

JACKY TSAI

"Look at my art and discover what I want to say"

Words and interview — Pariss Sloan



After some time away from the public eye, we manage to catch up with Chinese artist Jacky Tsai to discuss what 2014 looks like for his art and his audience. It's always fun catching up with Jacky; a refreshingly honest man with a great level of loyalty to his Chinese roots and traditions. Thankfully it didn't take much negotiation to get him on board for issue 3; "I think this is the perfect timing for me, as I can share some very exciting projects with you. I have some very exciting events coming up this year." Thanks Jacky, we're all ears ...

"I've been very quiet recently, and now I think it's time to show people what I've been working on over the past year. It's a very exciting time for me." Jacky reveals that there is plenty to look forward to this year - an exclusive collaboration with a popular design house, as well as his first solo show in 3 years! Most known for his skull work in the UK, Jacky shares his plans to move away from his original concepts with this latest collaboration, and touch upon traditional Chinese art - "We've

moved away from the skull and I've been able to incorporate things like the Chinese dragon and watercolour art. I had a certain freedom to do what I want." Collaborations take a great deal of compromise that not all artists can commit themselves to; Jacky however assures us that this particular collaboration worked well for both parties.

With a certain level of freedom, Jacky was able to incorporate his own ideas and vision into the hotly anticipated project. You may be more familiar with Jacky's artwork than you realise, with a successful collection in Harvey Nichols showcasing his original skull work on a number of tee's. Jacky stresses a need for artists to present the public with affordable art, as quite often large portions of the public are marginalised by unrealistic prices and concepts. Although important for the creative soul to work outside the restrictions of cost and expense, Jacky feels it is important to produce some art for everyone to appreciate and own.



Although an extremely positive individual, Jacky reveals a side to him that explains the sensitive and perfectionist approach to his work. When asked what his family thought of his art, Jacky divulged that his family are not as understanding or as aware of the impact that his work has on the art world. With a stigma that still revolves around the image of the skull, his family and friends in China still find the concept frightening. Jacky hopes to touch base with traditional Chinese art and develop several pieces that would both be understood and appreciated back home.

How would you like to introduce yourself to our readers?

I consider myself a pioneer in both the fashion and art industry, and I just want to blur the boundaries between the two. My main priority is to produce the best art that I can, and in doing so, produce something that can then transcend into a fashion environment. I want to make my art accessible to young people and to normal people!

As a Chinese artist, I am the only one doing this type of commercial art. I feel it is very hard to describe myself, but I feel that I am mixture of Chinese tradition and western culture.

How do you feel you are received in the UK? Do the British understand your art?

Completely! It's the Chinese market that doesn't fully understand what I am doing at the moment. I've found myself in a very good position in the art world, because all of my limited edition paper work has sold out very quickly. This has given me the confidence to carry on, and carry out some exciting new work.

I feel very comfortable, and pleased that people like my art in the western world, and they completely understand me.

Why do you think you've done so well – is there a niche in the market for your craft?

I think first of all, my art is unique. It is art that sits between western and Chinese culture. Without my background, it's not possible to do that – I think that is the very reason why my art has been received so well.

I'm a very visual animal; all that I create is based on very beautiful things. I can't tolerate any flaws in my work - I'm a perfectionist! I try to present profound meanings and ugly concepts in a beautiful way. I draw upon social trends, political views and issues, but always try to find a way to decorate the issue in a beautiful way.

I want to grab people's eyes first, and then gradually people can absorb what I want to say and express in my art. That's the reason I feel people understand my art, and receive my art quite well.

What social and political messages are you trying to convey in your art?

(Laughs) I don't normally tell people my political views because I want people to discover my views in my art. Because I'm a Chinese, I can't really vocalise my political views, and by language I am a very modest, soft guy. My visual language can be much more aggressive. If you understand Chinese politics, you will soon understand more about my art.

What I can say is that not all my art is positive; there are negative elements that I try to portray in a beautiful way. Take a look at my art, and discover what I want to say.

Is your work a product of intense planning, or simply an extension of your emotions?

I think both. When emotion is high I don't think you can do a good job, particularly in my art. As I've got older I pre-plan my art a lot. Every artist works with emotion, that is something you just can't deny, however I prefer to plan everything and to have a visual idea before going ahead and creating something. I find that compared to 10 years ago, I am much more able to

accurately reflect my vision on paper, however I still have more work to do.

Where do you seek your inspiration?

Daily life inspires me. I have a lot of series concerning social issues, like my piece focusing on global warming. You can see pollution scenes and oil spills, I called the piece 'Petrol Rainbow'.

In the middle section of the piece is a very beautiful petrol rainbow pattern, but it represents a very ugly concept. It's about oil spills, you see the animal covered in oil, and you know – just pollution everywhere! I wanted it to be visually powerful and unique.

Do you find your work influenced by being in London?

Not really. I haven't finished exploring my emotions for the Chinese concepts and culture, as there are so many political and social issues. But once I've finished maybe I could consider working on London topics. I consider my art to be global, drawing upon all types of issues - you can find different answers from my art.

Why the focus on skulls?

My first skull was definitely inspired by Alexander McQueen. I developed a floral skull and didn't realise how much of an impact it would have over the last few years. I feel the skull is a perfect concept for me to do what I want. The skull can be a beautiful thing.

When I used to think of skulls I found them very ugly and scary. In Chinese culture, the skull is a very scary image. Every time I produce a skull, it is a step towards reducing my fear. I want to create beautiful skulls to overcome the fear.

How long does it take to produce a piece of work?

It all depends. Sometimes when emotions are high it can take only a week, and sometimes up to a month. It's hard to say because it's not a fixed nine to five job; it's all about how you are feeling and how motivated you are by what you are doing.

Do you have a favourite piece?

No piece is perfect, when I've finished I am usually very excited. After a week I am already considering revisions for my next piece of art, as once you have produced a piece it is difficult to be objective. So after a week I start to think about how it can be better.

What do you have planned for 2014?

My big solo show will take place in the Swing Gallery in mid April, which will showcase some of my new artwork as well as some of my original pieces.

This is the first time in three years I will be doing a big solo show. All my current artwork and new pieces will be released, which I'm really happy with! I am really happy with my recent work. It's very exciting!

My solo show is all about Chinese traditional craft, with a unique and modern twist. I always use Chinese craft, even in my contemporary art.

Also, I have a very big and upcoming collaboration with a luxury brand. I cannot tell you too much, but I can tell you that! I've created six new and exclusive artworks for this luxury brand, which will be applied to various products – women's wear, menswear and even home ware. They have a big flagship store in London, which is where we will launch the collaboration. The collaboration news will be released in the next few weeks, but now it's all strictly confidential.

I enjoyed the collaboration because I could bridge fashion with my art, and really let the two entwine in one project. I am very passionate about fashion, and I'm able to encompass art unlike anyone else. With a small brand in Harvey Nichols, I feel that I have a lot of fashion freedom.