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The Minister as Muse

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As Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, reflects on his mortality, artists are experimenting with his image in their work.



Jimmy Ong's portraits of Lee Kuan Yew.

The vibrant watercolor shows a gaming table with three playing cards, each depicting a different portrait of the same man. Small figures kneel at the corners pleading, “Papa, can you help me not be frightened?” and “Papa, don’t you know I have no choice?” They are lyrics from the gay anthem “Papa, Can You Hear Me?” from the Barbra Streisand film *Yentl*; the man featured on the cards is Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s first prime minister, who is often described as a father figure—albeit an authoritarian one—to the young nation. New York–based Singaporean artist Jimmy Ong incorporated the lyrics to reflect the anxieties of a generation of gay men in a city-state where homosexual activity remains a criminal act punishable by up to two years in prison, while the card motif is a nod to the much-debated opening of two casinos earlier this year.

Ong’s work is a relatively rare example of a contemporary artist incorporating Lee’s image, even though Lee has dominated Singapore’s political landscape since the young nation’s independence in 1965. Lee stepped down as prime minister in 1990 but has remained involved in government and holds a cabinet position with the title “minister mentor.” His image has the power to evoke strong reactions, yet unlike Mao Zedong, whose image has been embraced by legions of Chinese artists, Lee has remained a distant, often taboo subject for many Singaporean artists. “I can only speculate that it is self--censorship at work,” says Ong. “Even in my artwork I am self--censoring, like using *Yentl*’s lyrics in place of my own voice.” But just as the 87-year-old Lee has started in recent interviews to contemplate openly his own mortality, some artists are also beginning to reflect on Lee’s life and legacy. Several recent art exhibitions have used his image to explore the notion of nationhood, though never too critically. “Reevaluations are part of anyone’s legacy, but to do so while someone is still in office colors the effort with all the anxiety of politics,” says Jason Wee, a Singaporean artist also based in New York. “Mao is no longer in office, and Lee still is.”

Wee has been working on a series of portraits of Lee, using shampoo bottle caps arranged to create a pixelated effect. Titled *No More Tears*, the portraits are a nod to Lee's rare emotional moment in 1965, when he cried on television announcing the separation of Singapore from Malaysia and Singapore's future looked uncertain. Wee has also gone beyond mere iconographic representation, examining how deeply the aging statesman's influence runs over the city-state's citizens. In the recent exhibition *Beyond LKY* at Singapore's Valentine Willie Fine Art Gallery, artists were asked to reflect on a Singapore without Lee. Wee installed a tall, dark, granite sculpture in the shape of the number one, inscribed with the words IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER, MR. LEE, along with *Self-Portrait (Yellow, Green and Red Mr. Lee)*, an ink portrait in which the artist looks like Lee. "I decided on a self-portrait, but one that shows how little control I have over my genetic, national, and ideological paternity," says Wee. Others at the exhibition also reflected on Lee's influence on Singaporeans, positive and negative, though many did not use his iconography.

The British had no qualms about promoting Sir Stamford Raffles and other colonial figures when they ruled Singapore, and to this day a tall, white statue of the "founder" of colonial Singapore still stands proud along the Singapore River. Surprisingly, ever since the city-state gained independence in 1965, it has continued to celebrate the names of colonial pioneers on monuments, streets, and bridges, rather than embrace new modern-day heroes. As the first generation of political pioneers has begun to pass on, there have been occasional calls to celebrate them and their achievements, but the Singaporean government, and in particular Lee, has always shied away from anything that could be construed as creating a cult of personalities.

Few of Asia's other longtime leaders have hesitated using public art to promote themselves; Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos had his own bust carved into a hillside in central Luzon, and Mao's image was so pervasive that it was not only on official buildings, but also in every single household. Lee has preferred the nation building to be carried out in other media, such as newspapers and textbooks. "The cult of personality makes him uncomfortable," says Tom Plate, author of *Conversations With Lee Kuan Yew*. "He thinks it's tacky. Until very recently, he didn't even want to talk much about aspects of personality and his personal life."

Gallery owner Valentine Willie points out that artists have probably been reticent to use Lee's image in their works, because officially, the use of any cabinet minister's image requires approval from the Media Development Authority. Yet he also acknowledged that at his recent exhibition he did not seek any permission nor did he encounter any problems. Indeed, some of the works were reproduced several times in the state-controlled media, which could be considered a subtle endorsement. "The greatest censorship is self-censorship," says Willie. "We've lived for so long under a regime where we can't do this or that, it's almost ingrained in our psyche that we don't go there."

That's definitely changing. A finalist for the 2010 Sovereign Asian Art prize, whose winner will be announced early next year, is an oil painting in the pop-art style of a young Lee relaxing with his family. It is by Ong Hui Har, who tackled the private side of the political leader in a one-woman show earlier this year. The true test will be if and when she and her colleagues tackle the other side.