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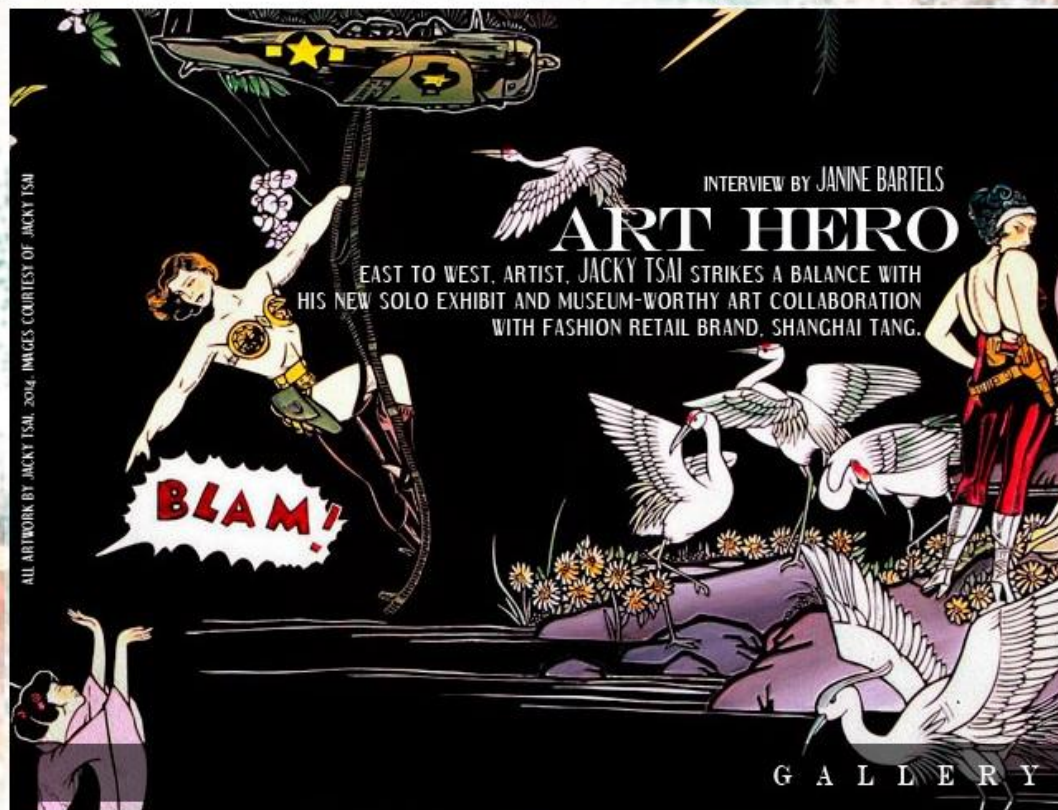
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If you are familiar with the floral skull from Alexander McQueen's Spring/Summer 2008 menswear collection, then you know the work of artist **Jacky Tsai**, the artist behind the iconic design – or *should* know him.

CONTACT



For **Tsai**, the public's perceived connection between he and McQueen borders on inherent. It's almost become customary, he shares, that interviews begin with a question somehow related to this floral skull. Still, even six years since the acclaimed fashion collaboration, he is not weary of the seemingly automatic association, rather, he continues to recognize the opportunities it has created for him within both the fashion industry and the art world. "I think McQueen gave me more than what he took from me," explains **Tsai**. "Because even my opportunity in the art world comes from that floral skull." And as the artist's current calendar of events demonstrates, that harvest of opportunities have been plentiful.

This past May, saw two landmark launches, the first being **Tsai's collaborative collection** with Chinese fashion brand, **Shanghai Tang** in celebration of its 20th anniversary, and the second being the artist's first solo exhibit, opened at **Scream London** and showing until June 20th.

