

Thinking Outside The Box

No obstacle is too big to overcome for artist **Wallace Chan**, whose artistic goals break through boundaries and defy categorisation

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Chinese multidisciplinary artist Wallace Chan — gem carver, sculptor, painter, researcher, jewellery artist, and philosopher, takes the universe as his key inspirational source. But what is the universe? For Chan, it represents connectedness in both the physical and abstract sense. Following this path of thinking, an invisible movement in the air can lead to a storm, a drop of water can be seen as the beginning of a flood, and what we do as people affects others. This also applies to art.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Chan's latest exhibition, TOTEM, in the Fondaco Marcello, Venice, begins with a particular and peculiar soundscape, composed of "earth tones". As one gazes around in the deep, dark exhibition room, relic-looking sculptures, which at first look like extra-terrestrials, and then heads on footings scattered on the floor, slowly come into sight. The enigmatic face motifs serve as reminders of the ageless and androgynous facial features often referred to in Buddhist imagery.

There, in the dark, an individual's experience is well capsulated. The exhibition title, TOTEM, refers to the Buddhist belief that the universe and everything in nature has a soul and that totems are symbols of human connections with all living and inanimate things. It is impossible not to question the totems of modern society and perhaps make an inner list of totems both worthy of admiration and questionable. These feelings that emerge when surrounded by Chan's sculptures are perhaps

related to the fact that his practices as an artist are much about spirituality.

In art, there is a tendency to categorise artists and their art for posterity, e.g. impressionists, expressionists, surrealists and so on. Though Chan is driven by his Buddhist belief, he is difficult to place in a box with religious art because he works without boundaries. As an artist, he wants to be free to experiment with all kinds of art forms and materials. Over the past five decades, his creativity and curiosity have led to myriad innovations, such as The Wallace Cut, an illusionary three-dimensional carving technique; the mastery of titanium; patented jade technology; the invention of elaborate gemstone settings without metal claws; and, most recently, The Wallace Chan Porcelain, a ground-breaking material that is five times stronger than steel. Chan does not make a fuss about an oeuvre that most people would find extraordinary. But art critics may be confused by the lack of boxes in which to categorise him.

Categories are probably helpful to explain a certain art form or style, but in Buddhism, there is the belief that everything is from the same origin, which means that there is a basic harmony overall. Chan allows himself the freedom to transcend and move beyond boundaries in his work. He chooses not to put a label on his art in order not to be confined. "In the end, history will give me my place," explains the artist.

A pioneer in using titanium for art-making, Chan has researched, experimented, and discovered the space age metal's potential not only

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These pages, from left to right: Wallace Chan; TOTEM



in jewellery but also in his large-scale sculptures. With a melting point of 1700 degrees Celsius, titanium is extremely difficult to work with. Chan's tools gave way under the pressure of sculpting it, creating a continued demand for new tools, which he had to invent as well. His works are the products of persistence and incredible patience, which his past as a Buddhist monk prepared him for.

TOTEM presents a large-scale installation of the unassembled parts for his 10-metre sculpture, titled *A Dialogue Between Materials and Time, Titans XIV*. According to James Putnam, curator of the exhibition, the exhibition is "juxtaposed of iron beams and modelled titanium heads of various sizes, which create a dialogue between the two materials, with titanium, one of the strongest, most durable, and lightweight metals known, providing a contrast to the weightiness and susceptibility to corrosion of iron, which with time, will act as an earthy root, rusting away gently, while the

titanium endures." The installation does not belong to a singular form, but it is produced by the relationship between multiple parts, which together create an expansive universe.

Looking at the deconstructed sculpture, one gets a sense of fragility and of an imminent collapse of the previous order, which could symbolise the current atmosphere of uncertainty over global issues, such as polarised politics and climate change. Following that line of thought, Chan's work is not merely an oscillation of Buddhism; it can be interpreted as a political statement and a critique of an international political situation, though this is not Chan's exact purpose in pursuing his art.

"Everything we do is always about searching for existence and our own place in the world — the meaning of life. I look for a spiritual reality — something that is beyond me," says Chan.

WALLACE CHAN: TOTEM is on view at the Fondaco Marcello, Venice, until October 23, 2022

