

# PHUNK AND SOUL

Home-grown 'visual rock band' Phunk's  
riffs on artistic control and chaos are  
documented in a coffee-table tome

animation to interactive virtual spaces – the possibilities seem to be endless.

Add Jackson Tan, 47. "Our creative process has always tapped between art and design, with no output in the 1990s to mid-2000s but mostly in the 2010s."

He says that after 2005, the group's work gravitated more towards art, as a result of the collective turning their gaze inwards instead of relying on outside influences to fuel their artistic voice. "We draw from Singapore's unique hybrid culture," he says. "Our ancestors are migrants from China, we speak English as a first language, celebrate Chinese New Year, sing our national anthem in Malay, eat Indian curry for lunch, read American magazines, listen to British rock music, watch graphic movies from Hong Kong and Singapore."

Asian Tan, 47, agrees: "Singaporean designers used to struggle with finding the Singapore identity. It was not until we started to recognise our local culture, embracing English, being proud of our heritage, we realised Singapore design is where a Singaporean lives in."

In 2003, the group held a two-month exhibition at the Freed Space in New York City's Lower East Side founded by Jeff Staple – also known as Jeff Ne, an influential Asian-American designer known for his streetwear designs and smaller collaborations with Nike.

Their seminal work, titled Control Chaos, was a 4m by 2.1m graphic artwork all screened on just four charts and an Apple II computer painting computer. Chan, Jackson Tan and Alvin Tan met in 1992 when they were graphic design students at LaSalle College of the Arts.

They completed a foundation year in fine arts before majoring in graphic design. They were the first batch of students in Singapore to learn multimedia and animation. Two years later, they topped in Chan, Jackson Tan's primary school, to form the collective.

At the time, Chan had just graduated from LaSalle, having studied a year later than the others. Phunk has always styled themselves as a "visual rock band".

In fact, they originally wanted to form a rock band, but after a few studio art sessions, the creative decided to focus on their strongest suit: creating rock music with visuals.

They developed a high-contrast, pop-infused style in the 1990s, exploring visual culture beyond creating logos for clients.

They launched Singapore's first design publication, Trigger magazine, in 1996, it ran until 2003.

The members work very much like a rock band. They first do a freelance "jam" session, with different themes and ideas.

Once a theme is decided, one member makes the initial concept sketch while another works on the illustrations.

The third member works on colour, while the fourth oversees the production as well as represent the idea into sculptural form.

There is never a fixed arrangement or order as the members switch roles constantly.

"Back in the early 1990s, our work was mostly limited to the print medium," Chan, 46, tells the Straits Times.

"Today, it exists in multiple media and formats, from print and

## Phunk's greatest hits

1

### NEW DREAMS OF AN OLD WORLD, 2014

Phunk's largest wall installation was created for the Paluska Asian Art Triennale in 2014, where they also collaborated with Paluska residents to complete the artwork. The locals were invited to collect old Japanese manga comics and write their dreams for the future on the book pages.

Jackson Tan says: "We covered the 'new dream' on our the 'old world' together with the main message of 'hope' visually expressed."

The installation (right) was the centrepiece of the Triennale and was prominently displayed at the Paluska Asian Art Museum's lobby. It served as the backdrop for activities such as the Triennale's opening ceremony, workshops and performances.

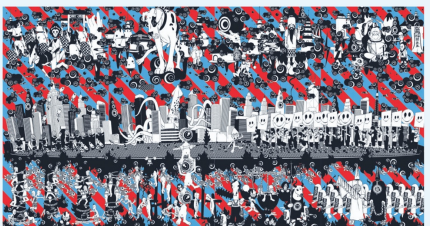


2

### CONTROL CHAOS, 2003

The seminal work that sparked Phunk's trajectory into art was created for the collective's first international art exhibition in New York. It was first shown in Jackson Tan's home.

Phunk has also created a new digital version titled Control Chaos 2020 for the museum. It will reflect recent events such as the coronavirus pandemic and the Yellow Umbrella movement.



3

### MTV WORLD STAGE, 2010

Phunk started working with American music video channel MTV after it opened its Asia headquarters in Singapore in the 1990s.

Phunk created the brand identity (right) and animation introduction for the MTV World Stage, a music festival in various Asian cities. This marked the first time the collective's original artworks had been turned into animated visuals for television.



4

### THE ROLLING STONES X PHUNK, 2011

When Phunk was exhibiting at Tokyo's Shoin Gallery in 2010, they were approached by The Rolling Stones licensing agent to collaborate on new merchandise. The group illustrated and re-interpreted The Rolling Stones' iconic tongue and lips imagery into unique designs on T-shirts (left), caps and boxer briefs that were launched in 2011.

Jackson Tan says: "We were briefed that the band's very democratic attitude towards their members before production. We were happy to receive the news that our designs were unanimously approved by the band."

5

### D.I.S.C.O. (DREAMS IN SOCIAL COSMIC ODYSSEY), 2010

The collective's first public art commission was a series of hanging sculptures (above) inside the Promenade MRT station. The title is an acronym for the references British discotro balls.

The glitz of downtown Singapore is reflected in the large-scale work, which takes the shape of massive water droplets made from thousands of tiny steel discs. At by the station's skylight, the components reflect their surroundings and create a kaleidoscope of patterns on the floor, walls and ceiling.

Vintage, while Jackson Tan works on branding and curatorial projects, behind Black Design. Chan runs a motion graphics and film production company called TMBRBY. Chan, 47, is currently an entrepreneur and work in his art.

The active members work together in the same studio as those of the collective.

According to Justin Chong, who runs writing studio in Tan's home and is one of the authors of the new coffee-table book, an important aspect of Phunk is their "dedication to reach out to the world."

"Chen to home, Phunk was part of a larger cultural shift in Singapore during the 1990s and 2000s," he says.

"It was a time when indie bands were emerging, independent

artists emerged like The Substation and Zouk came about – the seeds that were later co-opted to construct Singapore's reputation as a global city of the arts."

"So, in many ways the Phunk story is an expression of how Singapore grew from a 'cultural desert' to a creative city."

Thames & Hudson's international editorial director Lucas Dierich says he and his colleagues were struck by the energy, diversity, complexity and scale of Phunk's 'body of work'.

The London-based publisher says its catalogue of books on Singaporean art is active but success in October last year, it released a 320-page monograph titled Mak Wee Wei Works by W Architects, on Singaporean veteran architect Mak Wee Wei.

"The one European eye, Phunk's work seemed a magical fusion of a

variety of Asian themes into an entirely new visual language," says Mr Dierich. "My overriding sense of the confidence of the work."

"Control Chaos combines over two decades of work, and the quality and variety of the output is world-class."

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PHUNK MEMBERS ALVIN TAN on the collective's journey to find their artistic voice