On throwing away expectations



Designer Theseus Chan on challenging yourself, being adaptable and empathetic, balancing style and concept, and why artistic frustration is just part of a wonderful journey.

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As told to Ken Tan, 1938 words.

Tags: Design, Art, Culture, Inspiration, Process, Focus, Time management, Creative anxiety.

What's on your mind right now?

2020 has been unsettling. Our routines have obviously been disrupted because of COVID-19. I'm not saying that the disruption is necessarily negative, but it's natural for the mind to want to cope or control the situation. With so many unanswered questions and a veil of uncertainty over life, fatigue can easily set in. That's where compassion, empathy and patience are so vital right now.

We're forced to slow down and be more in touch with our emotions.

The speed which we have been used to has changed. Regardless if you're active or stationary, finding a regular pace in these times can be challenging. When before I would have expected prompt responses, I now am sensitive to people who may be working at a different capacity. I don't have that sense of urgency like before, deadlines can be irrelevant. I felt that it was necessary for all of us to be a bit more reflective, more human.

Where is your creative stimulation in this time of uncertainty and forced shelter?

I do find the tension between the old world habits and processes, but also coming to terms with the search for new ones. We're at an interesting inflection point. Previously my work would stem from a reaction against something, for example, *WERK* Magazine was a reaction against the perception of what publication design and printed matter should be. I had a story and a motive, you know, however with so much that has happened in such a short time, articulating a response requires more time. It's like when someone has passed away suddenly, you need a moment to grapple with the grief, and re-center. Those points of contention seemed to have disappeared, it's challenging, but I think that's ok too. Maybe today's uncertain climate is leading to some thing not done before.

Not only did they disappear, perhaps they are less significant compared to other things that's happening in the world.

Precisely. Because of this reckoning your perspective is reset. Compared to global issues, is your creative ideas and work relevant? What role do you play? What do you say? It's more challenging than ever before because the answers needed must come from both the pressures of external circumstances and within. I'm hopeful this is the start of something completely new. Therefore, my search continues.



Toga-*WERK* No. 25. Photographed by Chikashi Suzuki, *Archives*, Courtesy of Theseus Chan, WORK Pte Ltd.

You have been running your creative shop, WORK, for more than two decades. Can you talk a little about it?

Recently, an old friend reminded me succinctly. He said, "You had always wanted to do your own thing." I have always done my own thing. I do not have templates to follow. I listen to my heart, and think about what it is saying. Most of the time, it's emotional. Owing no expectations to anyone, I have my autonomy and freedom. I also have a predisposition to root for the underdog and unpopular things. Things that are shunned as unglamorous or untrendy. I really like the complete opposite of the status quo. This is the essence of WORK.

Talking to you today, I feel just as charged and passionate. Nothing could be better than to have my point of view considered. WORK company has been independent for 23 years. Recently someone renowned expressed interest in acquiring my company. While it may be tempting, I was not interested in losing my freedom. Working with a big team, there's much more emotional baggage you have to manage.

How do you pitch your vision to clients?

If your proposal is for them to spend a lot more money to get it done, likely you would get resistance as it is business after all. With an economic solution, you have a better chance to get your approach considered. It's great when clients are ready for an exchange of ideas, to have their points of view expanded. I love a good and inspiring conversation thus creating a stimulus for everyone.

Is self-promotion necessary?

Self-promotion may sound like an ugly word but it's a necessary definition. I think the best promotion is the manifestation and the consistency of your work. That speaks more of you than the awards you've won, the lifestyle you lead, or the company you keep. Let your work speak for themselves. It's always better that someone speaks for you in this particular instance as opposed to you talking about how great you are. That's why I'm saying that, despite all the compliments I have received over my career, my head is definitely on the bloody ground. I appreciate the generosity and kindness from people, I don't take that for granted, but I felt almost embarrassed to actually talk about it myself, or to put it on social media.

Retrospection is important, it's an archive after all, but looking forward is actually far more important to me. What I would yet be capable of doing would determine if I could outdo myself. Personally, I have always been very conscious about challenging myself. It propels me to constantly do things differently.

What's your process like?

It's abstract, natural and free. One thing leads to another. When the premise is decided, I may have new ideas of how to package or format it, which might alter plans from earlier steps. Things weave in and out, nothing is set or planned. I also think it is beneficial to have a wide set of technical skills (from working with various forms of tools, not just the computer), a sense of experimentation, and a willingness to destroy your creation when necessary. To re-build from ground up so to speak, in that process often times something new will manifest itself.



