

Island of genius

BY MARK WHITE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN SIEWERT

PING LIAN YEAK IS STARING AT AN AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH of Marina Bay in Singapore. Using a pen, he carefully sketches tiny fragments of it on two giant pieces of card that cover a lozenge-shaped wooden table. Having filled in most of one corner, he gets up and runs upstairs in the family home on Sydney's north shore that he shares with his mother and two sisters.

The cosy, detached house on a quiet, leafy street has terracotta shingles above the garage, while a dozen or so potted plants share the space by the front door with a tangle of shoes. Ping Lian's pictures line the walls of the U-shaped, open-plan ground floor. Those featuring animals, including one of the family's golden retriever, Crystal, radiate vivid splashes of colour. His cityscapes, on the other hand – and I can see depictions of Kuala Lumpur's Petronas Twin Towers, Malacca's Christ Church and the Eiffel Tower – are imposing in their intricacy.

Ping Lian, 20, is severely autistic. Coming back downstairs, he joins his mother, Sarah Lee, at their glass-topped dining table. Until he begins to talk, you'd take him for a normal, good-natured – if shy – young man. But then you notice the concentrated effort required to answer three or four simple questions in a row and his replies, when they come, are a series of short, staccato bursts. "You like drawing?" his mother asks. "Yes," he replies. "Draw. Piano. Play."

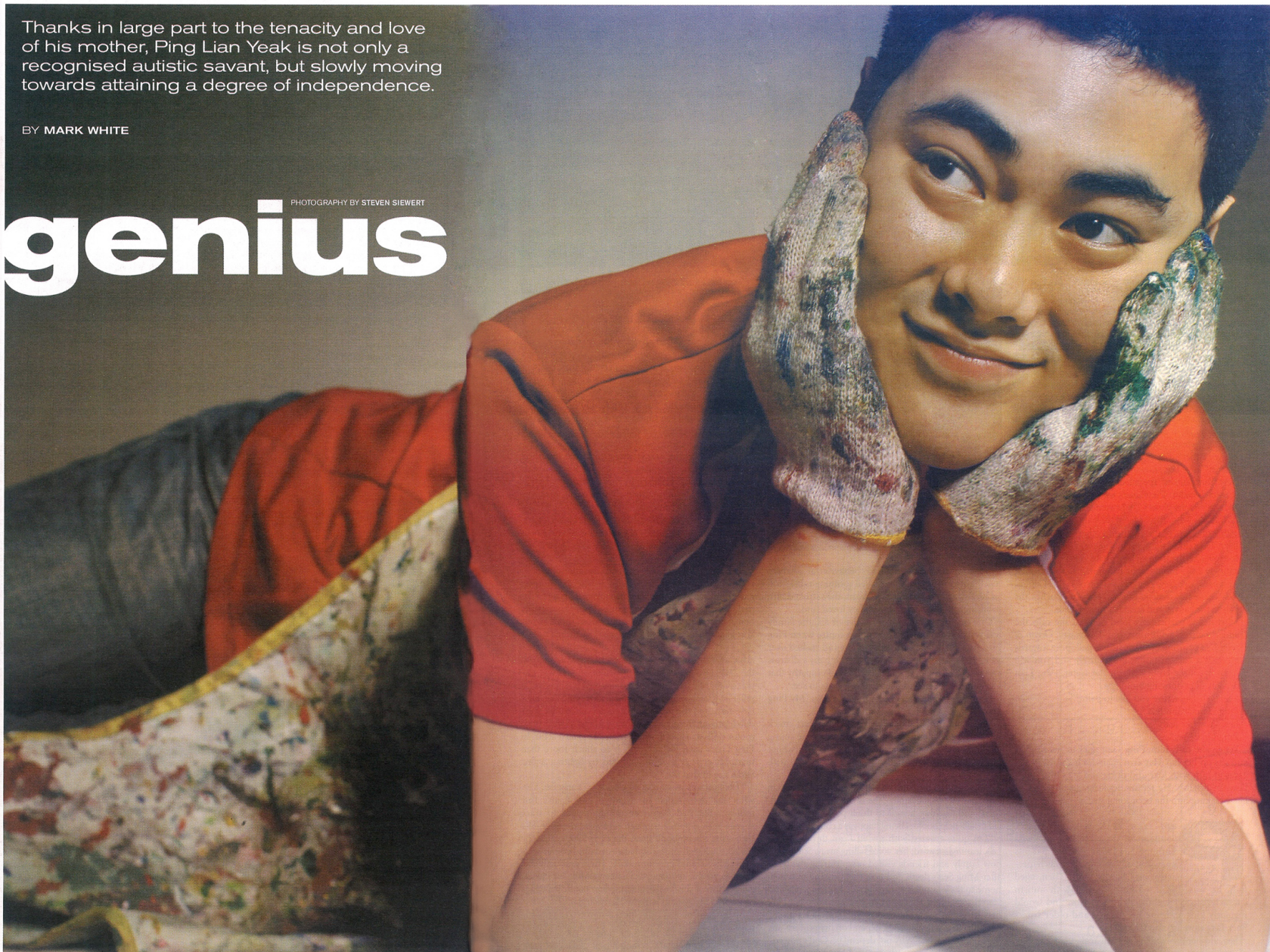
"I never feel he's a burden," says 52-year-old Lee. "He gives a lot of meaning to our lives." She's friendly and slightly built, but with a dark-eyed gaze so intense you suspect it would be a mistake to underestimate her, or the lengths to which she'd go to defend the people she loves. "He's got a very unique journey, so we also experience this unique journey with him."