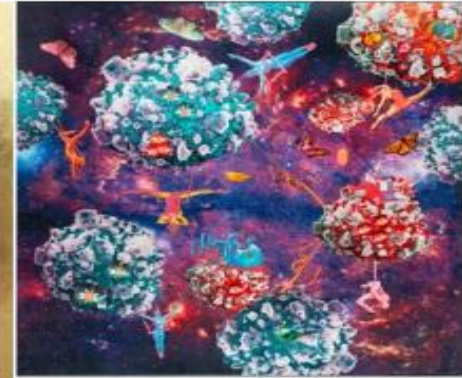
While **Tsai** may not be able to be in Shanghai and London – where the artist resides – at once to celebrate, he always does manage to remove the ocean between the East and West, merging the regions' traditions and pop culture into his, often whimsical, designs.




Having grown up in Shanghai, Eastern culture runs deep within his blood, while his life as a Londoner has sparked new creative visions. The result is a man who may be described as a Chinese artist by nature and a pop artist by practice.

There was a time though that **Tsai** might not have appreciated such a tag. In fact, as he shares, early in his career, he tried to remove the East and Eastern influences from his art, but soon realized that this would fundamentally mean removing himself from his own work. "Even when I want to do a complete Western art, I find my art is really Chinese...because it is from my blood. It is hard to find the balance, sometimes I just want to do the Western art, but I can't control myself."

Now more than come to terms with his dual-sided inspiration, **Tsai** has learned to meld east with west dynamically in his art, as exhibited in both his collection for Shanghai Tang and the works on display at his ongoing solo show. To gage the playfulness and intelligence that erected the bridge between the two cultures, see **Tsai's** piece entitled "Pow!" which pays homage to Superman in narrative, while embracing ancient Chinese artistic traditions in method. Chinese art history is a major theme of **Tsai's** show at Scream London.



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For the artist, visits home to China are explorations into artistic possibility, a time when he can learn traditional techniques to incorporate into his own work. His current works show off the ancient method of lacquer carving, a dying Chinese craft. Using this technique, the artist brings to life his pop culture references from a dragon-infused rift on his famed floral skull to superhero action as described previously above. "Lacquer carving work, embroidery, cloisonné, and other traditional Chinese techniques will find that modern twist in my solo show," explains Tsai. "That is a big jump for my career because before this, I have always done the prints, but now I am exploring the Chinese medium a lot."

The artist's partnership with Shanghai Tang, too, shows heavy influence taken from traditional Eastern designs, seen in items ranging from clothing to tableware and decor items.

An established name on the London arts scene, Tsai has moved beyond the skull, but has not lost the vision that first inspired him to create the unique design — a concept seeped in both Eastern and Western culture. As a man who keeps traditional Chinese art alive through modern day superheroes, one might just say, Mr. **Jacky Tsai** is something of a superhero himself. Hot off the opening of his solo exhibit, we sit down with Tsai to pick his brain on the East, the West and the art created in between.

IN CONVERSATION

LET'S START BY TALKING ABOUT YOUR UNIQUE CREATIVE VISION. AS A CHINESE ARTIST, YOU MAY BE THE ONLY ONE OF YOUR KIND IN THE UK. YOU SAID IN AN INTERVIEW, "I AM FASCINATED AND BLESSED WITH THE ABILITY TO COMBINE THE WESTERN AND THE EASTERN BACKGROUNDS AND TO CREATE ART THAT DEPICTS SUCH HARMONY." WHAT INITIALLY DREW YOU TO CREATING CHINESE ART? WAS IT YOUR BACKGROUND AT THE CHINA ACADEMY OF ART?

It's in my blood. If you learn art in China you have to train really hard; that kind of education system restricts people too much. When I came here, I wanted to do something different, and bring the Western technique into my art.

THE CHINESE LACQUER CARVING TECHNIQUE YOU EMPLOYED IN THE WORKS FOR YOUR SOLO SHOW ARE VERY IMPRESSIVE AND INNOVATIVE CONSIDERING THE "POP" TONE OF THE ART. WHAT PART DOES THE TECHNIQUE PLAY IN YOUR VISION FOR THIS SHOW?