STEIDL-*WERK*. No. 24 ROSE WYLIE AND FRASER TAYLOR, *COLLISONS*, Courtesy of Theseus Chan, WORK Pte Ltd

Are you a platform agnostic type of creative?

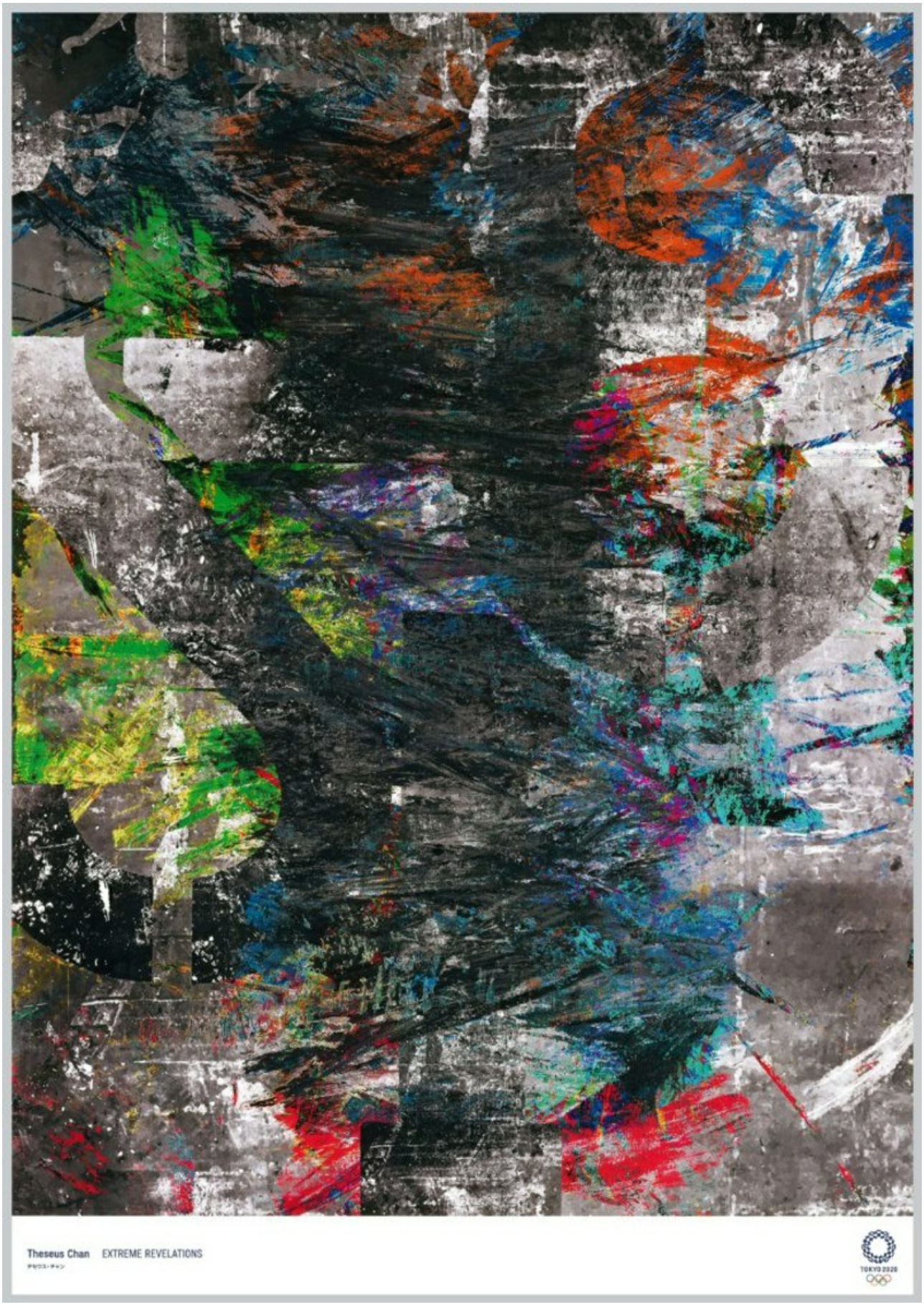
I usually required a platform to manifest and embody my expressions, and I react to the platform in a sort of dance. By that I mean both creative manifestation and platform should move together towards a new kind of symbiotic entity. From a logo to the interior of a fashion space, both art and place must be elevated, and not simply be retrofitted. It's also about being free to explore different platforms, maybe some unexplored medium can yield a more exciting result.

