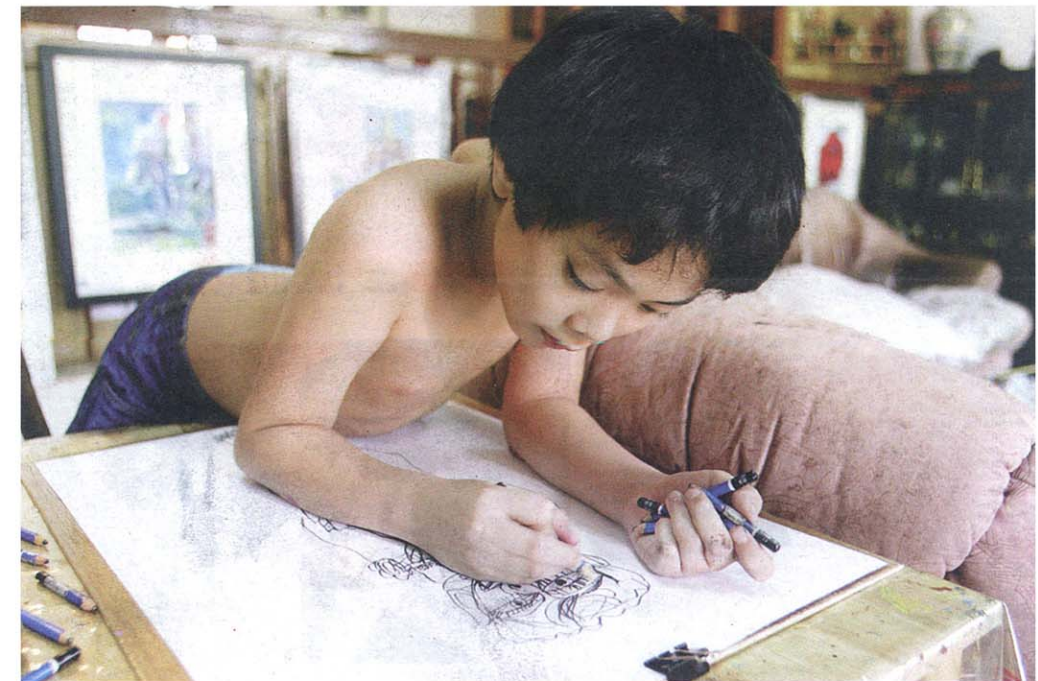


A boy wonder



Crayons, paint, brushes and paper are some of Ping Lian's best friends.



The boy's talent is nurtured through the love from his family as is being done here by Cher Lyn (left) and Lee. Right: Ping Lian keeps with the times, too.



"He works very fast. It takes him half an hour for a simple charcoal sketch and two hours for a serious art piece," said Lee. Ping Lian's artistic talent is extraordinary. But, like any ordinary child, he is hyperactive and has a short attention span, loves root beer float and biscuits, dotes on his older sisters Sher Lyn and Cher Lyn, and enjoys watching Toy Story, Kidsongs, Sesame Street and Magic English. His latest preoccupation is the electric keyboard. Unlike ordinary children, however, Ping Lian is autistic and diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. Although he has an excellent memory and reads well, he has limited speech vocabulary, usually expressing himself in single or double words. He is home-tutored and attends supplementary lessons for special needs children at the Emmanuel Care Centre. He also takes Kumon classes in Mathematics.

Strokes of genius from

He works very fast. It takes him half an hour for a simple charcoal sketch and two hours for a serious art piece - Sarah Lee

an 11-year-old autistic child

By VIVIANNE PAL
Photos by KAMARUL ARIFFIN

LOST in his own world, 11-year-old Yeak Ping Lian kneels on the floor, humming softly as he doodles on a yellow paper. He is oblivious to my presence. "Ping Lian, say hello to this che," Sarah Lee said to her son who reluctantly moved away from his drawing. "Hello," he mumbles while engulfing me in a hug. "His eyes settle on the flowery motif of my dress. "Paint," he enunciates in a clear voice, and then runs to his work-table and waits. "Paint flower!" he repeats louder. The house is swamped with Ping Lian's art - on the walls, stacked up against banisters and under the tables. They are done in charcoal, pencil, ink and marker pens with water-colour and acrylic. While some resemble infantile scrawlings, there are others that seem impossible for an 11-year-old to produce, such as the Petronas Twin Towers, the KL Railway Station, Christ Church, Malacca, charcoal etchings of former premier Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi and the Dentistry Faculty of University Malaya. His latest is "Prosperous Year", a vibrant acrylic painting of a rooster protecting a hen as she feeds.



Clockwise from left: Ping Lian does it all from scratch, even from mixing the colours; doing self portraits are usually when an artist has arrived; and this is amazing for a child, but Ping Lian has done it and the picture fetched RM100,000 in a charity auction.



