



Theseus Chan

—SINGAPOREAN, B. 1961—

Limitations are what give Theseus Chan the freedom to pursue his designs. The creative maverick works in an extremely organic fashion, often guided by only intuition and whatever resources are on hand. This seemingly irrational approach helped Chan consistently produce unconventional advertising and graphic design for clients ranging from high-fashion Comme des Garçons to streetwear-label Adidas. His pursuit of highly original works led Chan to leave mainstream advertising and establish his independent firm WORK in 1997. Rebellious against an industry lacking in imagination, Chan founded the magazine *WERK* in 2000, subsequently followed by *W_K W_K* in 2015, to further push the boundaries of graphic design production, and to extend his reach beyond Singapore. Collaborating with overseas creatives from Tokyo, New York, and London, each issue meshes the imperfect, the odd, and the handmade into beautiful, limited-edition “extreme printed matters” that have won him top design accolades globally and the cult status of an avant-garde magazine designer. —JUSTIN ZHUANG

—Tell us about how you approach design at WORK.

I work with very little—often with almost nothing, but this limitation gives me freedom. This forces me to find ideas and solutions by thinking rationally and irrationally.

—WERK magazine started as a personal project to experiment in design. How has the magazine evolved over the years?

It is more like a journey of self-discovery now. It is about connecting and disconnecting thoughts, experiences, and random ideas together. After *WERK No. 20*, I did a rethink of my approach to designing the magazine. I came to the conclusion that the format has always been loose and searching, and the best way to design it is to not overthink. Hence, with *WERK No. 21: MARTINE BEDIN* and *WERK No. 22: DOVER STREET*

MARKET BEAUTIFUL CHAOS, I worked with very little time, materials, and resources. This allows me to be completely free to design it as and when ideas come along.

—What role does WERK play in your design practice, WORK?

With *WERK*, the approach is more personal and vague, but I do apply some of the dictums to commissioned projects that have more defined objectives.

—Every issue of WERK is a reinvention and a completely new design. What is a common thread through the entire collection?

It always starts off indistinct in the beginning, and as I work on them they evolve. One idea leads to another, and that is how things happened for *WERK*.

—WERK stands out from other magazines by consistently experimenting with printing and production techniques

in each issue. Can you tell us about your relationship with the craftsmanship of printing?

“Experimentation,” “artisanal,” and “craftsmanship” are neologisms for designers and marketers—I don’t set out thinking in that fashion. I create my work according to how I envisioned them. I work with my printers to find ways to do more extreme printed matters.

—WERK meshes the clean and chaotic, often mixing highbrow fashion and art subjects with the lo-fi aesthetics of punk and graffiti. How do you make sense of this seeming chaos to arrive at fresh designs, such as in issues 21 and 22?

The odd, imperfect, used, distressed, broken, handmade, lo-fi aesthetics appeal to me, and sometimes the only way to get there is to unlearn what you have learned.

Back in 2012, I was introduced to Martine Bedin by Alison Harley. I was told by Alison that she will need some ideas to show Martine for her meeting. Instinctively, I rendered some spreads with those die-cut shapes, partly because I saw Martine’s work with the Memphis-Milano group and partly because I wanted to create a book-object. The published version is almost ninety-five percent close to those first thoughts.

When Adrian Joffe agreed to collaborate on *WERK No. 22* for Dover Street Market [DSM], there wasn’t much time—less than six weeks, to be precise—to DSM’s tenth-anniversary launch. We were only given a bunch of interior and exterior photographs to work with. Given the progressive thinking behind DSM, a retrospective approach was definitely not in order. Instead, I imagined what DSM would be like in the next ten years. From there, I reimagined the future by creating lo-fi visual collages with interiors and windows of DSM and images from NASA—a future where different elements clash and encounter each other in often ironic, energetic ways.

—What comes to mind when you hear the word “beauty”?

A person’s inner beauty is what I look for and is far more important to me.

—What is the most beautiful time of day?

A time when I am at peace with myself and everyone around me.

—What is the most beautiful place you’ve visited?

I was traveling in an old, yellow bus across this river where the water is pristine and underneath it is a forest with trees and plants of every kind. The place is unknown, but I know I have been a few times in my dreams.

—INTERVIEW WITH JUSTIN ZHUANG

