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Lee Wen's Time to Shine at Art Basel Hong Kong 2014

by Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop 09/05/14 9:15 AM EDT

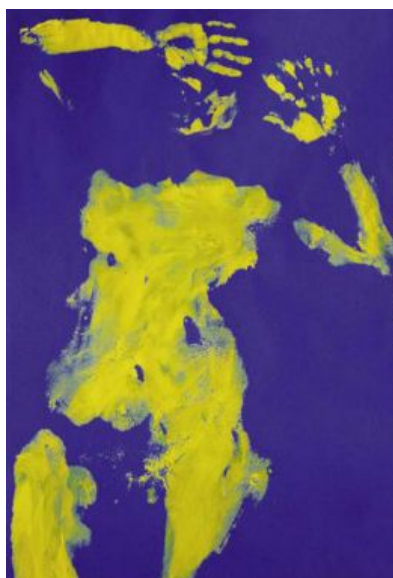
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Lee Wen's Body Print (left); photograph from the Strange Fruits series (right)

Art Basel Hong Kong 2014 is likely to be an important milestone in the career of **Lee Wen**, one of Singapore's most prolific performance artists whose multidisciplinary works explore issues of identity and societal issues. Despite being awarded a Cultural Medallion in 2005 — the highest artistic recognition in Singapore — the 57-year-old artist has never previously been represented by an art gallery, let alone had his works shown in an international art fair.

Now one of his better-known pieces, the interactive “Ping-Pong Go Round,” will be featured in the curated Encounters section of Art Basel Hong Kong and Singapore gallery iPreciation is dedicating its booth at the fair to his works, offering a mini-retrospective of sorts that will enable more people to better understand the artist's oeuvre. “Lee Wen is a key figure and one of the pioneers of performance and contemporary art in Singapore. I wanted to present his works because they are historically significant and they represent responses to the socio-political issues of the times. His works and ideas should be shared and be appreciated by more people,” explains gallery founder Helina Chan.

"I don't like the word retrospective, because I'm not done yet. Furthermore, I have many other pieces not shown here," the artist quipped.

The solo exhibition will underscore his artistic versatility through a varied collection of works, from his iconic "Journey of a Yellow Man" performance series (1992–2001), where he posed in various situations covered in yellow paint to emphasize his ethnicity, to his "Strange Fruits" series, which was created in response to the National Arts Council's decision not to fund performance art between 1994 and 2003.

"Journey of a Yellow Man" was started by Wen while he was living in London where many people assumed he was from China. "It was a reaction to how people are often typecast by the color of their skin," the artist recalled, "Some people have mistaken the work as being about the pride of being Chinese, but it's not, it was more about questioning identity, as well as trying to explore the idea of a full-body mask while doing a performance, instead of just a (face) mask."

The photography of his "Strange Fruits" performances, where he covered his body with Chinese lanterns and walked around various Singaporean locations without the necessary public entertainment license, has also become a well-known series from the artist. The fun imagery contrasts with the underlying issue of restrictions placed on performance art. "At the time the Substation, which was getting NAC funding, had asked me to do a solo show and I didn't want to do a live perform that could threaten their funding. So I thought I could do an installation of photographs of a performance. Ironically, by the time the exhibition took place (the NAC) had lifted the ban," he said.

During the Hong Kong VIP Preview, Wen, who has been suffering from Parkinson's disease for over five years, is hoping to perform "Call of the Red," a piece he created last year. "It's a song I wrote for my mother, who is 92 years old and has been a widow for many years. The song is written as a performance about someone who is going to die, and wondering how she will be reunited with her husband, who died very young, and whether she will be accepted by this young man. It's a sad story, but it's about her and about the values we have," he explained.

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