The long, lonely road to recognition

After two decades of struggle, acclaimed performance artist Lee Wen finally gets his day in the sun – his first commercial solo, writes HELMI YUSOF

Lee Wen picks up his guitar, forms a harmonica brace around his neck, and makes up a song. He sings a blues number about life and the obstacles he’s faced. His hunched body, racked by scoliosis, sways back and forth.

Despite his debilitating illnesses – he has Parkinson’s and scoliosis which impairs his spine and movements – the 57-year-old artist and Asian Cultural Medallion recipient has something to celebrate.

Next week marks the debut of his first ever solo show organized by a commercial gallery, and it will take place at a platform no less prestigious than Art Basel Hong Kong. The iPreciation booth will showcase works from his entire oeuvre, stretching back from 1992 right up to his recent drawings, This, and a retrospective show at the Singapore Art Museum two years ago, are sealing his reputation and generating buying interest among collectors – finally.

Shocking as it may seem, the acclaimed artist has “never really sold a single piece of artwork until recently,” he says as he ponders four different kinds of medication at his studio space in Alivad Street. In the past, he had given away or sold at a big discount some works to artist and gallery friends. But apart from one prominent architecture collector, no one else had purchased anything of his until iPreciation gallery Helmsia Chan visited him two years ago.

Mo Chan, a strong champion of Singapore art, was appalled to find Lee lying in pathetic conditions in a tiny room behind a stage of a former school building in Telok Kurau. She requested to see his works and soon, to her further dismay, numerous negatives documenting his famous performance works in aspit condition. The negatives, the primary record of his iconic performances as the Yellow Man, were mouldy and discoloured.

“How can this happen? This is as good as any artist out there. He has contributed so much to the Singapore art scene. After the Nanyang artists, he is one of the pioneer artists who helped create the contemporary art scene from scratch. Without people like him and Tang Da Wu, we would not have the scene that we have today,” says Ms Chan. iPreciation gallery, located in Cascaden Road, now takes care of Lee’s artworks and is bringing them to Art Basel Hong Kong next week. At 70 sq m, the Hong Kong booth will be a large one – a clear indication that the tough Art Basel’s selection committee recognizes the stature of the artist.

Lee is best known for practicing performance art during the 10 years when the Singapore government declined to give funding to performance art, following Joseph Ng’s controversial stripping of his public hair at a performance art event in 1993.

Lee was then an art student in London, where he was frustrated by how Londoners often assumed he was from China and then marvelled at his perfect English. Meanwhile, the mainland Chinese whom he encountered often expected him to speak Mandarin fluently and be knowledgeable about Chinese customs.

Turn between two sets of stereotypes, he invented the role of the Yellow Man at a performance art event in London. He painted his entire body with yellow paint and collected two red metal chains around himself as a symbol of his struggle against stereotypes.

The work gained notice, and he went on to perform the Yellow Man in Thailand, India, Poland, and Germany. To date, he has shown his works at more than 30 international biennials and festivals.

Unfortunately, performance artists – unlike painters and sculptors – have a hard time selling their works because a collector cannot “own” a performance, so to speak. Typically, the only things for an art collector to buy are the official photographs, sketches, and posters of the performances.

But even so, these documents are a hard sell. It was only until famous performance artist Marina Abramović’s seminal retrospective in New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 2010 that the general public’s perception of performance art was lifted. Meanwhile, the brisk sales of Abramovic’s photographs made many collectors change their minds about collecting the works of performance artists.

In recent years, Lee has seen his Yellow Man photographs purchased by institutions such as the Singapore Art Museum and the National Gallery, Singapore. The Urban Redevelopment Authority also bought the photographs for Lee’s performance work called Strange Fruit, made in response to the government’s ruling that artists must hold a public entertainment licence before they can perform in Singapore – a bold choice for the USA.

According to Ms Chan, about a third of his works planned for Art Basel Hong Kong have already been snapped up. Priced upwards of $3,000, they include some powerful and poignant drawings that depict Lee contemplating the state of his health and his hard journey as an artist. Some of these drawings are currently being shown at art space Grey Projects in Tiong Bahru. Lee, who pops 17 pills a day for his symptoms, is philosophical about his life.

When asked if the 2012 Singapore Art Museum retrospective was a turning point for his tough career, he replies: “I don’t know where or what is a turning point. All I know is that, since the going was tough, I still do what I want to do and I have never stopped. The tough things were, the better the works were. As far as I can see, there was no turning point.”

“Over the years,” he recalls, “there are many people who miss the point of my art, but I allow them to change their minds. I don’t want to typecast them just as I don’t want to be typecast. Life is such that we must always be prepared to change – for that’s what revolutions are about, that’s what love and art are about.”

Lee is married to a Japanese artist-activist based in Japan. They have a teenage son who also lives in Japan. But Lee admits the long distance has put the marriage under a lot of strain.

For more, though, there is Hong Kong to look forward to. Lee admits: “I’ve never taken part in an art fair, so I don’t understand how things are bought and sold there. But I look forward to learning about it. As a person, I never look back. I only look forward.”

Lee Wen’s works will be shown at Art Basel Hong Kong next week from May 15 to 18 at the iPreciation booth at Hall 1, Booth 1C18. Works are priced from $3,000 upwards.