Lastly, I think it's important not to be beholden to a format. When the COVID-19 lockdown started, I thought it'd be nice to digitally paint portraits of friends, and Instagram was the obvious choice. People responded well, but over time the bombardment of content on social media, and repetition of posts can reduce the meaning and essence of the original idea. So, Instagram was a means to an end.

It could be the nature of Instagram. Yet so many are relying on it now to have a presence.

When the streets were empty during the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, there was a strange sense of calm. It made me think of the pre-Internet days, when we wanted to talk to someone we would just call, and a voice over the phone was a perfectly normal thing. We've adapted to new technologies so quickly and creatively. Even if the

Internet or Instagram were to disappear today, I believe we will be able to adapt eventually to that new reality. I had a long engaging, conventional phone conversation with an old friend the other day. Maybe an evolution from Instagram would be to actually call someone [*laughs*]?


Theseus Chan EXTREME REVELATIONS
TOKYO 2020

Theseus Chan, *Extreme Revelations*, 2020, Tokyo Olympics 2020 Courtesy of Theseus Chan, WORK Pte Ltd

On that point, what do you think a painting of tomorrow can look like?

I would think your question has something to do with the subject needing to be expressed? There are many mediums, and will only continue to expand based on new technological advancements. But we will always express things that matter most to us, from still-life to all of Nature's glory. It will be interesting how Artificial Intelligence of the future can help express our curiosities, loves, fears and anxieties in unprecedented creative ways. I think perhaps humans will be more courageous with their creative expressions, and not hold back because of a trivial problem like a lack of skill, since AI can do a lot of the technical heavy-lifting. Still there will always be value in human ideas and original concepts.

Oscar Wilde said all art is at once surface and symbol. The balance of style and concept.

Both are equally important. The best creative work has a very strong concept executed with an equally strong craft. No point in having a strong idea you can't convey well, and likewise you can't get away with hiding a weak idea behind an attractive facade. It is the balance of both style and concept that will be a creative individual's personal signature.





CoSTUME NATIONAL *WERK* Magazine Collaboration Exhibition, 2019. *WERK* No.27: Smashing Hits-*Magazine you can wear* including showcase of all issues of *WERK* Magazine No.1-26 together with special capsule collection from CoSTUME NATIONAL, Tokyo. Courtesy of Theseus Chan, WORK Pte Ltd

What will you throw away today?

Expectations. Problems arise when you set expectations for yourself—in others or in your work. Doing so places too much unnecessary pressure and anxiety on oneself. When reality comes short of your desired outcome, chances are it will affect you emotionally. You'll be disappointed for not having achieved or manifested what was on your mind. I'm not saying you can completely let go of all expectations; that's unrealistic. It's a conscious effort to navigate your actions and your expectations. However, if you make an effort to compartmentalize your

expectations, and if you can remove those that are irrelevant, you'll be much freer and your general well-being will improve.

But, of course, having said that, I don't want to simply dismiss problems. The world runs on expectations. You can see it in politics, in the pandemic. Those are very real, complicated things. I mean we are still trying to solve problems from decades, if not hundreds of years before. When you look back 10 years later, you have a survival story to tell your children, friend or whomever. That there was a period but it wasn't all that bad. Just try to make the most of the moment you're in.

I could see how freeing yourself from the burden of expected results can have impact in your work too.

Yes, definitely. Through experience I know I have to be patient when working. For example, I've been revisiting an idea for months. I don't know if I'm analyzing too much, but I can lose the spirit and motivation if I am not careful. Thoughts like "It's been done before," or "That idea is not as great as I thought it was," are inevitable but unnecessary self-checks. I often use a more empirical, spontaneous process, where I'm completely free of expectations. Sometimes that works, sometimes it doesn't. Again, it's a constant search, and artistic frustration is part of a wonderful journey.

Theseus Chan Recommends:

Be at peace with yourself and people around you.

Think about yourself less but more of others.

Protect and be kind to all life—nature, animals, and the Earth.

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