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Lean Alejandro's Midlife Crisis

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SAN FRANCISCO, CA - Lean Alejandro got a fresh new look in San Francisco recently after a group of artists refurbished a 20-year-old mural honoring him and other activist icons of the 1980s.

But longtime visitors to the "Educate to Liberate" mural on Masonic Avenue will notice something different in the revised painting. Lean looks like he has started to grow white hair.

Jane Norling, a member of the Haight Ashbury Muralists who spearheaded the project, said the artists did not intend to portray an older Lean. "*Lean was repainted using the original painting as a base,*" she said. "*I think the white in the recent painting was meant to add depth, but it really appears as white hair. So it adds another dimension — (like) he is forever alive.*"

It's been 20 years since Lean was shot dead in front of his Quezon City office on September 19, 1987. He was 27.

Speaking at a memorial in July in to mark what would have been Lean's 47th birthday, activist JV Bautista noted that Lean was spared having to endure what many of us of his generation, now in our 40s, are going through or will likely go through: midlife crisis.

Lean will not have to agonize over whether he made the right decisions in his personal and professional life, or whether he has led a meaningful existence. None of that.

Despite his unintentional aging on the San Francisco mural, in the minds of many, he will forever be the young, confident and brilliant activist who led us in the movement against dictatorship. He will forever be the symbol of the Martial Law Babies, as our generation is called.

We were children when Ferdinand Marcos imposed martial law in 1972, and the regime tried to shape us into an obedient army of blind followers. The dictator failed. By the 1980s, the Martial Law Babies were out in the streets, rebelling against the regime, with Lean at the forefront.

He wasn't exactly the epitome of the dashing mass leader. Tall and skinny, he spoke in a high pitched, sometimes shrill, voice. But he was charismatic, and it quickly became evident to those who watched him in action that he was intelligent, passionate and, most important, sincere.

FilAm activist Francis Calpotura, a former UC Berkeley student who founded the League of Filipino Students-USA, recalled the first time he heard Lean speak in Makati in 1984.

"This lanky guy gets on top of a flatbed truck and proceeds to explain to the throng of white collar workers and businessmen, the common cause of students and professionals against the Marcos dictatorship," he said. "I remember saying to myself, 'Not exactly my image of a mass leader, but he's good.'"

Lean defied the stereotype of the rabble rousing, sloganeering student leader. His friend Jojo Abinales said Lean showed how "to be an activist and an intellectual at the same time."

He was a voracious reader, and his interests cut across many fields. Lean was a fan of *“Lord of the Rings,”* and he drew inspiration from the story of a peasant Jewish family that fought tyranny in the film version of the Broadway musical, *“Fiddler on the Roof.”* The day he was killed, he was reading a book by Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci.

Abinales jokingly speculated that Lean would have dealt with his midlife crisis by spending more time in the library or returning to the University of the Philippines campus in Diliman. *“He will try to finish what he failed to accomplish as a UP student – to graduate!”*

As chairman of the UP Student Council and later secretary general of the Barong Alyansang Makabayan, Lean became a prominent figure at protest rallies at Liwasang Bonifacio and at Mendiola Bridge near the Malacañang Palace. He debated Marcos’ allies and lackeys on national television and worked closely with such revered political figures as Senators Pepe Diokno and Lorenzo Tañada, as well as the *trapos* (as we called the traditional politicians) in trying to build a broad political alliance against Marcos.

The Left’s heavy handed approach to coalition-building led to a personal crisis for Lean. He became controversial for advocating the boycott of the 1986 presidential election in accordance with the position of the underground left. The boycott campaign caused him nightmares, according to Abinales.

“He became the personification of the boycott position,” he said. *“Lean was being accused of being a dogmatic and a hardliner, and thus cannot be trusted when it came to coalition building.”*

Still, after the fall of Marcos, Lean continued to play a high-profile role in the social change movement, and even ran for congress in his hometown of Malabon. He was such an effective advocate for social justice that he apparently was considered a threat by rightwing forces seeking to preserve the old order. They saw the need to have him eliminated.

More than 60,000 people attended his funeral. Many of us honored his memory by naming our children after him.

In San Francisco, which Lean visited several times, news of his death shocked many of his admirers in the FilAm community and the broader activist movement. *“Disbelief, disgust,”* was how Calpotura described how many of them felt.

The Haight Ashbury Muralists led by Miranda Bergman and Jane Norling had just started painting *“Educate to Liberate”* when Lean was killed.

“Moved by Lean’s dedication to justice and enraged by his death, we immediately brought him into our mural for the people of San Francisco to know and honor,” Norling recalled.

The mural shows arms linked with other activist icons. On his right, is South African leader Winnie Mandela, ex-wife of Nelson Mandela, and on his left, a Salvadoran mother of a desaparecido (disappeared, i.e. abducted). Also in the portrait were Benjamin Linder, the American engineer who killed by U.S.-backed Contras in Nicaragua, Native American activist Leonard Peltier and the Puerto Rican nationalist Pedro Albizu Campos.

Around their portraits was a tapestry of political images depicting a hodgepodge of causes – from the fight against global hunger and colonialism to the battle for the rights of minorities and the elderly.

Beneath Lean’s portrait is his famous quote: *“The place of honor is the line of fire.”*

A lot has changed since Lean's death.

The movement he once led went through major upheavals, including a bitter and painful split that at times turned violent. Many of Lean's former comrades, including his widow, Liddy Nacpil, eventually broke with the movement, rejecting what they increasingly saw as undemocratic, even totalitarian, tendencies.

Within the broader Philippine Left, there has been a push to rethink progressive politics based on more inclusive, undogmatic principles, and to de-mythify many of the movement's leaders, past and present. Even Liddy Nacpil appeared to do just that at the memorial for Lean in July. While she paid tribute to her late husband's courage and commitment to social change, she said Lean was nevertheless prone to the same narrow machismo of the typical Pinoy male. He once became upset when Lidy dared to challenge his views in public, she recalled, adding, "*Tao lang siya.*" He was also human.

In San Francisco many activists and artists, including Jane Norling, also revisited their views of progressive political movements and the use of power. For it has become clearer that, while any political group calling for armed revolution can claim to represent "the people," that's not always the case. In not a few cases, armed revolutionaries eventually turned into tyrants.

"I firmly believe people have the right to take up arms for self determination as long as its for building justice," Norling said. *"It's just that I was naïve about how armed force worked."*

The changing view of progressive politics is manifested even in the mural on Masonic Avenue. Not only Lean's hair has changed. He is now seen also linking arms with a new comrade: Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize winner for her work in empowering women, battling corrupt officials and planting millions of trees in ravaged lands in Africa.

The muralists painted Maathai's image over that of Winnie Mandela, who has become a reviled figure to many after she was accused of abusing her position and power during the struggle against apartheid. Norling said the muralists made the change principally because they wanted to honor Maathai - but also because Mandela, as an icon, has become *"outdated and complicated."*

That Lean did not suffer Winnie Mandela's fate on the mural is heartening for those of us who continue to remember him as a hero.

His life and martyrdom remain relevant today. In spite of the changed attitudes and upheavals over the past 20 years, there is no debating that the young man who stood bravely in the line of fire deserves to be on any wall honoring those who fought for justice.

P.S.

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