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Interview: China's Leading Fashion Photographer Chen Man



Courtesy Chen Man
Fashion Photographer Chen Man
by Belle Zhao
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BEIJING — **Chen Man** was called a “pioneer of visual reform in China” by the **New York Times**. Her works have been accepted as part of the permanent collection of the **China Design Now** exhibition at London’s **Victoria and Albert Museum**. French architectural design master **Philippe Starck** has become a collector of her works and now displays her photographs in the showroom of his new hotel. Chen, born in 1980, has worked with countless luxury brands, fashion magazines, and helped create album cover art for record companies. She is without a doubt China’s most accomplished fashion photographer.

In 2011, Chen held solo exhibitions at the **Today Art Museum** in Beijing and the **Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art**, as well as in Taiwan and Italy, in presenting her most all-encompassing work since her debut. Chen will open a solo exhibition organized by the **COMO Group** at the **Bangkok Metropolitan Hotel** on April 25, 2013. On display will be nine light boxes and two printed paintings, in addition to six other printed paintings that are to be placed in the rooms of top-floor suites. This exhibition will also include a number of works from Chen’s “**Bad Head**” series, which used waste materials in the post-production process in order to support the notion of environmentally friendly fashion design.

ARTINFO spoke to Man on the eve of her new exhibition.

What special works do you have planned for the COMO exhibition in Bangkok?

The works I am going to present at this exhibition are very special. Take the “Bad Head” series for example, I have incorporated industrial waste materials into my designs as a reflection on the disturbances that humans have created on Earth. I’ve also used regular everyday garbage to create a number of amazingly beautiful works. These works stand alone as exceptional creations by themselves, but also hold significant meaning in the context of promoting an environmental protection message. It is the combination of my Chinese background and Western ideals in bringing together both human culture and nature that forms the impetus for creating these works, as can be seen in my “**View From Behind**” series. The relationship between man and materials is also explored, and is the essence of the “Bad Head” series. The “**Mickey**” series and “Vision” series are also rather special, and are works I completed during the early

stage of my career. Still in college at the time, I was in a phase in which I was combining painting and graphic design techniques into individual works. Those creations were extremely visual to say the least.

When were you first drawn to photography?

I began painting when I was two years old, and I was educated at the Central Academy of Fine Arts High School, Central Academy of Drama, and graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. The environment I grew up in has always had an artistic ambience, and the people surrounding me have always been artists. In school we learned how to paint, sculpt, and all the other traditional art techniques, and as a child I never even attempted or considered taking up photography. In order to make a living after graduating, I was a graphic designer for a long time. At that time, it was still not easy for an artist to make a career out of one's art. It's not like it is now where I can make millions in just one photo shoot, at that time it was still unthinkable.

As a child I began painting and studying art because I was good at it, and from there never stopped. In winning a fair number of prizes at different competitions, my parents agreed to let me continue down this path, and in the process helped cultivate my ambition. Becoming a photographer was my first true job. The changes photography brought my life are too many to list, and at a bare minimum photography was the driving force for me in maturing from a girl into a woman.

Was growing up in the hutongs of Beijing a source of inspiration for your photography?

As a typical child in the post-1980s one-child generation after China's opening up and reform, we are the generation of socialism with Chinese characteristics. I am part of this generation that has witnessed the dreams of many become reality. For me, my inspiration comes from life, the influence of everything around me. The influence of Western materialism and culture is what has had the greatest impact on me, but what I truly need most in my life is the influence of ancient Chinese philosophy. I think traditional Chinese culture can have a highly beneficial impact on the world, the environment, and the balance of all things worldly and those we can't yet grasp. For those that have become spoiled by today's materialistic culture, traditional Chinese culture can be used as a modern language to express this more holistic vision.

What are the reasons for your changes in style?

My works can be divided into three stages. The first two stages I was trying to define myself as a photographer. "Vision" is the first and consists of my college years. At that time I edited my photos extensively, and even through to today, no one else has ever produced pictures this way. It was just me trying to create something new, the enthusiasm of a young heart, always finding new elements to add to my photos – it was an extremely creative period in my career.