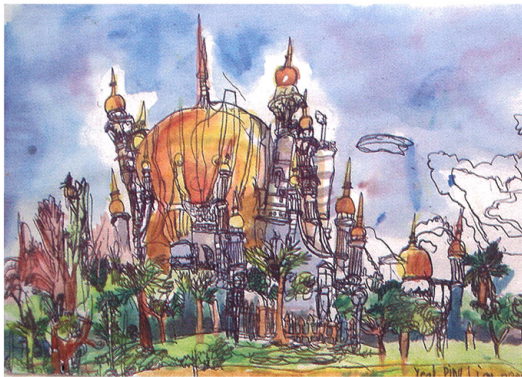
About one in a hundred children develop autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and of those, about one in 10 possesses a talent that's in sharp contrast to their level of functioning. Their skills tend to fall within a narrow range of subjects, such as art, music or maths. Most are what's known as "splinter savants" – those with a very specific skill, such as the ability to memorise maps, historical facts or sports trivia. A few are "talented savants", with an outstanding expertise in playing a musical instrument, say, or painting.

About 100 savants in the world are classed as "prodigious savants", so talented their skills would ordinarily be considered to be at prodigy or genius level. One is 50-something Alonzo Clemons, of Boulder, Colorado, who suffered a severe brain injury as a child and can neither feed himself nor tie his shoes. He can, however, see a fleeting image of any animal on a TV screen and sculpt a perfect 3D representation of it. Another is 35-year-old Englishman Daniel Tammet: he has ASD and is a maths and language genius. In 2005, he learned Icelandic in a week for a TV documentary. Ping Lian Yeak shares their company.

Ping Lian's work has been exhibited in the US, UK, Australia, Japan, Germany, Singapore and Malaysia. *Ubudiah Mosque I*, which he paint-

Thanks in large part to the tenacity and love of his mother, Ping Lian Yeak is not only a recognised autistic savant, but slowly moving towards attaining a degree of independence.





WINDOWS OF GENIUS: (above, left to right) Ping Lian Yeak's *Ubudiah Mosque I*, which he painted aged 10, then donated to a Malaysian charity that auctioned it for over \$30,000 the following year; with his mother, Sarah Lee; at work in his studio in Sydney.

ed in 2003, aged 10, raised over \$30,000 the following year in an auction for Malaysia's Riding for the Disabled Association. He is featured in a popular Korean book, *Knowledge*, which contains profiles of historical greats such as Albert Einstein and Abraham Lincoln – "Einstein!" says Lee, showing me the book.

New York autism specialist Dr Rosa Martinez was first introduced to Ping Lian's work in 2005 by Texas-based autistic-art expert Dr Laurence Becker during a fund-raising drive. A year later, the pair collaborated in hanging the work of Ping Lian and others in a New York gallery. They called the exhibition *Don't Dis The Ability*. "He moves his brush from his palette to his canvas with seemingly little forethought or effort," says Martinez, who heads up New York-based Strokes of Genius, which celebrates autistic artists. "He just touches the brush to the canvas and creates a masterpiece."

Martinez is particularly fond of what she calls the "hidden figures" within his grand canvases. *Ocean of Horses II*, a painting of many horses galloping towards the sea, is a case in point: look closely and you will discern a couple embracing in the water. Ping Lian especially likes drawing buildings.

Lee: "Which picture you like to paint?"

Ping Lian: "Paint leaf."

Lee: "You like leaf?"

Ping Lian: "Yes."

