

C R E A T I O N



THE JOHNNIE WALKER HOUSE EDIT | VOLUME 02

MAKING²⁷

Chris Lee, founder of multi-disciplinary design studio Asylum, doesn't believe in fickle trends.

SENSE²⁸

Instead, he is convinced that the right balance between art and commerce

with a hint of scientific precision, is the single most important element in any creative enterprise.

IT

TEXT *Lim Sio Hai*

ALL





20

INTERIOR

JOHNNIE WALKER HOUSE, SEOUL



INTEGRATED

FRED PERRY, MANDARIN GALLERY, SINGAPORE



PRODUCTS

ASIA PACIFIC BREWERIES, SINGAPORE





"It's very important to be in the right ecosystem to be able to succeed.

You can be the most talented person in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you will be nothing."

Chris Lee

34 "I WANT TO DO THE KIND OF WORK THAT MAKES YOU SAY 'YEAH!'"

He has been in the business for the past 20 years, but Chris Lee has not lost the sparkle in his eye. He's aware that the day when that happens will be the day he should close shop. "I don't want to overrun my stay."

It has been an illustrious ride so far. Among his many awards, the multi-faceted creative director picked up Singapore's President's Design Award for Designer of the Year in 2009, and his multi-disciplinary firm Asylum is behind some of the most talked-about spaces in Asia.

Nothing exemplifies this better than the three Johnnie Walker Houses that Asylum conceptualised together with Manchester-based advertising agency Love. The Shanghai, Beijing and Seoul outposts are a homage to Johnnie Walker's blended whiskies, portrayed superbly in a sophisticated and sensory experience – from the 24-degree angle of the label, channelled by the bar counters in Beijing, to the dynamic installation reminiscent of whisky drops descending through a stairwell in Seoul.

For such a hotshot creative, Lee is surprisingly down to earth. Listening to him

describe the creative process behind the three Johnnie Walker Houses, you realise it's nothing if not methodical. There are no whims of inspiration, no trend-following gimmicks or flashy gestures. "We looked at the ingredients. With that, you can convey information like a science centre would, but we wanted it to be very natural," explains Lee. One example, the peat that makes up the bricks on a wall, is an essential ingredient behind the renowned smokiness of Johnnie Walker whiskies.

The touches are subtle, but the result is multifold. It makes the Johnnie Walker brand come to life, and enhances the enjoyment of the beverage to an experience that one feels excited about. "Most importantly, you don't notice it until someone points it out – you will just think it's a very cool bar," says Lee.

Lee knows the power of design and understands brands well, sometimes to the point of redirecting client's briefs. "It's very important for me to challenge clients and let them reflect on what their needs are – sometimes they don't really think through why they want a certain thing. We steer them in a direction where everyone is clear about what the objectives are."

It's his guiding vision that gives Asylum its edge. "For me, design is really art and commerce, and I have the ability to distil them to the point that it works for both," reflects Chris. "Something that is purely creative doesn't give results to the client, but at the same time, if you're a very commercial outfit that is not creative, you have no unique selling point as a company. As a designer, I want to push boundaries, but designers can take things too far – we have in-house checks to restrain things when required."

Lee knows about business. Nestled among myriads of Buddhist associations in Singapore's cultural enclave of Geylang, Asylum's four-storey shophouse office (designed by local architecture studio Zarch Collaboratives) is also home to two of his other companies. There's Amnesty, a fashion retail firm that distributes the Fred Perry label in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as Ally Social, a company Lee spun off to provide the social media and digital marketing services that many of his clients require.

The serial entrepreneur has also started a few retail stores, most prominently the Chocolate Research Facility, an experimental

confectionery brand which cast its myriad flavours as personalities with playful packaging. It's an operation he has closed.

"I learnt that sometimes, design is just one part. The big part of the business is everything else: your infrastructure, production and staffing." While the business went well, spawning three outlets in three years, he saw that the venture couldn't grow further because of its production company, which was not a partner. "I figured: I'm good at creating, so I should just stay with that."

Now 44, Lee's acclaimed career includes tenures as the head of design at advertising agencies Bartle Bogle Hegarty and Ogilvy & Mather, but Lee almost didn't get to go to design school. An engineering dropout, he considers the biggest struggle of his life the time when he had to convince an examiner to let him into design school. "I had to show a portfolio, but my art was pretty horrible. I had to go to my ex-girlfriend's house to collect back all the things I had made for her. It was pretty mushy stuff," Lee says with a laugh.

Today, Asylum is recognised around the world for being at the forefront of experiential design. It has done projects in places as far away as Sweden (for high-street label H&M)

and New York (Johnson & Johnson), and continues to blaze a trail in cutting-edge dining spaces in Singapore, with a highly anticipated hotel coming up soon by the Singapore River. There's even a furniture collection in the pipeline – something Lee has been wanting to take on for some time as a natural extension of his work.

"Art, architecture and fashion are genres that inform my work. Everywhere I go, art is the first thing I want to see," shares Lee. He rarely sources ideas from design. "Design is the end product – if you look at it, all you are doing is copying."

It's no surprise that his heroes are from the art and product design world. The office is lined with artworks by Hong Kong artist Stanley Wong, under whom he worked at Bartle Bogle Hegarty and who he calls *shifu* (teacher in Mandarin), as well as Singaporean artists John Clang and Lip Chin. Favourites on his office shelves include monographs on German painter Gerhard Richter and American light and space artist James Turrell, all sitting under a neat row of '60s Braun radios by legendary German industrial designer Dieter Rams.

Music is perhaps the influence that has

shaped Lee's life the most. Very early on, his decision to go into design was influenced by the packaging of cult British independent label 4AD: "I decided that I would be very happy if I could do this for the rest of my life." If he could choose, Lee would have lived in the UK in the '80s; as a designer, his work would have had the chance to proliferate throughout global youth cultures via record covers. "It's very important to be in the right ecosystem to be able to succeed. You can be the most talented person in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you will be nothing."

Singapore didn't use to have an ecosystem for cutting-edge design, but it is getting there now, Lee notes. It's safe to say that he continues to be ahead of his time, as some audiences just don't get Asylum's work. A case in point was the National Gallery Singapore branding project – a gutsy logo that was so simple that the firm received criticism for being too lazy.

Does critique get him down? Not at all, Lee says firmly. "I stand by our logo – it was supposed to push the boundaries and be a little uncomfortable," he says.

"I think that in 10 years, people will see it as an iconic design."



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