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# Ink Philosophy: Jun Cha

by Matt Ho

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23-year-old L.A. tattoo artist Jun Cha is an amalgam of all things creative. He's an illustrator, a painter, a photographer, a fashion designer having memorable collaborations with brands like **Black Scale** and **The Hundreds** under his belt, and more. It takes skill, time and patience to dip your toes in everything, but most importantly, discipline. Yes, passion is important, but without the very basics of discipline, dedication fades and ultimately that 'passion' ends up being just a phase. This is especially true in the world of tattooing. Many have their heart set in the right place, but few are willing to do what it takes to tackle the physical and mental strains of working on a large eight session back piece or a six hour sleeve. Jun learned this early on from his first mentor **Baby Ray** at the age of 16.

"I really learned the basics of discipline, of focusing, of really being able to give my all to the craft, because it really was no joke with him," he recalls. "It's not just the quality of the work that you have to pay attention to. You gotta make sure, you know the very basics of like learning how to always clean up after yourself right? Taking out the trash, like making sure the floor is clean so you can eat sushi off of it."

Like a low-level intern handling calls and delivering coffee, tattoo apprentices have to undergo a necessary hardship to pay their dues. Horiyoshi III's early days apprenticing for Horiyoshi II was spent on chores that included making sumi (ink), sharpening needles and a whole lot of floor cleaning before he really dove into the practice itself. It's a real test of character, work ethic and ultimately, it determines if someone is truly passionate about tattooing or if they're looking to cash in on the industry's newfound celebrity. Jun understood the importance of these fundamentals well. In time, he dissected the craft and developed what he described as a spiritual outlook where what he was doing transformed from hobby to passion.

"In the beginning it really wasn't even about tattooing, it was really about changing my whole thought process and view on what tattooing really is."

Under the tutelage of Baby Ray and eventually Jose Lopez of L.A.'s famed **Lowrider Tattoo Studios** (where he still is when he's not in his private space Arudima Studio), he honed his skills experimenting with several styles ranging from color to traditional Japanese. Soon, he made his transition towards the west coast fine line black and gray work he has become reputable for. Growing up around the L.A. street tattoo scene and having his mentors were an influence in his artistic direction, but Jun did take a personal liking to the style.

"It just has a really nice way of aging, really nice way of settling on the skin. A very neutral way of depicting images," he says. "The harmony is almost already there because you have a single medium that you're using to create these images. It's almost like if you compare it to a black and white photograph versus something like a full color, Internet photograph."

In short, he's referring to its timeless quality. Thomas Hooper made a similar comment when describing black colored tattoos similar to that of a photograph album in an antique store in an [interview with Marcus Kuhn](#). It's a fairly literal interpretation that reflects the idea of nostalgia, but for Jun, the idea of 'timeless' goes a little deeper.

"When I was speaking about a timeless quality, I'm referring to a lot of the historic references that I use for the work that I do as a tattoo artist. There's a lot of

connection to the classical periods of art, the Renaissance and I guess that's where really...I guess the 'timeless' word comes from," he says. "The timeless quality is when you're making that connection to something that is truly timeless."

It makes a lot of sense hearing this considering how his personal interest and education in the fine arts transitioned into his professional life. Jun's tattoo portfolio is filled with sleeves and back pieces adorned in classical/historical figures such as Julius Caesar, Lorenzo de' Medici and 16th-century Korean Admiral, Yi Sun-Shin. The imagery is common in his work and it's what clients flock to him for. But being good at what he does is in no way a sign that Jun has settled as an artist nestled in a state of comfort. Comfort, he explains, is a nightmare and it's a feeling that can be dangerous in several situations. As much recognition and acclaim Jun receives for his work, I've learned that he's never satisfied. You know how people say you never stop learning in life? Jun really takes that ideology to heart. Seven years into his career and he still feels like a student of the trade who hasn't figured it out. But here's the thing, that's OK.

"It's not even about finding yourself. Again, it's about creating yourself. For me that's what is the most fulfilling. I like not knowing how it's all going to turn out. I don't want to know. I want to find it out and I want to grow and continue to grow. If I figure it out and have it all mapped out...you've already kind of capped a limit to yourself."

Growth is a large part of Jun's philosophy. He's a long way from being the 16-year-old running door-to-door around L.A. tattooing just because he wanted "to do some cool shit" as he puts it. Nowadays, Jun finds that his "work has become the closest thing to a spiritual practice." Finding meaning in a piece is one way of looking at it, so here's the question: is it OK to get inked just because it looks cool as opposed to doing so out of sentiment? Well, for him it's about balance.

