

Interview: Lee Mingwei - 'I really wanted to give birth'

By Jackie McGlone

October 16, 2009

LEE MINGWEI knew I was coming, so he's baked a cake – a spicy lemon cake, which is a treat but not entirely unexpected. One of this conceptual artist's most acclaimed works involves him cooking a meal for strangers and then eating it with them.

We share his delicious cake while drinking fragrant Taiwanese tea in his tranquil home, which is also his studio. Unbelievably, we are only a few floors above the clamorous paranoia of New York's downtown financial district, but we might be in a bamboo-floored Buddhist temple, such is the aura of peace and calm. Most of it emanates from Lee himself, who was taught from the age of six in a Ch'an monastery, learning the power of concentrating on daily activities beside his master. (Ch'an is the Chinese ancestor of Zen.)

This boyish-looking 45-year-old, whose work is being seen in Scotland for the first time in the Edinburgh International Festival's visual art exhibition, *The Enlightenments*, is dressed in a traditional Chinese garment, a silvery-grey silk tunic. He was born in Taiwan, is based in New York, and has an air of Zen-like serenity, despite the fact that, for a while, he was perhaps the most notorious artist on the planet after he pretended in 1999 to be the world's first pregnant man – and received death threats as a result.

Many found his "pregnancy" hard to stomach, although Lee was taken seriously by the medical establishment who declared his condition biologically feasible. He claimed to have had an umbilical cord and placenta implanted in his body after undergoing radical hormone treatment in an American hospital, the Dwayne Medical Center.

When his elaborate online site and pregnancy diary went into its 15th month, he was finally accused of being a hoaxer rather than modern medicine's miracle man. Nonetheless, *The Male Pregnancy Project* – along with Lee's *Letter Writing Project*, which comes to Edinburgh's Dean Gallery – is now included in Taiwan's official art education syllabus for high-school students. "They put *The Male Pregnancy Project* into the virtual reality section rather than the avant-garde conceptual art projects," he says with a sigh. The web-based project – www.leemingwei.com – includes a photograph of the slender, almost naked, Lee looking six months gone.

"*The Male Pregnancy Project* is something I choose not to speak about since it has not yet come together for me either physically or emotionally," he says softly, adding that he has, however, appeared in public with the prosthetic pregnancy tummy.

The main purpose of the project is to provoke thoughtful conversations between genders about this particular issue, he says. "In a way, to prepare for such an event in the near future." Then he pauses and says: "I have never spoken before about my real reasons for doing this.

"My older sister, Sophia, became pregnant with her first baby, my nephew, who is now 12; I was so envious that she was having an experience I could not share, although as a homosexual man I do not have any desire physically to become a woman. I have never wanted that, but I was jealous of her being able to do something I couldn't do. I really wanted to give birth.

"I thought as a man I'm so limited in so many ways, not only intellectually but physically. I've always wanted to have a much stronger empathy with women. I love my mother and my sisters very much. I thought that being pregnant must be the most wonderful feeling; it's something that all human beings, both men and women, should experience before they die. So, creating the project was like a spiritual rebirth for me. One of my best friends, Virgil Wong, is a virtual reality master with a medical background, so he helped me to create the project online.

"I haven't talked about it before because for me it's an extremely cold project at this moment, although it's incredibly emotional for me as I haven't really experienced it physically. The thing is it is like all my other practice – it's a project created to provoke, to make people think, to put questions out there. I have no answers to these important questions. If people think it's a joke, then there are others who have taken it very seriously.

"I was silly enough to put my own name on it and a religious group found out where I lived – my partner and I have since moved – and they threatened to place a bomb in my apartment. I was so scared people might die because of me."

Why doesn't he simply father a child himself? "I would love to! But my clock is ticking – I'm 45!" he says. "Children are such beautiful people and I would like to bring new life into this world. My partner and I could adopt, or have a surrogate child. But, first of all, we want pets, but I travel all the time. I guess the Pregnancy Project is really about the maternal side of me since I believe that all men should celebrate their feminine side."

