

Artist Interview: Justin Lee (Singapore)  
Source: Catalogue issue #12, 2006

## men:profile



# POP FANTASIES

Contemporary artist Justin Lee dresses up incisive social commentary in juicy hues and eye-catching graphics.

Style: 44

**W**hen Justin Lee walks into the café for this interview in a tee and jeans, he looks just like any other student on the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts campus.

But behind the easy smile and dark-rimmed spectacles is an enquiring mind that is always switched on.

Currently, his mind is buzzing with his thesis project for his degree course in painting. Having bagged a scholarship for the course, he is obliged to put up a solo show. Called *Textalization*, it deals with text-based art.

"I'm making captions and statements about real issues, creating awareness about what life is and where we are in this society," explains the 42-year-old artist.

Among his works is a piece with the word "Godalisation" emblazoned across it in red letters. Another canvas proclaims, "I Fall in Love with God". By providing the answers, Lee hopes viewers will think up their own questions. "For example, 'I Fall in Love with God' prompts questions like 'Who is my god?' and 'Why did I fall in love with god?'" says Lee. "God may be an idol, a singer like Madonna, a stranger on the street... for me, god is nature but we human beings don't look at nature for aesthetics. We look at artificial things. I want to make people think about themselves."



Style: Men Magazine cover



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Elmo, *samsui* women, *Astro Boy* and Chinese characters inhabit the colourful, quirky world of Lee's art. With their flat, graphic quality and arresting imagery, Lee's works shows off his early education in graphic design and merchandising. Behind the apparently simple images and icons, though, are thought-provoking themes. Among his favourites are the effect of Western culture on the East, Chinese tradition, consumerism and Asian identity.

Since his first exhibition, *Double Happiness*, in 2003, Lee has been constantly in the spotlight of the local art scene, having done one group show and three solo exhibitions, making him one of the best-known contemporary artists here.

#### ON HIS STYLE

"[It] seems to be closest to Pop Art, though I don't like to categorise my work. [But in terms of where] I fit into history, I wouldn't mind Pop Art [as a label] because the artists who have influenced me, such as Warhol, are all from that genre. I was a graphic designer so commercial art is an influence, too. I like to introduce new things into my canvas, like fabric or a tag."



#### ON HIS INFLUENCES

"I think Andy Warhol is fantastic because he understands society and he has a very clear picture of how to portray it. Just as Andy Warhol made use of his American culture to create works, so do I use Singapore culture. I have a lot of Chinese elements in my works and the marriage of East and West. I'm Chinese and the works tell a story of who I am, where I come from. To me, the story is most important for an art work."

#### ON ART AWARENESS IN SINGAPORE

"For our grandparents, it was almost close to zero. But the new generations have had more exposure. They have been to Europe. I would like more recognition for artists and more financial support from the government. Then we can go further. Most of my collectors are in their late 20s and 30s."

#### CONFIDENCE MAN

Justin Lee reveals his dress style and favourite shopping spots.

#### SO WHAT'S AN EVERYDAY OUTFIT FOR YOU?

I wear simple, comfortable clothes like tees and jeans. I always wear jeans. It's about how you carry it off. You have to have confidence. Some people wear great clothes but the way they walk is so sloppy or they drag their feet — I hate that. There's no point wearing a Gucci suit if you can't carry it off.

#### SO WHAT MAKES A PERSON LOOK GOOD?

The way you walk into a room or crowd has to be different. One key is eye contact. And a smile. Without a smile, you are never fully dressed.

#### WHERE DO YOU LIKE TO SHOP?

I get most of my clothes from Bangkok. I like some of the boutiques at Silom Centre, they have lots of handmade clothes by Thai designers. When I browse at street stalls, something can touch me, such as a tee with a silk screen design of Christ's face with a drop of blood as a tear, or an upside-down bird.

#### YOU COMMENT ON CONSUMERISM IN SOME WORKS. DO YOU OWN ANY LUXURY GOODS?

I used to own a Rolex watch but I sold it during my diploma years to buy a computer — that was many years ago! But now I don't want to spend that much. I'd rather spend the money on acrylic paints. ●

Justin Lee's art is available at Art Seasons, The Box, 5 Gemmill Lane, Tel: 6221-1800; Asian Art Options, 131 Devonshire Road Level 2, Tel: 6738-2602; and Utterly Art, 208 South Bridge Road, #02-01, Tel: 6226-2605. Prices range from \$500 to \$2,500. Visit [www.justinleeck.com](http://www.justinleeck.com) or e-mail [justinhair@hotmail.com](mailto:justinhair@hotmail.com)