

June 22, 2017 - Dicko Chan is a Chinese-American photographer who was born in Seattle, raised in Hong Kong, and moved back to the United States as a teenager. His work explores the intersection of his shared cultures, identities, and the larger questions of being a queer person of color. Dicko lives and works in Los Angeles. He frequently shares his work via his Instagram account.



As told to Samantha Ayson, 2084 words.

Tags: Art, Beginnings, Process, Inspiration, Identity.

Dicko Chan on sharing your work on social media

You've described yourself as a photographer as well as an artist. Do you draw a line between the two?

I definitely draw a line between the two, although they're essentially the same thing. Being a photographer is more of a trade, you know? There are so many different kinds of photographers, and there are so many different kinds of artists. Obviously all photographers are artists, it's visual art.

I think a lot of people also feel the same way about the divide. I guess we're still figuring it out?

Yeah, and maybe it's also the ego and how you think of yourself. I feel like, as a photographer, it's thought of more as "work" and "what you get paid for." You get paid as an artist too, but it's a different trade. Somehow, in our American culture and society, we have this negative... or at least I do, this negative perception of work and labor. In other countries, people don't even have this conversation, they're just like, "I identify with my work and this is just what I do." Maybe they're just not as individualistic, whereas in America we have such a big sense of self. As an artist, there's more of yourself in your work and you get paid for it. Whereas photographers get told what to do.



Leo King

You've worked with various Los Angeles-based fashion designers like 69 and No Sesso, how do you balance keeping creative integrity in your work, but still delivering what clients want?

See, I don't really treat them like clients, they're more my friends and my community. When I create on that basis, there isn't really a need to separate or to figure it out. I also enjoy thinking about what people need. It's more about accepting them, and the people around you, into your lives and making something new together.

It seems like you're always working on personal projects and projects for others. How do you avoid getting burned out from taking on too many? Is that something you've experienced?

No, not really. I don't ever really feel burned out, I get energized the more I do. I could get burned out, but I think that there's always time. You just move on and do the next thing. When you're stuck, you don't have to be stuck if you just go do something else.

I don't know if this is true, but it seems like you update your Instagram more than you update your website. How do you use social media as an artist?

I use social media how everybody else uses it. It's part commercial / self-promotional, and it's part playing the game. Some people really don't like it and I see where they're coming from. I share the same concerns, but I also don't resist it, because I think that it's part of our evolution. I think that as long as you are able to think critically about it and see what it's effects are then we can use it responsibly.

Do you think that affects the way you make work? When you're working on a new project, are you thinking in the back of your head about how you can share it on social media?

Yeah, I think so. This is my own personal experience, but the photos I share on Instagram are simple. Not that they're any worse or any less interesting, it's more of a basic in-your-face composition. There are a lot of nuances that come from only staring at a small screen, everything is a thumbnail. I have actually been thinking more about making physical prints and books so that I can change my perception of how I make work, and how it interacts in a different medium.

Social media is also its own medium now.

It is. I mean what's the point of resisting it?

There are definitely upsides to sharing your work on Instagram, but I've noticed that quite a few of your posts have been reported or flagged, and have been taken down.

It makes you see how we think we have freedom but we really don't. We're working within this perimeter when we're sharing on Instagram. That's also why I don't like it. Its censorship is so fucking biased. Instagram has this double standard about the images they want to show and the body types that they're comfortable with being on the platform. It's funny that they call it "Community Guidelines" because it really is a reflection of our society and the audience.

I see photos of conventionally beautiful people on Instagram, and there are photos that I post of myself and my friends, whose looks are not what you would find in the mainstream media. I think representation is also a huge motivation in my work. I get reported for certain photos, and I'm just like, "Dude, people are sharing way more insane images than me," but somehow it's offensive because of our bodies.

I think it's interesting to point out the "Community Guidelines," and how that's a reflection of our society.

It's what's deemed acceptable to make money, because in the end, we have to understand that when we're on Instagram, we're part of the system, we're part of the very thing that oppresses us. Sometimes I think, "How radical is it, really, if I'm just doing this on Instagram?"



Sanam Sindhi

Do you think it's a good idea to be sharing your art on a platform that doesn't necessarily support your work?

