

SEAN LEAN

Ceramics, in his hands, become a means of thinking the relation between the contemporary and the *longue durée* of trans-Asian exchange: not as a vertical descent from origin to present, but as a horizontal field of circulation in which forms are continually remade.

~ Adeena Mey, from an accompanying essay on Sean's work

BOOTH FC12



TOP: *Something, nothing*
Automotive paint on aluminium
114.5 x 140cm (Triptych)
2025–2026

RIGHT: *A tale*
Automotive paint on aluminium
140cm x 158cm (Triptych)
2024–2026

Sean Lean (b. 1981, Kuala Lumpur)

Sean Lean is an artist whose practice spans painting, industrial materials, and automotive finishes. His work develops from Malaysian-Chinese histories, personal memory, and the cultural tensions shaped by tradition, aspiration, and the shifting values of a multicultural society. He often begins with fragments from his own life and moves toward broader questions of identity, belonging, and the narratives that shape the region.

He has exhibited in Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Indonesia, and China. In 2024 he took part in *And the invader's fear of memories*, curated by Line Dalile, which placed his work alongside Lawrence Abu Hamdan, FX Harsono, and other artists engaged with memory, testimony, and the pressures of historical silence. Major bodies of work such as *Flesh: Blacks and Whites* (2013), *Motherland* (2015), *3* (2018), *M2* (2020), *china* (2022), and *COLORED* (2024) trace his ongoing engagement with introspection and cultural inheritance. These exhibitions investigate the changing meanings of Chineseness and the negotiations within diasporic identity, while his material language has expanded into aluminium, mild steel, and automotive paints to consider industry, modernity, and the uncertain stability of cultural symbols.

Lean has also taken part in international collaborations, including a commission for KENZO with Tiger Beer and WWF inspired by conservation stories of wild tigers, and a special cover for Bazaar Art magazine. Across his projects he considers how personal history intersects with collective memory, revisiting traditions, belief systems, and inherited expectations through a contemporary lens that combines research, humour, and attentive craft.

Cover image: *Something, nothing* (2025–2026)

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What sets his work apart is to work with ceramics beyond the materiality of ceramics. Lean is neither a contemporary artist working with ceramics, nor a contemporary ceramic artist exploring the potentials of Chinese tradition or attempting to update it for our present moment.

Lean's relationship to China also stems from the reference to 'china' – the word used by the West when it encountered porcelain and which remained as its generic name – as the paradoxical point of departure for his work. Describing himself as a 'westernised kid', the artist's gaze towards China can thus be seen as having always been mediated by the West.

To locate his work within its context is to recognise the layered nature of Chineseness in Malaysia, a hybridity that precedes contemporary global mobility and extends back through centuries of regional movement.

Text excerpts taken from an accompanying essay by Adeena Mey (PhD), a writer, curator, and educator, on Sean Lean's work.



Filial obligation adds a more intimate texture to this distance. Lean recalls the pressure of a rigorous Chinese upbringing and the persistent feeling of falling short. Early works that reproduce porcelain motifs are, by his own account, attempts at “paying dues,” even as they insist on rupture. The vase form, cut into metal, appears reverent yet is literally split open. The act of cutting becomes a means of inhabiting the role of “Chinese son” while simultaneously refusing the image of Chineseness he inherited. After his father’s passing, this burden loosens. The silhouettes remain, but without the didactic weight of cultural debt; they become one material among others through which inherited forms might be re-routed. Rather than framing inheritance as a return, Lean’s work casts it as a negotiation – one that passes through resistance, ambivalence and a cautious relief. The cut metal vase registers this tension: not reconciliation, but a diagram of the compromises required to live with a past that is both imposed and desired.



TOP: *Tortoise*
Automotive paint on aluminium
134cm x 128cm (Triptych)
2025–2026

BOTTOM: *Dark and Vain*
Automotive paint on aluminium
144cm x 137cm (Triptych)
2025–2026



SCAN TO READ THE
ENTIRE ESSAY BY
ADEENA MEY

Lean’s practice emerges within a history always already marked by replication. European chinoiserie, Dutch and German porcelain, and British “china” all developed through acts of imitation; Lean’s engagement with porcelain silhouettes acknowledges this genealogy without attempting to correct or revoke it. Working from digital images and auction reproductions, he produces what he calls a “fake”: as he put it “I’m trying to pay my dues in a rather clumsy way by retracing the footsteps of my ancestors, trying to recreate the image as faithfully as possible. But in the end it’s still fake – the material is fake.” One could argue that the fidelity he pursues is therefore not technical but conceptual: he repeats the gesture of reproduction, foregrounding the distance inherent to diasporic knowledge. As he notes, he approaches Chinese motifs “as an outsider,” despite his ancestry – a position shaped as much by schoolbooks and paternal expectations as by any inherited craft. This sense of exteriority unsettles the assumption that diasporic artists return to authenticity. For Lean, copying is not a deviation from origins; it is the structure through which “China” has been encountered in Southeast Asia.



Inferior Physique
Automotive paint on aluminium
134cm x 128cm (Triptych)
2025–2026

Lean’s refusal of the “right” material exposes how much cultural authenticity depends on surface, and how easily surface can migrate across technical regimes. The chart-like panels that accompany certain works, documenting layers of automotive paint, invert the secrecy of glaze recipes and treat cultural form as an algorithm – repeatable, adjustable, never pure.

Lean is not concerned with quoting or re-contextualising a ceramic original so much as with exposing the mediations through which “porcelain” has been made to signify “China.”

Lean’s engagement with export porcelain extends into a more explicit confrontation with the Western gaze and its textual imaginaries which once framed China as object of curiosity and racialisation.

Textual silhouettes on ceramic export wares’ deconstructed silhouettes, they expose how porcelain served not only as commodity but as a surface onto which the West projected moral judgement, ethnographic fantasy and racial typology. This is intensified by Lean’s interrupting the continuity of the vessel by cutting them into triptychs, literally figuring what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha termed ‘Third Space’, namely a space “which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.” Both the vessel and these descriptions are rendered unstable, split, dematerialised and subjected to a chromatic logic that oscillates between glaze-like gloss and industrial flatness and objectivity.

the temporal relationship of Lean’s work to the history it invokes is not one of inheritance but of adjacency – an ongoing negotiation with a past that persists less as a coherent tradition than as a network of fragments, images and materials that continue to travel.

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