I find a good balance between the Chinese traditional technique and the Western pop art. All the techniques I explored can be easily transformed into the pop art platform. So the whole process is very profound. There is only 4 or 5 old masters left in China that can do a very high level of lacquer carving. All the young guys don't want to do that anymore, it is quite boring.

AND TIME CONSUMING I IMAGINE.

You have to sit there forever to do the carving, so for me it is quite a challenge, and for them it is quite a *big challenge* as they have never done this kind of art before in their life. This just creates opportunity for them to explore more in a modern way.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE TO FINISH A PIECE?

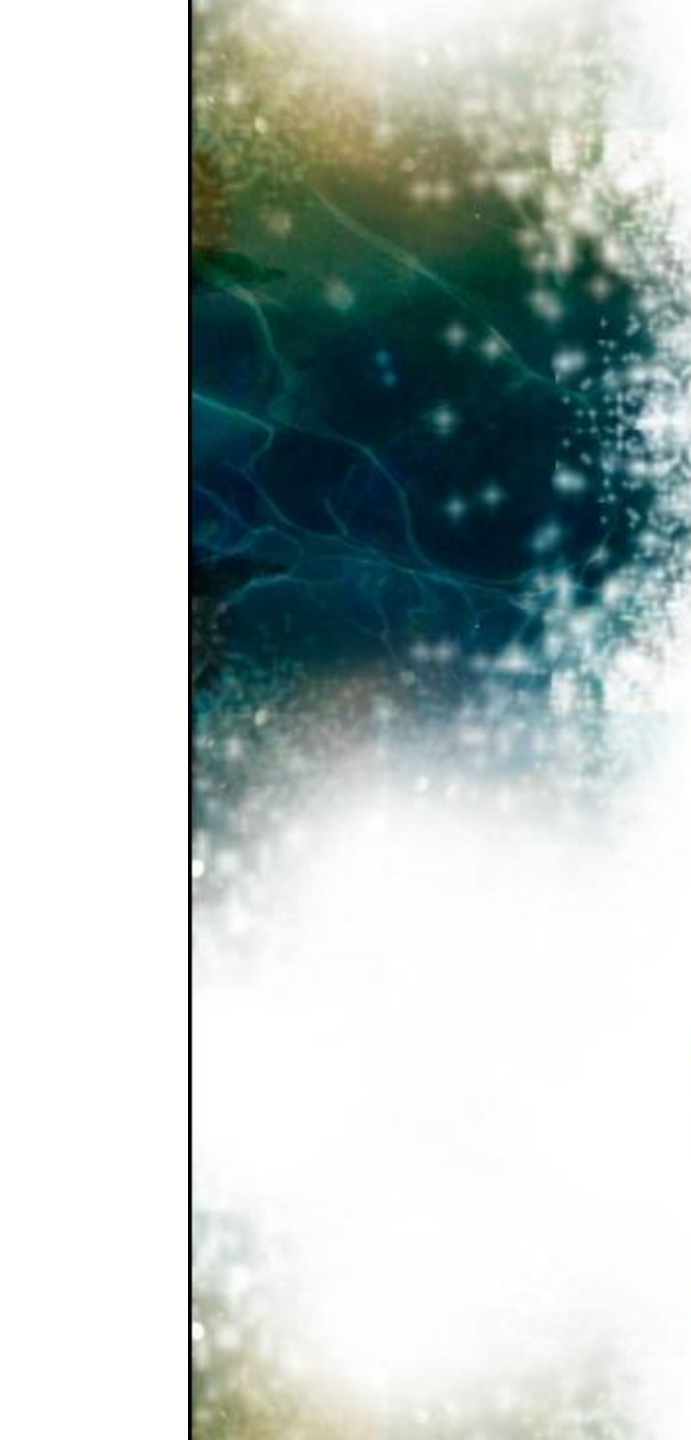
One or two months.