Later in my career, after I entered the fashion world, many people had more than a few concerns about my style. With all the post-processing I was doing, people were worried I'd make a monster out of them. For this reason, and without any transition at all, I jumped right into my minimalist stage. The 1 inch profiles I began to shoot were beautiful just the same, and allowed people to see that I was more than just an artist borne of editing. Different celebrities eventually began to seek me out for photo shoots and my status as a mainstream photographer in the fashion industry was cemented.

After a period of photographing many celebrities, I began to create a series incorporating more elements of contemporary China into my work. This fact is very special to me, as I was the first photographer to bring contemporary China and the different faces of China to the mainstream fashion world. Up until that point, Chinese photographers only knew how to imitate the West, Japan, and South Korea, and no one had previously attempted to add elements of contemporary China to their work. Creating it was not easy, because if done incorrectly the result would be an extremely "old fashioned" mess.

I was able to have success though because, one, I am a native Chinese photographer who never went abroad to study, two, I am very familiar and have a great deal of experience in the visual industry, and three, I believed it was something I should do. China should not have to keep reliving its own past or imitating others. I wanted to create something that would show the contemporary beauty of China. The most iconic photos from this series were those of **Lu Yan** at the Great Wall, which was also the first time that photos were taken at the Great Wall for any mainstream fashion magazine. This series of photos created quite the sensation at the time. The **“Mirror”** reported on my photos and commented that this was a new and ground-breaking milestone for the fashion industry in China. The third stage in my career combines my Chinese background with Western ideals, and uses ancient human philosophy and a strong visual approach to maintain an inner and outer balance between the environment and the materialistic manner in which humans live today.

How would you describe your current style?

An extreme mixing of all things. My works are a fusion of my Chinese background and Western ideals. Phrasing it a different way, my ancient Chinese humanistic cultural background is the software program installed on my contemporary Western culture-based hardware. I am committed to expressing myself by contemporary means via a traditional and humanistic way of thinking. My works are a combination of everything: all faces of our contemporary present, Eastern and Western, mainstream and non-mainstream, vulgar and elegant, as well as past, present, and future.

Most of your works are completed as part of work-related projects. How do you balance your business works with your personal projects?

I think that business is business, and art is art. When I'm doing a work-related project I don't think of myself as an artist. When I'm taking photos as an artist I can't act from a commercial perspective. In short, this is the balancing act I deal with in my photography.

Which of your works are your personal favorites?

My **“Red”** series at the **Maeght Gallery** in Paris was my first foreign exhibition series. I was pregnant at the time I completed the work for this series. The year after I gave birth to my child was a year of extreme happiness. I completed my **“Five Elements”** series, which is a particularly meaningful artistic creation of mine that combines Chinese Taoist culture, concepts of environmental protection, and world art. My **“Five Elements”** series is one that I am principally satisfied with, and is one of the most complete projects from the third stage of my career. Another series from the third stage of my career, the MAC **“Love and Water”** series, is a commercial series that I am enormously proud of. The series combined both commercial, artistic, and philosophical elements. I took the traditional Chinese concept that man is an integral part of nature in combination with ideas of environmental protection to promote to the world an ideal I believe in very strongly.

Would you rather have your creations defined as works of fashion photography or works of art?

To be honest, fashion and art have already come together in an inseparable manner in my work. Artists nowadays are heavily involved in commercial work, and commercial products can also be artistic products, for example, the iPod. There is no separation any more, and always trying to categorize in this way is one of the limitations of the human mind.

What are your future plans?

As nothing more than a simple person, I have no power to change the future of mankind or myself. I

sincerely hope that communication between people on a spiritual level will see great developments, and not just in numbers or statistics, but something we can all see with the naked eye. Not just in form either, but a true balance of idealism and materialism, and worldly recognition of the true beauty of traditional Chinese life. Only if the majority of people live life in this manner will the world be a beautiful and peaceful place to live, people will have clean air to breath and fresh water to drink, and mankind will be able to attain an ideal and harmonious future.

