

Arts

Interview: Jacky Tsai

The Shanghainese artist speaks to us about his background, inspirations and the beauty in decay

By Jessica Cheng
May 08, 2013

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29-year-old Jacky Tsai is on track to be one of the world's most acclaimed artists and is definitely one to watch. With his conceptual and graphic take on art, his blend of Eastern and Western elements is truly apparent. His creations, comprised of mainly skulls and the idea of beauty in decay, are evidence of his ever-evolving background and his desire for contrast.

In collaboration with Hong Kong department store, Lane Crawford, Tsai has presented a massively scaled "skulpture" (as he calls them) to display alongside Lane Crawford's latest collections. Starting on May 11, the artist's posters and work will also be available for sale in store. The famed Shanghainese artist, who was credited for concocting the original Alexander McQueen floral skull, sits down to talk to us about his conceptual art, inspiration and plans for the future.



HongKongTatler.com: How did the collaboration with Lane Crawford come about?

Jacky Tsai: The brand and creative director, Sarah Fung, dropped me an email when I was in between two pieces. And I felt that it was a great chance and a great opportunity to work with a company I really love. It all happened quickly and everything happened in a short amount of time, but I love that kind of pace.

HKT.com: How did you start in art? Give us an idea of what your background is like.

JT: I grew up in the post-modern city of Shanghai. It was big and overwhelming. When I was in China, I studied in the Chinese Academy of Art and my background was actually in graphic design. I moved to London eight years ago and studied illustration. When I graduated, I spent a year in web design. My extremely mixed background definitely helped me to do art differently. I don't have any kind of fine art background; I think that's why I've been classified as a contemporary pop artist.

HKT.com: Do you think Shanghai fuelled and inspired your art?

JT: My art reflects Chinese traditional culture a lot. I love Chinese watercolour paintings; I think they are beautiful. That kind of Chinese art is in my veins, everyone where I came from does it. When I moved to London, I found a different way to look at Chinese culture and art. So my work now is about contrast, blending Western and Eastern elements together to create harmony.

HKT.com: Once you made the transition to London, how did you become involved with Alexander McQueen?

JT: It's actually a boring story. All of the Central Saint Martin students were placed in McQueen's fashion house. It all happened very naturally and organically. I worked there for three months and that was where I came up with the concept of the floral skull. When I left, I never realized the impact it would have. Now you see that floral skull and variations of it everywhere.

HKT.com: What was the inspiration behind mixing such different elements?

JT: Many Chinese traditional paintings are about flowers, plants and nature. I loved those paintings, but wanted to conceptualise them in a Western way so that people from all backgrounds could enjoy my art. I wanted my art to represent neutrality so everyone could like it. Many Chinese people are afraid of skulls, but it's quite trendy in the Western world, especially in fashion. I thought to myself, "how do I make Asian people like skulls?" So I tried to do something beautiful. I tried to represent the skulls in a beautiful way to try and talk about the beauty in decay.



HKT.com: What different mediums do you normally use and how long does it take you to complete a piece?

JT: I usually use canvas, paper, leather and even silk. Maybe this year I will try wood and ceramic. I want to try everything possible. Depending on the concept and complexity of the piece of art, it can take anywhere from a day to a year to complete a piece. I once worked on a leather skull with designer Linda Tsai and it took us half a year alone to develop the technique and another half a year to finalise the project.

HKT.com: What are you doing with your artwork at present? Do you exhibit quite a lot with your art?

JT: Not really, I'm quite low key and I want to focus on my art. When I finish and am satisfied with my artwork 100 per cent, then I sometimes exhibit and have solo shows. But right now, I've only finished about ten to fifteen pieces that I'm completely happy with. In the last two years, I've been doing a lot of affordable art, but now that I've finished my goals in the fashion world with releasing my t-shirt line and doing collaborations with Lane Crawford, I want to do something high end in the art world. I want to do art that is less affordable and more massive in scale.

HKT.com: What do you see in the near future for you and your artwork?

JT: My goal is to focus on my art and hopefully become the first real Chinese contemporary pop artist. We have pop art in China, but it's almost a mutant version of pop art, propaganda pop art. That's why I want to follow the Western route, with Chinese thinking and Chinese elements behind my art. Just like Takashi Murakami does when he uses Japanese comics but follows Western pop art rules. I think that's my future.

HKT.com: And the quintessential question: what do you think about Hong Kong?

JT: Hong Kong is just like my artwork. It's like a visual collage. You see all the traditional Chinese restaurants and behind them are tall glass buildings. That kind of mix is intriguing to me - Eastern elements and Western elements in such a tiny space.

HKT.com: Lastly, do you have any advice to young artists?

JT: Keep on doing what you're good at and don't give up, because your chance will come. Listen to yourself and don't listen to too many opinions because you will confuse yourself.

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