**JACKY
TSAI X
SHANGHAI
TANG**

“SHANGHAI TANG IS TRYING TO USE THE CHINESE HERITAGE, AND THEY ARE QUITE AN INNOVATIVE BRAND TO TRY TO EXPLORE BEAUTIFUL CHINESE CLOTHING IN A MODERN WAY; AND I AM DOING THE SAME THING IN THE ART WORLD – I ALWAYS COMBINE THE WESTERN AND EASTERN CULTURE IN MY OWN PIECES.
**I AM DOING
FUSION ART.**”





WOW, THAT IS LONG! IN LIGHT OF HOW ANCIENT THIS TECHNIQUE IS, HOW DID YOU GET INTO IT?

Just because when I go back to China, I like to travel a lot and I like to go to craft places, and then I just luckily found three or four very good Chinese techniques that could be transformed into my art. The craftsmen are occasionally sent to Beijing to fix some kind of traditional treasure. So you will always see this kind of lacquer wood treasure in the auction house, but you will never see it in a contemporary show. It's the first ever!

NOW IT'S THERE FOR A WHOLE NEW GENERATION TO DISCOVER.

I bring this traditional technique into the modern world.

HOW HAS YOUR ART AND VISION EVOLVED OVER THE YEARS. LESS SKULLS AND FLORALS?

Obviously my art is more mature. I moved from the floral skull concept now. Basically, if you look at my new work, you will see different art, it is not only skull art, but lots of different things. The concept is always about East and West to make the Chinese version of pop art.

MOVING ON TO YOUR RECENT DABBLES IN FASHION, WE LOVE THE COLLECTION YOU CREATED FOR SHANGHAI TANG, THE ARTISTRY BEHIND IT IS INCREDIBLE. HOW DID THE COLLABORATION COME ABOUT?

Basically, I think they did some research online or saw me somewhere. Also, last year I did a big collaboration with the department store Lane Crawford in Hong Kong, they are the Hong Kong version of Selfridges or Harrods. I think they chose me because I am native Shanghainese...but the most important reason is that we are doing the same thing.

HOW DO YOU MEAN?


Shanghai Tang is trying to use the Chinese heritage, and they are quite an innovative brand to try to explore beautiful Chinese clothing in a modern way; and I am doing the same thing in the art world – I always combine the Western and Eastern culture in my own pieces. I am doing fusion art.

THE CAPSULE COLLECTION HAS A WIDE VARIETY OF ILLUSTRATIONS THAT SHOW OFF YOUR BREADTH AS AN ARTIST. YOU HAVE THE FLORAL DRAGON THAT IS MORE TRADITIONAL AND THEN THE FLORAL PLAY AND PETROL RAINBOW THAT ARE MORE COMMERCIAL PRINTS. WHY THE VARIETY OF PRINTS, WAS IT TO STRIKE A BALANCE IN THE COLLECTION TO APPEAL TO EASTERN AND WESTERN SHOPPERS?

I am a commercial artist; all the art for me has a good concept, but the priority for me is to make sure the visual is attractive because I am a commercial artist and I have to sell my art. I don't like any ugly art, it makes me sick. In the art world, you see too much ugly art, especially Chinese art. You see lots of pink faces with silly smiles. Maybe they had a profound meaning before, but I don't think that is the right way for me. I always celebrate life and celebrate the energy of the natural. That's what I want to do — just make sure the concept is very strong.



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WELL, I THINK YOUR VIEWING AND BUYING PUBLIC APPRECIATE THAT YOU'RE NOT A FAN OF UGLY ART, THAT'S FOR SURE. IN TERMS OF EASTERN AND WESTERN SHOPPERS, DO YOU THINK THAT WESTERN SHOPPERS OF THE BRAND WILL BE AS DRAWN TO THE COLLECTION AS MUCH SO AS EASTERN SHOPPERS?

I think one of the reasons we collaborated together is because I really have that balance. I am living in London and my art is more popular in Western culture, than in China.

