

# SHARP SHOOTER

*From ad campaigns to fashion editorials to visuals that provoke thought on social causes, photographer John Clang's work has garnered him international acclaim. JAMES TULLEY speaks to this Singaporean born, New York-based lens man to find out what makes him tick.*

*Photographs by* **JOHN CLANG**



Beijing-NYC





**Designare Magazine (DM): There is an increasing focus on Asia politically, economically and culturally. As a leading international photographer from Asia, do you see yourself as a role model to others in Asia and how does this make you feel?**

John Clang (JC): "Due to the increasingly booming market of China, much attention has now been shifted to Asia. I don't think that changes the way I practise my art but it does make me proud to be an Asian. I am not exactly a role model or at least I don't think I plan to be, but I'm always interested to inspire and guide the younger generation in Singapore about new contemporary photography. I love to teach."

**DM: What sparked your early interest in photography? What was the turning point for you?**

JC: "It's a rather embarrassing story. I was watching a Hong Kong Cantonese TVB drama series which starred the actor Simon Yam. He's a photographer in it and I just love how he expresses his thoughts through a camera - the carefree, creative lifestyle."

"I was a Science student but I love art and I'm hopelessly romantic. I can't draw to express myself and photography just suddenly became the medium for me to express myself creatively."

"Then in school, there was a photographic society which introduced Salon Photography to the students. Somehow, even though I was new to photography, I knew that was not my route. I did not join the club and decided to just learn on my own."

"I was 15 years old. Then, I was a competitive table tennis player, representing school, winning the National Championship, three years in a row. When I discovered photography, I decided then, that it will be my life. One fine day, I accumulated all my medals and table tennis paddles in a box and threw them into the rubbish chute. This was my determination to focus on photography and not let other hobbies or passions distract me."

**DM: What makes your work unique and gives it its defining quality or hallmark?**

JC: "In my humble view, I think my work is based on an acute observation of myself in my urban environment, and I use photography to express that. This observation and the thoughts that follow it can be quite abstract. Instead of using notes to record down my thoughts, I try to use photography as a medium to record these thoughts in my head. Thus, these images become my mental diary."

"I have never tried to have a specific style in my work but I do believe that my sensibility and my highly personal approach will link all my work together, thus creating a refreshing style on its own."



**DM: You seem to effortlessly move between different genres such as advertising campaigns to fashion editorial. How do you evaluate the projects or work that you are prepared to undertake? Is there a genre you enjoy more than others?**

JC: "Well...I started wanting to do only Fine Art photography work. At least that was what I was first exposed to, as my first exhibition in Singapore was with 5th Passage Ltd (founded in 1991, it managed the only artists collective gallery in Singapore).

"Then I was exposed to Advertising work because some creative executives in agencies saw my exhibition. My initial exposure to Advertising photography was that this is a very technically driven craft, not exactly something I imagined myself doing for the rest of my life. But the moment I felt that I could use my approach in photography to work on advertising projects, I began to feel more comfortable. I figured that I need not be like any other advertising photographers. I can do what I like and hopefully still be able to translate that to advertising campaigns.

"I was young, naive and ambitious. Very fortunately, it all worked out nicely. So my approach to Advertising and Fashion photography has to be based on my solid roots in contemporary art photography. I'm hoping to bring some freshness to the work and continue inspiring myself and push myself further creatively. I can never be labeled as an Advertising or Fashion Photographer. I'm a photographer."

**DM: Once you undertake a project or immerse yourself in your work, do you have a distinct or consistent thought process in the way you approach it?**

JC: "There's some consistent methodology indeed. I like my images to be subtle and refreshing. I like them to be meticulously produced and yet still look unpolished. I also like them to be intriguing and challenging to the audience. It is this desire to create something that challenges that makes me tick."

**DM: What work or moment in your life are you most proud of and why?**

JC: "My work is a collection of my memories. They are a reflection of my mental mind so I'm not sure if I can be proud of them singularly. As for the proudest moment in my life ... I'm not there yet. Maybe the day I have my solo show in MOMA."





**DM: You maintain your privacy. Has this been a response to your popularity or have you always been a private person?**

JC: "I'm a Capricorn - we get along easily with others. I love to meet people and have a good chat. But I'm also a very emotional person and have many moments when I love to be alone and do my thinking. My lady calls me an indoor plant. I like staying at home or going long solo walks - I enjoy having time for self-reflection. I love walking alone in an urban city where I'm almost invisible."

**DM: Your recent work for the Hopenhagen project has garnered much critical acclaim. Tell us about this project: what it means to you, and how you approached its development and final execution?**

JC: "This project was initiated by Tham Khai Meng. He is the worldwide creative director and chairman of Ogilvy & Mather. He is one guy I respected tremendously ever since I started in Singapore. He wanted me to work on this and I felt honoured to be invited and be a part of it. We basically decided how we wanted to approach this campaign through some intense long meetings and email exchanges."

