

John Clang is living the artist's dream -- he works in New York City and people speak of his name. And he knows it. The 36-year-old Singapore-born photographer is unabashed about his rapid ascendancy in the fickle and often cruel world of art, but he has more pressing matters on his mind: existential ones.

"I'm somebody that young photographers want to be, because I'm successful, but life isn't just about that. Art is a way to understand myself. I want to understand myself as much as I can while I'm alive."

Clang may live in a frenetic metropolis where an artist could easily languish in a cloud of hedonism that fame so often delivers, but instead, he chooses isolation by spending most of his time at home or going on one of his solo walks.

"I usually walk four to five hours at a time. I don't have a camera, just a pencil and a piece of paper. It's solely about self-reflection

because I'm constantly having conversations with myself. It's an interesting way of creating and thinking."

That innate need to create has led to an unconventional career marked by a rebellious streak of raw ambition. Much to an Asian parent's chagrin, Clang's life could be held up as a "don't" on how to seek success. Don't, at age 17, drop out of art college to work as a photographer's assistant. Don't, at 21, exhibit one's work as part of the controversial art collective, 5th Passage Artists. And, definitely, don't discard your family name for an anglicised misnomer.

Clang explains his choice, "It was hard to get an appointment when I called myself Ang Choon Leng. When I called myself John Clang, it opened so many more doors." And what doors it has opened. Since leaving for the greener creative shores of the Big Apple in 1999, he has shot campaigns for Hermès, Nike, Evian, Godiva, Motorola and Nissan, to name a few.

Clang's success hasn't come without sacrifice -- and irony. The overwhelming guilt of leaving his parents behind in Singapore is manifested in many of his personal pieces. The first series he shot that got him critical attention is titled "Fear of Losing Their Existence", a series of individual portraits of his family with their faces starkly wiped off.

"It talks about my fear of forgetting them in my head. When they leave the world, I will have to depend on photographs to remember how they look like. That's really sad."

Despite that, he counts his blessings and the opportunities that his adopted home has given him. "I was fortunate that there were people who were willing to give a young guy a chance. In New York, everyone is from somewhere else; it's a melting pot of different talents. As long as people see that you have talent, they will hire you, because they know it's about what you can bring to them."

— **Ci En Xu**

JOHN Clang

The homegrown photographer had to leave home to find success, and himself