ON THAT NOTE, WHAT KIND OF WOMAN DO YOU THINK WILL WEAR THE GINGER FLOWER GARMENTS? MORE WESTERN SHOPPERS PERHAPS BECAUSE THEY ARE ATTRACTED TO THE "EXOTIC" DESIGN?

This question I just talked to some of my female friends about. The Western girls will always be like "I love that, I want to wear that." The Chinese girl will always say, "maybe it is too old for me, maybe my mom could wear it." So it is two totally different opinions, but I think if you're a confident, trendy lady, you can wear it no matter how old you are.

WORKING IN FASHION ISN'T SOMETHING NEW TO YOU, YOU HAVE YOUR OWN LABEL, NO? ANY MORE COLLECTIONS IN THE WORKS?

Yes, definitely! I am selling my little fashion brand in Harvey Nichols, it is a very good platform for young brand. Once I finish all of the collaboration projects, I will focus on my fashion brand again.

IT MUST BE QUITE DIFFERENT IN TERMS OF HOW TO MARKET FASHION VERSES ART?

I will be selling my fashion products like my art; it will all be limited edition. It will be the highest level. I am just rebranding all the label tabs, packaging. It will be amazing! I won't only sell the T-shirt, but all the high end products like scarves and women's ready-to-wear clothing.

JUST TO GO BACK TO THE SKULL DESIGN AND THE SKULL SERIES YOU CREATED FOR YOUR NEW SOLO SHOW, I UNDERSTAND THE SKULL PLAYS ON THE BUDDHIST BELIEF IN REINCARNATION AND THAT THE SERIES MEANS TO ILLUSTRATE HOW THE SOUL LIVES ON UPON THE DEATH OF A PHYSICAL BODY AND IS REBORN INTO A NEW LIFE OF BEAUTY. DO YOU BELIEVE IN REINCARNATION?

Yes, I do believe that. I do believe that life is just like a circle, if you do everything right and treat people well you will have good karma in your next life. If you do badly, life is fair, and then your next life will be terrible.



“ I AM REALLY PROUD OF WHAT I AM DOING AS AN ARTIST. NINETY PERCENT OF FOREIGNERS HERE ARE JUST DOING A BANKING JOB. WHICH I FEEL IS QUITE BORING. I FEEL I AM DOING SOMETHING TO MAKE LIFE BETTER. ”



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SO IN OTHER WORDS, WE BETTER ALL BE GOOD AND KIND! WHAT GOOD DEEDS DO YOU DO?

Treat friends truly and create beautiful things. For me, I feel my life is meaningful, it is not about making money, its about making beautiful pieces to please all the people. That makes me feel special. I am really proud of what I am doing as an artist. Ninety percent of foreigners here are just doing a banking job, which I feel is quite boring. I feel I am doing something to make *life* better.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO IN YOUR NEXT LIFE?

I don't want to be an artist. I don't want to repeat myself. Something interesting and not a boring banker.


MAYBE YOU COULD BE A MUSICIAN? THAT'S CREATIVE AND NOT BORING. ARE YOU MUSICALLY TALENTED AT ALL? CAN YOU PLAY ANY INSTRUMENTS?

No, because I am so focused on my art, that's why I don't have any free time do anything else.

IN ANOTHER LIFE, MAYBE. LAST SKULL QUESTION I SWEAR. . .AS THIS IS ALSO MY LAST QUESTION. YOU DESIGNED THE ICONIC ALEXANDER MCQUEEN SKULL, BUT IT'S ALEXANDER MCQUEEN'S NAME THAT IS ATTACHED TO IT, NOT JACKY TSAI. IS IT LIKE SOMEONE ELSE SIGNING THEIR NAME ON YOUR ART WORK OR IS IT DIFFERENT BECAUSE IT'S FASHION?

It was a fair trade. I was young; I wanted to experience a fashion house, so I did a three month placement job there. I definitely created the floral skull, but in a fashion world, they can claim that was for McQueen. McQueen got that motif, but now people recognize more that it is Jacky Tsai, and that I am doing a different floral skull at a different level now.

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