"Obviously at the end of the day, the tattoo has to look good. But for us, for a person to commit his/her whole body, with this amount of time and this amount of work, I find that it's a lot more meaningful and powerful if the work we're doing has a direct connection to that person and beyond that really...if it's about his/her culture, or his/her beliefs, or whatever it may be. The work is balanced in the sense that it has both that meaning that goes beyond what we're doing and that it's still a visually strong piece of art."

Part of growing for Jun is exploring other creative fields. Streetwear is the most notable one because it's partly responsible for his escalated exposure to a world outside his industry. He didn't do it for a quick buck either. Understanding the creative progression, the inner workings of the industry is what drove his interest and it's this sort of curiosity mentality that's the basis for why he tries anything new. Jun's definitely not the first tattoo artist to branch out (think Scott Campbell for Marc Jacobs, Mister Cartoon for Vans and of course, Ed Hardy), but it's interesting to listen to him explain why.

"Once you're exposed to just how much, how endless the possibilities can be with a life involved in the creative field—that doesn't necessarily just mean visual arts, it can be whatever. Once you are really exposed to that endless cycle of what you've done, how much amazing things can be done because of it, it's like you're just going to want to keep going. You wake up and go to bed thinking about this stuff and it's an amazing feeling for me."

Exploring various mediums is a challenge. Not necessarily because of the need to acquire new technical knowledge, but rather, the approach, the way of thinking is challenged. Some of Jun's paintings for example, examine subjects such as human struggle and human connection, which in itself brings a whole other level of difficulty. More is required out of him to communicate the visual narrative and it provokes a type of critical thinking he explains as being "outside the initial reaction state we tend to get into." But that difficulty is welcomed because not only does he grow as an artist, he grows as a person as well. At the end of the day, exploration and experimentation is all part of a larger vision Jun mentioned in a past interview where he talked about attempting to express his work through different fields by bridging them together and having it all communicate one perspective. I asked him to elaborate and he tells me that by "one perspective," he's referring to how you can translate your view on the world and your work through various mediums (Tim Burton is the example he gives me of an individual who has done just that). It's ambitious, but Jun's realistic. Nothing comes easy and he's aware that there's a long road ahead. At this stage, progression is far more

important than reaching for an end that may not even exist in the first place.

“The idea of perfection is always going to be an illusion and standards are always changing. So when you’re going through that journey, that end goal then, really is irrelevant – it’s the process itself that determines how full my experience is going to be.”

Process, is a fascination of his. Read the section dedicated to it on his [website](#) and you’ll see what I mean. It’s not always about getting to the end or even the end itself. The lead-up and the evolution after is where the reward is. Watching the conception of a tattoo come together with a client—especially when someone willingly puts their body through hours of pain—is always more rewarding. To Jun, things come in cycles. It’s why he doesn’t dwell on past work and it’s why he doesn’t react to the current mainstream status of tattooing with the sense of dread that others have.

“I don’t see it as a terrible destructive force as other artists see it as. That’s just a stage right now. It’s going to pass,” he says. “Instead of just reacting to that cycle, what if you approached it in a different way? What if you engage in that cycle? What if you’re able to shape it? What if you’re able to direct it instead of just following along with what happens? What if we can really use our brains and place it in a way where it’s definitive?”

He makes a good argument. Every action has a reaction. The slew of drama-filled reality shows may have left a sour taste to some in the industry, but in that process, a few web series online with a more honest, in-depth approach surfaced. Look at what VICE did with their *Tattoo Age* series. *Last Sparrow Tattoo*’s Scott Sylvia conducts great personal one-on-one interviews with several well known artists. Marcus Kuhn’s *The Gypsy Gentleman* is an excellent series that examines the history and the relationship between tattoos and the city he visits.

The point Jun’s making is this: nothing is absolute. Ask him where he thinks he’ll be in five years and I can promise you that you won’t get an answer. His artistic identity, how he thinks, approaches and communicates his work is going to change and he knows it.

“That’s the process. You can’t try to control it, you can’t try to like...you’re not going to figure it out tomorrow or five years from now.”

It’s a journey and part of going along the ride is being able to move on with no baggage. Letting go is a challenge, but Jun says that it’s crucial in his work and his life because it’s like he says, “When I’m detached, I’m aware and conscious.” If things don’t work out?

“Failure is an absolute necessity. Failure is success. You can’t be afraid to make mistakes because you’ll never be in the position to really understand your true potential as a person. The drive to succeed starts with when you intimately know how that lowest bottom pit feels.”

Bruce Lee once explained the concept of Tai Chi as this: “Running water never grows stale, so you just got to keep on flowing.” Perhaps this best describes who and what Jun Cha is all about.

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