

CONVERSATIONS · NAIMA MORELLI · MARCH 16, 2021

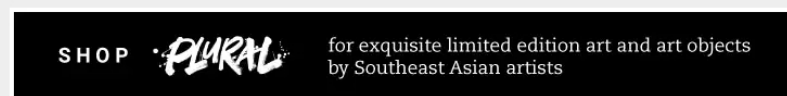
The Artist-Collector Relationship Behind “I am a CON artist”: Justin Lee and the Teng Collection at the Private Museum



“The most valuable insight a collector can get from an artwork is self-discovery,” says Teng Jee Hum, one half of the Teng Collection, together with June Ong. “This can often come in an epiphany about life.”

And insight is definitely what the collector got preparing the show *I am a CON artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee* at The Private Museum, Singapore, showcasing works from the Teng Collection as well as new pieces.

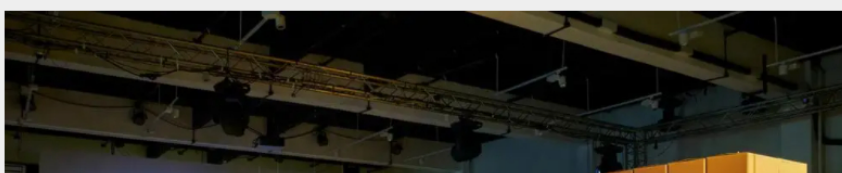
“Initially the title *I am a CON artist* was merely a pun on ‘contemporary artist’ to me,” he continues. “But the whole process of bringing up Justin’s solo show brought out that epiphany to me; that perhaps life itself, whether we delve into its existential or social-political context, is all a con job. Who are we kidding?” he laughs. “Herein lies the genius of Justin Lee’s work.”



In his mission to shed light on more layers to the ‘Singapore Story’, Teng wrote two books articulating his collecting methodology, and the wider narrative attached to artworks: *Godalisation* and *Godsmacked*. “Justin is one of the artists I favour from the ‘Paternal Production Period’ from 2001-2015,” says Teng, referring to a category of Singapore’s art history which he coined to describe “a time when the government invested in building art infrastructures and in financially supporting artists.”

The show *I am a CON artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee* highlights an intimate collector-artist relationship that has lasted more than ten years, merging an outstanding artist’s production and the collector’s vision of it over time. Opened during Singapore Art Week, the show spanned two locations: The Private Museum and 222 Arts Club. While the Special Showcase at 222 Arts Club was on view only from 19 to 25 January in conjunction with Singapore Art Week, the main exhibition at The Private Museum is ongoing until 21 March.

We spoke with Justin Lee and Teng Jee Hum about the new body of work presented, as well as how their dialogue and relationship have evolved over the years.



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Exhibition view of Special Showcase, 222 Arts Club – (left) *Game of Life*, 2018 and (right) Front view of *I Am A Product Of Upbringing*, 2010.

I am a CON artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee presents a wide variety of works from the Teng collection. This is the second time your collection is showcased, after your 2018 Art Stage VIP Collectors Tour in 2018. How did the show come into being?



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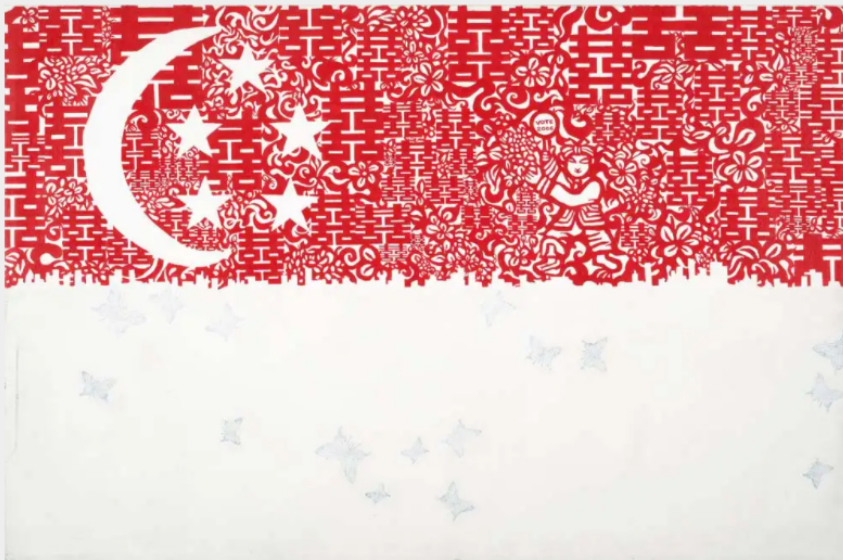
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Teng Jee Hum (TJH): In late 2019, I had finished my monograph titled “Give Utopia a Chance: The Art of Justin Lee” and began putting together an artist art book. We discussed with Aaron Teo of The Private Museum to host a solo exhibition for Justin Lee based on my essay, with works borrowed from my collection, and new works.