"I felt strongly that I wanted to do something that's away from typical advertising work and also more hand crafted. Khai Meng and his creative team think the same as me. Then we started casting for our 150 talents to be involved in the shoot. Basically, I tend to keep all my shoots very simple. The focus is always on the idea. With my lady, Elin producing it, the production went flawlessly and smoothly. Big production is never an issue, but if one is being overwhelmed by it, the work suffers. I like my work to look effortlessly produced and yet it requires a meticulously planned production."

**DM: Do you have a personal motto or value set that guides you through life?**

JC: "Simplicity."

**DM: From your perspective when you review the photographs that you have taken and have to select the final ones, what goes through your mind, and what ultimately determines the selection of the final photograph?**

JC: "The photograph should have a sense of intimate awkwardness in them, never a pretty picture."

**DM: Where do you draw your inspiration?**

JC: "I draw my inspiration from the observations I make during my solo walks. The observations can be things I see or things that make me think about my existence in this universe."

**DM: Apart from your camera and your family, what "luxury" could you not live without on a desert island?**

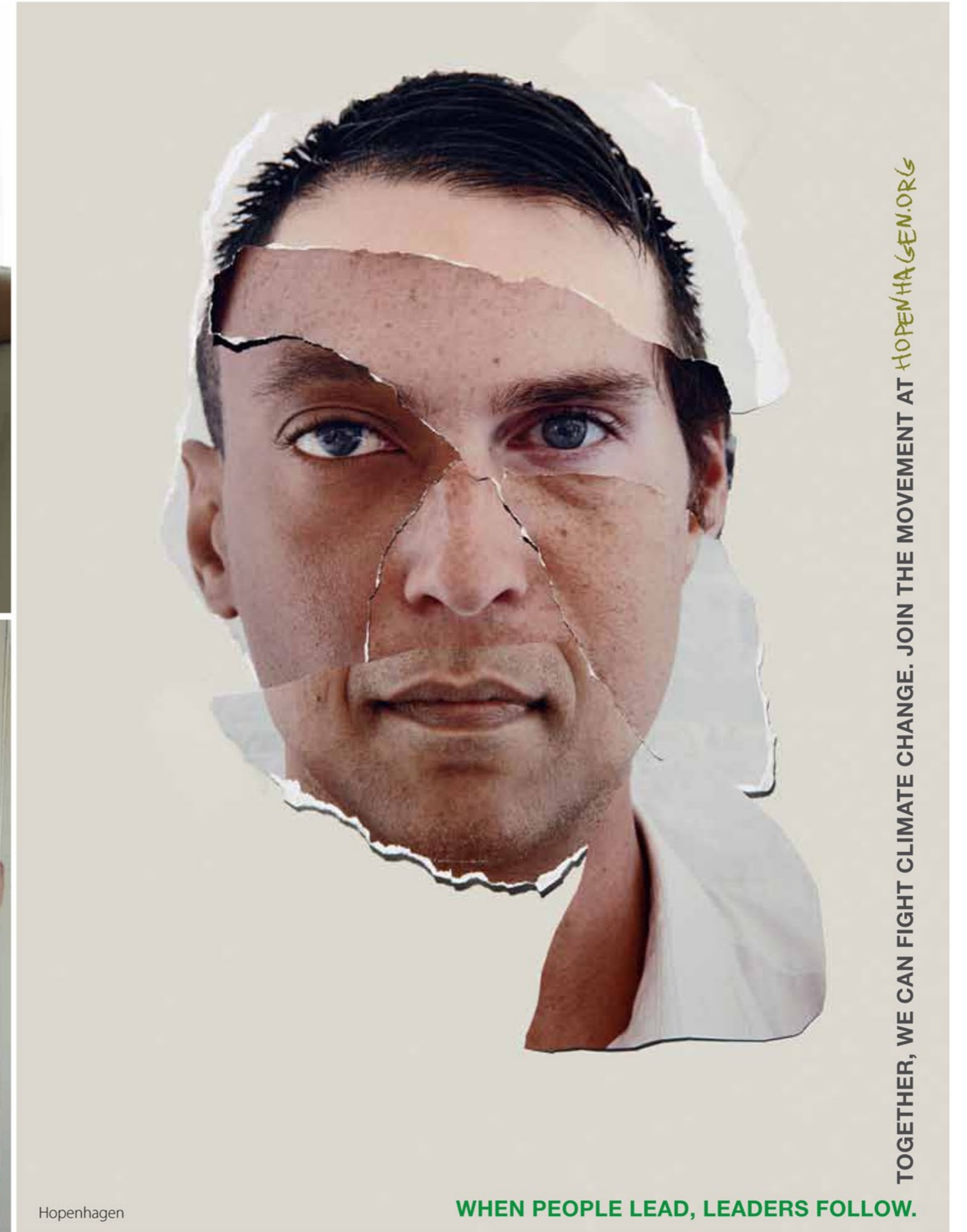
JC: "The Simplicity watch by Phillipe Dufour."



The contemporary man, photographer John Clang



Me and Friends



Hopenhagen

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