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SINGAPORE

THE GREEN EDITION

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DESIGN WEEK

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affects single
homeowners

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DESIGN

IDEAS AND INSPIRATION FROM THOSE IN THE KNOW

LIMITLESS CREATIVITY

Critically-acclaimed Chinese artist and master jeweller Wallace Chan will never restrict his creative freedom, easily shifting from art to jewellery or from crystal to steel, as long as he's able to create. He speaks to Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE about how he went from humble beginnings to a leading name in high jewellery and crafting towering titanium sculptures. ▶



photo COURTESY OF WALLACE CHAN



Wearing a long, unruly white beard, self-trained Hong Kong-based jeweller and artist Wallace Chan considers his mystical creations to be his children, and the creative process as an opportunity to reinvent himself each time. There's an air of Chinese sage Confucius about him as he dispenses pearls of wisdom. "When I'm working on my sculptures, it's a process of deconstruction, construction and reconstruction because it's about my inner self, how I constantly try to look for the meaning of existence," he says. "When I'm working on my pieces, I'm also working on myself. Art gives us the power to transcend ourselves and our realities. I believe in conveying hope and the power of transcendence through art."

Constantly chasing after growth in himself and the materials he uses, after spending eight years taming rigid and stubborn titanium for his jewellery at a time it was still unconventional, Wallace wished to push the boundaries of titanium even further in 2019 by applying it to make monumental sculptures. One of the few artists internationally creating large-scale artworks out of titanium today, Wallace's latest exhibition Totem at Fondaco Marcello in Venice (running until Oct 23, 2022, as part of the 59th Venice Art Biennale) features a deconstructed version of his 10-metre-tall titanium sculpture, A Dialogue Between Materials and Time, Titans XIV. Multiple peaceful, Buddha-

like heads with eyes closed and elongated ears are strewn across the floor, suggesting the social fragmentation and uncertainty currently faced by society. Inviting visitors to walk inside the artwork itself rather than viewing it from a distance, the labyrinth-like installation encourages them to search for themselves and seek out the unknown.

Nature is a recurring subject in Wallace's coloured titanium-backed jewels in which the spiritual manifests itself in the form of flora and fauna such as butterflies, cicadas, peacocks or snowflakes. "At its melting point of 1,700 deg C, titanium is reluctant to move," he discloses. "But I strive to convey a sense of fluidity and rhythm with titanium, creating the illusion that the metal is easy to shape, that it can be turned into feathers, flower petals, waves and more. When I meditate, I see myself in different sizes, coming in and out of existence. I see one self separating into many selves, and I then try to assemble these many selves into one self again. This is much like my creative process, which is ever chaotic, non-linear and self-searching."

THE HUMBLE BEGINNING

Born in 1956 in Fuzhou into a poor family that struggled to put a roof over his head and food on the table, Wallace began working odd jobs as a teenager to help to make ends meet. "I had a very difficult childhood because the economic environment in Hong Kong was not good at the time – there were more people than jobs. I shared a tiny room with ▶

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photo GIACOMO COSUA

1. A Dialogue between Materials and Time XIV sculpture exhibited in the Titans showcase.

2. A 930kg iron and titanium installation A Dialogue between Materials and Time, Titans XIV displayed at the Fondaco Marcello, Venice, during the 59th Venice Biennale.

3. Wallace with one of his sculptures at the Titans exhibition.

4. Wallace in Venice for the Art Biennale.

5. One of the large-scale sculptures at Titans exhibition at One Canada Square, Canary Wharf, London.

photo CALLUM TOY

photo CALLUM TOY

just one bunk bed, sleeping with my three siblings on top and my parents at the bottom. I became insecure about my future, but at the same time, I was eager to learn and improve to provide a future for myself. I knew I had to acquire a skill to survive.”

At 16, Wallace became a gemstone carving apprentice, and after nine months of performing repetitive tasks, he decided to set up his own workshop. The first decade, he spent immersed in traditional Chinese folklore and Buddhist carvings using opaque stones like malachite, jade and coral. Then chancing upon a book on Michelangelo, he discovered a whole other world, but could not afford to travel, so he learnt the art of Western sculpture by visiting Christian cemeteries daily and contemplating the marble sculptures of saints and angels.

After pioneering The Wallace Cut – an illusory three-dimensional carving process mixing intaglio and gem-faceting that results in a fourfold reflection on a transparent stone from one sculpted face on the stone’s back – in 1987, Wallace began experimenting with transparent materials like rock crystal as they allowed him to understand the element of light. “It’s always a dialogue with the light,” he states. “Sometimes, with even opaque materials, you have light on the surface that you can communicate with and manipulate. Different materials – opaque, transparent, semi-transparent or translucent – are all interesting because then I can explore the relationship with light. For me, light means different things. First of all, it’s a physical thing on the outside,

but light is also something inside, like how you explore your inner light and let it take you to a higher level of wisdom.”

THE PAUSE AND THE RESTART

In the 1990s, Wallace met his most important collector, who snapped up all of his crystal

carvings and commissioned him to work on the Great Stupa for Taiwan’s Buddhist Mountain. Devastated when the Taiwanese collector passed away, he became a monk in an attempt to address the mystery of life and death before returning to the mundane world six months later.



“I WENT INTO JEWELLERY CONVINCED THAT IT OUGHT TO BE A SCULPTURE IN ITSELF, SMALLER IN SIZE AND CLOTHED IN GEMSTONES AND DIAMONDS.”



photoS ACC ART BOOKS

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Having given up all his possessions, he lacked artistic resources but still had the burning desire to create, so he began working with salvaged or inexpensive materials like concrete, copper, stainless steel and iron in 2001. After that, in search of more colour in his creations, precious stones subsequently became the inevitable choice. He explains, “I went into jewellery convinced that it ought to be a sculpture in itself, smaller in size and clothed in gemstones and diamonds.”

THE RECOGNITION

Today a major player in the haute joaillerie scene, Wallace became the first Asian contemporary jewellery artist to hold solo shows at the Gemstone Museum in Idar-Oberstein, Germany, and Capital

Museum in Beijing, and also to exhibit at the Paris Biennale des Antiquaires and TEFAF Maastricht, the world’s most prestigious fine art, antiques, design and jewellery fairs.

“I began my creative journey as a carver in 1973, and I have never stopped carving and sculpting,” he concludes. “I am very fortunate to have earned recognition as a jewellery artist, particularly when I came from a time and place where people tend to consider jewellery-making an act of commercial production instead of artistic creation. I enjoy working on many different creations all at once: some creations will come to fruition; some will not. It is part of the creative journey.” ■

📍 Visit www.wallace-chan.com for more information.



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photo COURTESY OF WALLACE CHAN



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photo COURTESY OF WALLACE CHAN

6. Pages from *Winged Beauty: The Butterfly Jewellery Art of Wallace Chan* published by ACC Art Books.

7. Close-up detail of a butterfly brooch.

8. A Wonderful World brooch displayed at the DIVA Museum in Antwerp.

9. *Lotus Children*, a 2018 sculpture, is made from titanium and citrine.

10. The *Untitled* sculpture depicting a face carved from rock crystal Wallace sculpted in the 80s and 90s.



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photo COURTESY OF WALLACE CHAN



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photo COURTESY OF WALLACE CHAN