As my collection of Justin's work is quite extensive – and intensive – Aaron was to curate the show from this with his own selection. Much consultation passed between the curators and artist, occasionally involving myself as a collector. This evolutive process continues to morph into a wonderful project that finally involves the artist, the collector, the museum, and also ultimately the audience due to the interactive nature of some of the works!

Justin Lee (JL): In November 2019, together with Aaron and Jee Hum, we started planning the show by conceptualising a new body of work around themes that have been central to my practice over the years: migration and consumerism. The new works are a continuation of my art practice from my past text-based art series *I am a Con Artist* and *Godalisation*. I started looking into portraiture painting, and played with materials like stainless steel, neon lights, and interactive performance objects, creating works that are relevant to the contemporary context.



Justin Lee, *Singapore Flag*, 2006.

What is the work that you are most fond of in the show, and what it represents in the unfolding of your reflections as an observer of the transformations of Singaporean society?

TJH: I am particularly fond of three: *Singapore Flag*, *Godalisation*, and *I am a Product of Upbringing*. All three together suggest the zeitgeist of the nation of Singapore in the last 60 years and what is a Singaporean; in particular what makes individuals what they are and what they are becoming.

JL: The realistic paintings that I realised for this current show were challenging, since I haven't been tackling realistic painting since 1999. I enjoyed using neon light and stainless steel to capture today's packaging style, which influences the way we eat, dress, and even play. I'm also fond of the interactive works, such as the set of *Medals Awards* as well as *Last Chance for Love*, where the viewer is invited to go on stage and perform.



Justin Lee, *Godalisation*, 2005.

The Private Museum defines the show as “a special collaboration presenting the interconnectedness and intimate relationships that form between artists, collectors, art spaces, and their audiences.” How did you personally experience this?

JL: The challenge for both collector and artist is to be approachable yet elegant. In continuing to play with this idea of pop culture and consumerism we also wanted the works to be jaw-dropping. Through the interactive works, we managed to be playful and at the same time engage audiences at a deep level.

TJH: To quote from my essay: “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.” I deem it a huge success as the resulting chemistry between the curators and artist boiled over in an effervescence to engulf the collector, and finally culminated in engaging the audience in “an unforgettable experience of sights, sounds, performance (art), large scale installations and make-believe play-acting.”



Justin Lee, *Last Chance for Love*, 2021.

How many years did it take to develop such a special and deep artist-collector relationship?

JL: We took over 5 years to build up a true and stronger relationship. Today Jee Hum, June, and I share something closer to a friendship than just a collector-artist relationship, as we can talk about anything, and not just art.

TJH: As I see it, it took more than 15 years. It is never too overly intense though. In between, we focused on many other artists and genres, but somehow, we always come back, after a while, to follow and view and consider Justin's work. His body of work resonates with me because I feel he has represented what being a Singaporean is – very well. The identity crisis he depicts has always been very difficult for us as we are a

young nation of only 55 years.

Did you ever seek friendly confrontation with each other on a particular body of work?

JL: Not really. Jee Hum understands my art language very well. As for June Ong, she can read my personality more than anyone else; she does see me as a person. Both of them have different strengths and points of view.

TJH: I don't remember ever having any confrontation, friendly or otherwise, with Justin. My only requirement for him as an artist is to be authentic, and I would make a selection from those works that were made available for me to collect. I guess I ended up collecting quite many of his works because I was able to form my own narrative about each of the works in our collection, without ever having to confront him as to what his message was in producing each one of them.



Mr Daniel Teo, TPM Founding Director (third from the right), Ms Rachel Teo, TPM Founding Director (third from the left), Ms Yvonne Tham, Guest of Honour, CEO, Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay (fourth from the left), Justin Lee, artist, (fourth from the right), Mr Teng Jee Hum & Ms June Ong, collectors (first and second from the right).

Going back to the show's themes, what is the role of the collector in today's consumerist society and the market-based art world?

JL: The role of a collector is equivalent to the role of an artist. They both need to be aware of the shifts and changes of contemporary society.

TJH: I personally define art as something that is not made with a commercial or economic intention. Unlike other occupations where the maker of a product or service is paid for, how could an artist survive – without begging – if not selling his artworks. For that to happen, we need collectors, no?





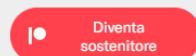
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I am a CON artist: Continuous Contemplations of Justin Lee is on view at [The Private Museum](#), Singapore, until 21 March 2021.

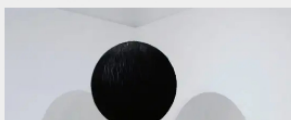
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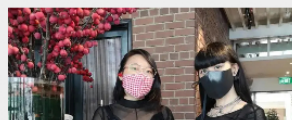
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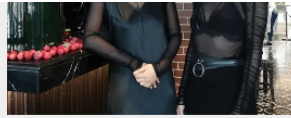
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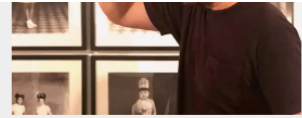
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