Little Ping Lian is an artistic savant, says psychiatrist

From P3

As Lee spoke to me, Ping Lian grew increasingly fidgety. Fascinated by the *StarMetro* photographer's camera, he began to lose interest in the flowers and drew Kamarul Ariffin instead. While Ping Lian started sketching, Lee recalled the time she found out about his condition. "He couldn't speak even when he was three years old. "I felt so lost when doctors told me that he was autistic," she said. But Lee acted fast. Armed with information from the doctor, books and the Internet, Lee and her late husband began by teaching Ping Lian how to show affection and express himself. They sent him to a normal school for almost two years to expose him to society. While simple tracing and colouring were part of his daily imitation skills

therapy, it wasn't until 2002 when Ping Lian began to display a sudden obsession for art. "He usually traces simple pictures and lines, but one day after eating an ice-cream, he started drawing the pictures printed on the ice-cream wrapper. That was when I discovered he could draw. He just drew non-stop from then on," said Lee, who had by then nurtured hopes that her son would be a prolific artist someday. She sent him for art lessons, saved all his artworks and kept a diary of his progress. One day while surfing the Internet, she learnt about Savant Syndrome, an exceedingly rare, but remarkable, condition. People with it have serious mental handicap resulting from various developmental disabilities such as autism, have astonishing islands of ability or brilliance that stand in stark, markedly incongruous contrast to the overall disability.

Curious, Lee sent copies of Ping Lian's work to Dr Darold A. Treffert, an American psychiatrist and author of *Extraordinary People: Understanding the Savant Syndrome*. Dr Treffert has been studying Savant Syndrome for 40 years. Ping Lian's extraordinary artistic ability led Dr Treffert to acknowledge him as an artistic savant. His profile is now listed on Dr Treffert's website, www.savantsyndrome.com, together with other notable savants from around the world. "I've kept in touch with Dr Treffert ever since. Besides him, the Association of British Women in Malaysia (ABWM) has also been a tremendous support to me," said Lee, adding that her association with the ABWM began when she befriended ABWM Public Relations co-ordinator Caroline Gregory last year. Caroline, together with ABWM members, are now preparing for Ping

Lian's art to be exhibited at the ABWM House at 12, Jalan Merung 3, Bangsar from Feb 25 to March 24. Part of the proceeds will go to the Emmanuel Care Centre. "This is the first time we're holding an exhibition by a special needs child. Hopefully this will educate the expatriate community on such extraordinary abilities as well as give Lee a platform to share her experiences and encourage those who are undergoing similar struggles," said Caroline while lounging on a couch in Lee's hall. The exhibition at ABWM House will not be Ping Lian's first. Since December 2003 he has held five exhibitions, sold 67 original art pieces and hundreds of limited edition prints. His rendition of the Ubudiah Mosque sold for RM100,000 to an anonymous bidder during the RDA Charity Ball grand auction in aid of the Riding for the Disabled Association

Malaysia last November. Some of his works were displayed at the Centre for Autism Spectrum Disorders conference in the United States last year. Lee's excitement over the impending exhibition is palpable; it is part of her dream of developing Ping Lian into an outstanding artist and at the same time using a percentage of the proceeds from the sale of Ping Lian's art to help other less fortunate autistic people. It was two hours into the interview and Ping Lian was restless. He tugged at Lee's sleeve and said: "Playground." At her approval, he dashed straight for the park in front of the house. On the table is a finished pencil portrait of Kamarul in amazing detail. To view Ping Lian's art, visit www.pinglian.com. For more information on the exhibition, contact ABWM House at 03-2095 4407.

Doc: Loving, optimistic and motivated families vital

MOST people would remember Oscar award-winning movie *Rain Man* for its poignant depiction of how used car dealer Charlie Babbitt learnt to love Raymond, his severely autistic brother who had incomprehensibly outstanding abilities. In the movie, Raymond had a talent or ability that stood in conspicuous contrast to his overall disability. According to American psychiatrist Dr Darold A. Treffert, the prominent abilities are superimposed upon, or grafted on to, the underlying disability. Dr Treffert, the author of *Extraordinary People: Understanding Savant Syndrome*, has been studying Savant

Syndrome for 40 years. He was a consultant for *Rain Man* and has appeared on *Today*, *Oprah*, *Larry King Live* and *Discovery*. "In autistic disorder, savant abilities occur in as many as one in 10 children. In other disorders, Savant Syndrome is much less, perhaps as few as one in 2,000, for example," said Dr Treffert in an e-mail interview with *StarMetro*. Not all savants are autistic and not all autistic people are savants. "When Savant Syndrome does occur, it occurs over a spectrum of abilities ranging from splinter skills (eg memorisation of trivia or other obsessive memory or sound recogni-

tion skills) to what I call talented savants (situations where usually a single ability such as art or music or maths are conspicuous and noteworthy) to what I call prodigious savants (circumstances in which the special skill or ability would be spectacular even if it were to be seen in a non-disabled person). "The latter, in my view, are spectacular and there are fewer than 50 living worldwide at the present time," said Dr Treffert. When asked the number of savants in Asia, Dr Treffert said: "I don't know for sure. I assume the number proportionately would be the same

as elsewhere around the world, that is one in 10 autistic people and one in 2,000 with other special needs disorders." In his website Dr Treffert mentions that there is no single theory that explains the cause of savant. However, a plausible theory in many cases is left brain injury with right brain compensation, in that the right brain compensates for the damage in the left brain. The skills most often seen in savants are those associated with the right hemisphere while those most lacking are associated with the left hemisphere.

Dr Treffert has classified Yeak Ping Lian under the category of artistic savant based on the description of his early childhood developmental difficulties and the nature of his artwork, which Sarah Lee provided. He accredits Ping Lian's progress to the love and devotion displayed by the family. "In my experience, in each of the savant categories, particularly in the talented and prodigious groups, very loving, optimistic, motivated and hopeful families are a part of the equation of discovering and nurturing the special skills that surface and thrive, and we are all its beneficiaries."