.

Do you feel that the goal of art should be to create a new system of interpreting and looking at things?

Though I call myself an artist, till today I cannot give a definition for Art. This is because art is never static. Artists, through their work, give art meaning. We create art and through creation, define it. So art should always be more than aesthetics. There should be a story in the work. What's real is what's inside us and art should be something that makes us realise what's real. There's a quote by Picasso I really like: Art is a lie that makes us realise Truth.

Why did you choose the 'double happiness' symbol as your trademark?

I didn't deliberately set out to make the symbol my trademark. I was actually taking inspiration from the Chinese paper cut-outs. I'm very interested in bringing back Chinese culture, and I like looking at things that other people would otherwise ignore. Besides, when I started using the 'double happiness' symbol, I felt that such a symbol of happiness and good fortune shouldn't be kept to just weddings.

Which is your favourite piece of work?

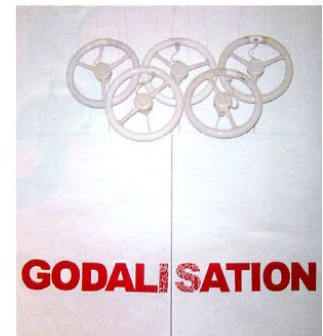
All my artworks are like my babies but if I had to choose one that I really liked, I would say my 'godalisation' piece is one I'm really proud of. One of my lecturers told me it really had international resonance.

When I was thinking about the idea of God and globalisation, I had all these funny thoughts about the different religions and their ideas of God and that started me thinking about 'godalisation'. Actually, I think globalisation is a very dangerous thing. By getting everyone and everything to meet at the same point, we all begin to want the same things and we start developing the same skills. I believe that having different skills and different kinds of societies is a form of survival for the human race.

Is there anything about you or your art that you wish people were more aware of?

I really want people to think of my work as my way of communicating with society and reflecting society. As I mentioned, art need not necessarily be on canvas — society at large is art. In fact, I'm working on a project with Marina Mandarin right now, designing mooncake boxes. This is a way of reworking tradition and bringing art out of the gallery and closer to the masses. I want to give people a new way of approaching art, and for them to challenge the traditional views of art. **hc**

Visit Justin Lee's website at www.justinleeck.com



Happy Piggy

TOP Da Jie

TOP RIGHT Godalisation

home|concepts 21