When she calls him, Ping Lian goes to his mother and sits on her lap. Her arm encircles his waist as she gazes at him with love and pride and asks him questions in English. He replies, looking steadily back at her, breaking into the occasional smile.

PING LIAN YEAK WAS BORN THE youngest of three children in Kuala Lumpur in 1993. All his parents knew initially was that he was hyperactive and hardly slept. Then, aged four, he was diagnosed with ADHD with autism characteristics. He showed no affection and would regularly kick and bite his parents and older sisters Sher Lyn, now 26, and Cher, 22.

Lee and her husband, Ming Sen Yeak, used a variety of techniques in an attempt to soften his disruptive

"We can't just look at it and say, 'Isn't that interesting?' Until we can explain it, we haven't really understood the brain."

behaviour, including applied behavioural analysis modification therapy: they played soothing music and let him sleep between them at night; they stroked him soothingly and whispered that they loved him.

One day, when Ping Lian was five or six, the family was walking around a KL shopping centre when Ping Lian heard a baby crying in its pram and rushed over to it. He'd been made anxious by the baby's distress and wanted to help. It was the display of empathy that Lee and Ming Sen had been waiting years to see.

"I was so happy," says Lee, remembering. "My Ping Lian got it!"

When her husband died suddenly of a heart attack in 2004, Lee found herself the sole carer of three young children and her 79-year-old mother-in-law, whose health was fragile. "I had no choice," she says, with characteristic firmness. "I need to be strong."

Help came in the form of Lee's Pentecostal Christian faith, her close-knit family (she is the ninth of 10 children) and teaching herself to think positively with the aid of self-help books. "Being happy is a choice," she says.

"I'm quite amazed with myself I got through," says Lee, leaning forward, her voice falling away. She recalls how family and friends visited often during the week after Ming Sen's death and how their leaving to return home to their families at night made her feel alone and scared. One night, a fellow church-goer said to her, "We may be going away, but God is with you all the time." Lee reflected. "Why should I depend on my power?" she says, remembering. "Why not depend on God's power?"

At the time of his death, Lee and Ming Sen had de-

clined to move back to Australia, where they'd lived once before, and had already visited Sydney and Melbourne to see which city best suited them. "I had faith it was the right thing to do," she says simply.

Ping Lian particularly liked Sydney's architecture, so Lee and her children moved there in 2006. "It was very hard," she says, breaking unexpectedly into peals of laughter. "I had no friends here. One mum with three children and the place is so new to me!"

Proceeds from the sale of the family home in KL, some savings and the support of a group of businessmen who loved Ping Lian's art helped them get by for a few years. The girls worked part-time – Sher Lyn, who's now a doctor, as a waitress, and Cher in a shop – and Ping Lian attended the Aspect Vern Barnett School for autistic children in Forestville.

Lee's plans of going into real estate were, however, eclipsed by Ping Lian's needs – and organising his exhibitions. Since 2009, the pair have run a stall selling his work – mostly prints – at Sydney's weekend Rocks Market. "He learns how to integrate into society and he enjoys going there," she says. "He feels useful because he can set up the stall. And he likes the attention."

On the day I meet them there, nearby stall-holders greet him cheerily while he roams around his territory, making a series of contented noises. "He enjoys being here," says Lee. "He's happy and calmer, more stable. You hear those sounds? He's happy, I'm happy."

ROSA MARTINEZ FIRST MET MOTHER AND SON DURING the 2006 *Don't Dis The Ability* exhibition and was impressed by the bond between them. Lee is, she says, "a pillar of strength and support. Her love and her faith have nurtured the journey that has advanced her son's development from an oblivious youngster with poor motor skills to a loving young man and skilled artist. In Ping Lian's case, the progress is so much more than maturation. It is a destiny created by lighting a fire. Sarah Lee lit that fire."

This ignition was a happy accident. Early on, Lee, who was determined to improve Ping Lian's fine motor skills, had begun encouraging him to trace shapes with a pencil through transparent paper. She shows me a scrapbook from the early 2000s. First, he traced the letters of the alphabet over and over, repetitive tasks to build imitation skills. Then, gradually, she introduced thicker paper to challenge him. We flick to a depiction of sunflowers and, on later pages, drawings of Ronald McDonald and the Hamburglar.

By the time he was eight, he'd outgrown the tracing paper. The first time it happened, Ping Lian had been out with his father enjoying an ice-cream. On their return, he burst into the house and rushed upstairs.