The gentle Lee's empathy with women certainly underwrites his haunting Letter Writing Project – which replaces his advertised plan to build a Stairway to Heaven – in Edinburgh. Prior to the 'pregnancy', his most talked-about work was The Sleeping Project, at the Venice Biennale in 2003, which invited viewers to enter a lottery, and which, if won, offered a night alone, "sleeping with" the artist in a gallery – in separate beds.

In Edinburgh, logistical problems meant Lee couldn't create his lofty Enlightenment staircase, so instead the capital gets his graceful, gravely meditative letter-writing installation. Made in 1998 at New York's Whitney Museum, it was his first solo show. His beloved grandmother had recently died and he had been composing long epistles to her containing everything he could not say during life to this forceful woman, who studied Western medicine and lived in Japan.

He shows me a framed photograph taken in the 1920s of three rows of serious-looking young women in white headbands standing stiffly behind a partly dissected male cadaver. "My grandmother," he says, pointing to the remarkable woman who became one of the first female physicians in Taiwan. She had four daughters and instructed them all to marry doctors. Three of them – including Lee's mother – complied. "So, the Letter Writing Project is a very personal tribute to my grandmother," he confides.

The project is made up of three booths (just one booth in the Edinburgh version), with walls of pale blond wood and frosted glass, in which visitors can write a confessional letter saying the unsayable. Stationery and envelopes are on small tables, which invite you to assume one of three meditative postures of Buddhism: standing, sitting, kneeling signifying gratitude, insight, forgiveness. When you're finished you select a place to leave your letter on one of the rows of shelves lining the walls. If you address and seal the envelope, it will be posted by the gallery. If you leave it unsealed, other people are allowed to read it.

"It's a very simple work but then all my work shares simplicity and refinement; it has to be clear and clean," he says. He points out that people tend to write letters about sensitive, deeply personal matters, why something has gone wrong – or right – with a relationship or mourning a friendship lost. Mostly they write to the dead and the departed. At the end of the first exhibition, 12,000 letters were sent out, about a third were for the deceased. "The writers pour out their hearts, so the unsealed letters are sometimes burnt ritualistically after the project closes, a reminder of the river ceremony we have in Taiwan every spring when people burn paper boats with prayers inside them," says Lee.

His other artworks have included that most maternal of acts, lovingly preparing a meal. The Dining Project is an ongoing event, which when installed includes a video of two people eating, although the faces of Lee and his companion are hidden. You see only the table setting and their hands. Lee then cooks a meal for a chosen guest – selected by lottery – after-hours wherever the work is being shown. "Privacy is important," he says. "It's a performance without an audience."

He's a good cook and recalls how his grandmother would always find connections with her community through food, as he did when he went to Yale, where, knowing no-one, he put up notices all over campus promising to cook an intimate dinner for anyone who signed up. "I felt so lost," he says. "But I made good friends." When the Lee family goes to Hawaii for their annual reunion, he's the family chef. "I bring Chinese, Italian cookbooks. My sisters are the sous-chefs. They're not such good cooks as I am." Over second helpings, he talks about his childhood in Taiwan, which was under martial law, with one-party rule, until 1987. "I grew up with it, so I didn't really notice. My parents, though, worked for independence." They didn't want him drafted into the military under a regime they didn't agree with, so they sent him to the Dominican Republic.

He stayed for nine months until he got a visa to enter the US, where he went to an all-boys boarding school in San Francisco run by Benedictine monks, although his family is not Catholic. "They are Buddhists, but not practising." After studying sciences, he told his parents he wasn't interested in medical school. "They allowed me to do what is really in my heart, which is art."

Since graduating from Yale, he's had solo shows all over the world. Last autumn, his most recent work debuted in Taipei. It's called *Between Going and Staying*, from an Octavio Paz poem. It's a departure from his other works because neither the audience nor the artist participates. The piece consists of five tons of volcanic sand, the amount calculated to last the six weeks of the show. It falls from a ceiling-hung light that looks like a broken eggshell.

"It's a piece that I'm still not clear about," he laughs, just as he's still not clear about being history's first pregnant man.

- The Letter Writing Project is at the Dean Gallery until 27 September, as part of the Edinburgh International Festival's Enlightenments exhibition.