I do like the idea of Instagram, it's about connecting people, although we are getting more disconnected than ever somehow. I'm very conflicted and I think that we all are at the moment. We're all just part of it. If there's something else that's easier and better for me to communicate with my audience, with my peers, with the people in my community, then I will use the other thing. I think that it's still more important for people to come together in the end, and I think that's the true value of Instagram. It's your community. It's so important to meet people on Instagram and actually hang out with those people.

Is your online community different from your offline community?

I definitely know a lot of people on Instagram that I've never met, that live all over the world. A big part of my community on Instagram are also my "offline" friends.

As an artist, how do you grow your network offline?

I think online and offline blur together so much that I don't really know what an exclusively "offline" network would be. I think that we spend too much time on our phones, especially in LA where it's so easy to box yourself in, because of how we live. We're not a city where we just get out of the house and we immediately see people. Everything takes a little effort. I think that it's really important to have time with your friends, connect with your loved ones, chill with your community, and just be there.

That's what Instagram and our phones are for, they're a means to an end, and the end is actual human connection, not just in the form of a screen.

Looking through your work it seems like you try to explore ideas that are "in-between." There's a lot of intersectionality in your work and a play between various dichotomies, like East/West, softness/violence, masculinity/femininity, etc. Where do you think that comes from?

I think that comes from me, who I am, and how I've always felt my whole life—like an outsider. Not only as an outsider, but I don't really fit into just one category. There are so many layers, not just to me, but to everybody, and I find that really interesting. A lot of the time, we think that we're just one self, but we're really everything at once.



Autumn Randolph and Symrin Chawla for Symrin Chawla

Did you always know that you wanted to be a photographer?

I always wanted to create a vision of what I saw as a sort of escape mechanism. I watched a lot of movies growing up, and I think that's what got me inspired to work in photography. I just wanted to create my own fantasy world, because that's what movies are, right?

When I was younger, I would always go to the DVD, or... VCD... In Asia, before DVDs there were VCDs, which were these low-quality video CDs. There was a rental shop down the street from our apartment building, and I would always go and search for new videos to watch.

You were born and raised in Hong Kong, and you moved to the US when you were a teenager. Is that true?

I was actually born in Seattle! I lived in Hong Kong for 13 years, and I don't know if this is something I should say in public, but I was an anchor baby. You know how immigrants try to have their babies in America? I was only in Seattle for about two months before I went back to Hong Kong.

You went back and visited Hong Kong recently, what was that like?

It was really emotional. The last time I went back there was three years ago. I feel like I go back in two or three year intervals. Each time I go back, I feel like a different person. This last visit was the first time I felt like an adult, where I was my own person, doing my own thing. I could see that my interactions with my family were totally different.

When you go to Hong Kong and you visit your family, what do you tell them you do?

I don't tell them. We don't really talk about it. I have family members that follow me on Instagram, and they like posts that are "cute" and "sweet," but I've also shared things that are just like, nudes of me and of my friends.

Why do you think that is?

A big part of it is cultural, and it is also socio economical as well. To understand erotica from a point of view that's not a progressive, liberal point of view, to see it as art, is an educated thing to do.

I feel like most people's instincts, or in China at least, when they look at a nude photograph, is to consider it as porn and react emotionally to it. I think that to look at it subjectively, you have to be educated in a way, to see it as something that's of value. It's also cultural as well. I think Chinese people are still very oppressed in many ways.



Leather Papi

Do you think if you were still in Hong Kong you'd be able to pursue art?

No, and I think about that often! If I were to live in fucking Hong Kong and never have moved back, I feel like that would be a part of myself that would have just been buried within me. I would still be gay, I would still be queer, but I don't think that I would have as much expression as I do now.

Would you say that the art you make comes from a personal place? How do you come up with the idea for something to work on?

I've always just made things. I've never really thought about what it meant until recently. My first project that I thought, "I'm going to create this body of work" was for Femme Erotica. I also think that so much of my old work could also be part of Femme Erotica, and I don't know when Femme Erotica will end. It's not something that I have just decided has a beginning and then it's done.

I also think that we have been asking the same questions forever. As I've learned more about other artists and more about photography, as I grow older, I'm just like, "Yo, I relate to this photo so much," and it was taken hundreds of years before I was born. We're just all so connected, and we're all really doing the same shit over and over again.

Dicko Chan recommends:

Leave the Country

Taking walks in the park

Calling mom

Hanging out with friends

Buying flowers

Name

Dicko Chan

Vocation

Artist, Photographer

Fact

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Self Portrait

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