Alarmed, Lee followed him. She found him in his bedroom intently studying the ice-cream wrapper and copying it. Instantly relieved, she went back to her cooking, initially overlooking the significance of the moment. For some time, she'd been pondering how Ping Lian could support himself as an adult. "My mum always taught dignity and pride and always be a useful person," she says. "So even though my son is autistic, I want him to be a useful person. What job can he do?"

In 2003, she had an epiphany and, in March, wrote in her journal: "I want to develop Ping Lian to be an artist. I know he will be an artist one day." Six months later, she saw Anthony Robbins at one of his "Awaken the Giant Within" seminars and scribbled down a quote that assuaged any doubt: "There is always room in your life for thinking bigger."

She set out to reinforce that goal by hiring three art teachers; it sounds excessive but, as Lee admits, she was embarking on a campaign to "brainwash" her son, who was drawing constantly, but whose remarkable ability had yet to reveal itself. He would become an artist, she'd decided. "Artist! Artist!" repeats Ping Lian now.

"See?" she says, beaming. "He's so happy."

Brainwashing doesn't have the most positive connotations, I say. "If you use it the right way, then it is the right thing," replies Lee with resolve. Ping Lian was autistic and unable to set his own goals, she explains, so she set one for him and positively reinforced it through repetition. If his teachers still couldn't make an artist out of him, it didn't matter: he'd have found a hobby. But within a year of the Anthony Robbins seminar, Ping Lian's work appeared in six exhibitions, two of them solo.

Wisconsin psychiatrist Dr Darold Treffert has studied savants since 1962 and is a worldwide authority on the subject. "I know Sarah says she brainwashes him," he chuckles, "and I wish she wouldn't, because there's a difference between brainwashing and encouraging and leading and finding the little gem and nourishing it like a little flower."

All genius, he adds, is part nature, part nurture. "Ping Lian brings extraordinary 'nature' in the form of innate ability and talent. His mother provides equally extraordinary 'nurture' in the form of unconditional love, determination, ingenuity, belief and hope. She brought Ping Lian all the way to Wisconsin for the *Windows of Genius* art exhibition here several years ago. And it worked. His artistic 'genius' is a credit to both of them. They are unstoppable."

A research paper on Treffert's website notes, "The importance of the savant lies in our inability to explain them." "Here is this island of genius," he says. "We can't just look at it and say, 'Isn't that interesting?' Until we can explain it, we haven't really understood the brain."

He adds that the technology to study the brain is moving past MRI machines, and new imaging techniques allow brain fibres to be examined. "It's like taking the cover off a computer and looking at the circuits themselves... Savant syndrome points to dormant potential within us all, which isn't to say we're all Picassos or Michelangelos – talent is the usual bell-shaped curve."

PING LIAN YEAK IS PLAYING THE PIANO, FIRST tentatively, then more surely. He plays Mozart's *Variations on a Theme* and *La Candeur* by Burgmüller before saying brusquely "Enough!" and moving to his computer, where he studies a picture of truck beds. He starts to sketch them.

Lee tells me that she has always set small goals for him as she attempts to impart new life skills. First, while washing up, she showed him how to clean a small pot. Once he mastered that, she gave him more complex tasks. "We try and we are hopeful," she says. "Never try, never know."

There have been times, she admits, when she's won-

dered, "Why me?" When Ping Lian was first diagnosed, she found herself railing at God: "I'm a good lady. My husband is an honest person. Why did God choose us?" She was angry again when Ming Sen died, but she also knew there was no point hanging on to negative emotion. "My faith grows through my spirit and my journey with my son," she says resolutely. "So many miracles have happened in my life."

Lee knows she won't always be around to care for Ping Lian. She has instilled the belief in him that he is an artist; can she now prepare him for having sole responsibility for the market stall? "I 'brainwash' him for years; now he loves to go to market," she says proudly. "He loves to set up stall. The groundwork's done."

Lee to Ping Lian: "Whose stall is it? Mummy's or Ping Lian's?"

Ping Lian: "Mummy's stall."

Lee: "Whose stall?"

Ping Lian: "Ping Lian's stall."

Lee: "Very good! What else must Ping Lian learn?"

Ping Lian: "Count money."

Lee: "Counting. What else?"

Ping Lian: "Serving."

Lee: "Who?"

Ping Lian: "Customers!"

ON MY SECOND VISIT, PING LIAN IS MUCH CALMER. "HE has matured into an obedient, hard-working and grateful boy," reflects Lee. "He is my good helper at home and when we go shopping." As we talk, Ping Lian, wearing a paint-spattered apron, potters about. As he walks past me, mumbling, I hear him say distinctly, "Oh so happy," before disappearing up the stairs. ■