

A portrait of a woman with dark hair, wearing a black t-shirt, standing in a modern building with a white railing. The background is slightly blurred, showing architectural details like columns and ceiling lights.

YOUNG ARTIST
AWARD
2013
GRACE TAN
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Born in 1979 in Malaysia, Grace Tan spent most of her formative years in Singapore and became a Permanent Resident in 1999. In the same year, Grace graduated from Temasek Polytechnic, and was initiated to the world of fashion—she was employed as a design assistant at the fashion label, Song&Kelly. A multi-disciplinary practitioner who has traversed many worlds, Grace has blossomed beyond fashion, into the fields of fine art and design. She is the founder of kwodrent (since 2003), an interdisciplinary practice based in Singapore, and an educator in the Faculty of Visual Arts at School of the Arts (since 2009).

Through continual explorations of patterns, repetition and symmetry found in materials and structures, Grace's work has evolved from wearable fashion pieces to sculptural constructions. Through these, she explores the formal and structural possibilities of fabric, paper, metal, plastics and other materials. Her works also engage other artists, sparking

off peer-inspirations and collaborations, all of which contribute to pushing the material limits of the mediums that she chooses to explore further.

A prolific multi-disciplinary practitioner, Grace has received several national honours for her creative practice, including the 2012 Design of the Year by the President's Design Award for her installation *Building as a Body* (2012) and the President's Young Talents Award for her installation *refuge* (2013). Her works have also travelled the world, and featured at notable festivals such as the Aichi World Expo (2005), London Design Week (2006), *Singapore SUPERGARDEN* at Venice Architecture Biennale (2008), State of Design in Melbourne (2008, 2009, 2010) and the Setouchi Triennale (2013).

Grace's notable works include *Building As A Body* (2012), a collaboration with Randy Chan commissioned by Singapore

Art Museum for The Singapore Show: *Future Proof, MM* (2011–2013), developed and presented as part of The Substation Associate Artist Research Programme. *In the Stillness* (2013) was developed for the Setouchi Triennale and presented at the Fukutake House. Other commissioned works include *Specimens*, a site specific installation for the Singapore Art Museum's inaugural exhibition, *8Q-Rate: School* (2008), and *Udara Yang Bergerak* (2012) for Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay. Grace also created *Woven Field* (2012), which was commissioned by the Land Transport Authority for the Downtown Line Art in Transit Programme.



A CONVERSATION WITH GRACE TAN

Describe how you knew you would become an artist, how you chose your ultimate medium of practice.

My journey into the field of visual arts happened organically. It was around 2007 that the wearable fabric constructions I had been making under the 'kwodrent series' started to grow more complex, evolving beyond the body. I began focusing on the construction and methodology, with fabric as my primary medium. These fabric sculptures continued to develop, growing in dimension and complexity while the underlying philosophy and method remained constant. It prompted me to question the methodology that informed and shaped the works. At the same time, I was intrigued by my explorations of digitising three-dimensional fabric construction into numeric data to create a perpetual dual entity.

Subsequently, I began working with paper and metal, materials that are similar to fabric but that are distinctively unique while guided by the core methodology. I have since worked with a variety of mediums. Ultimately, I prefer not to be constrained by a set medium. I enjoy the vigour in working across mediums. I like to keep an open mind in search of the hidden beauty as I delve deep into the material to discover what it can do or lead me to. I always find my identity as an art practitioner to be rather ambiguous due to my work across disciplines. I am honestly glad to be in this situation as it urges me to question what being an artist means as well as the underlying intention of my works.

What are the biggest challenges you face as an artist?

I believe my biggest challenge would be to go beyond the methodology that has shaped my work and to find the 'truth' in my work. In my formative years, I see 'truth' as being true to the structural integrity of the construct and the materiality of the medium by allowing the intrinsic and latent quality to emerge without exerting too much of myself. This is still what I am pursuing in my work but 'truth' has more depth to it now. The search for 'truth' encompasses working without knowing, a kind of blind faith and instinctive conviction in search of something deeper, more sublime and obscure. It is a delicate struggle within the self, how much and when to hold on or to let go.

What motivates you to continue despite these challenges?

I always find the process of art making to be a wonderful and amazing experience - the chance to be intuitively connected to the work, to feel the momentum gaining and to see the work emerging. It induces a child-like anticipation and delight. The greatest motivation would certainly be to arrive at the work. It is a point of completion, where things come and work together, creating something magical and unexpected. It has a feeling of something bigger, something beyond and something that has its own life.

When you set about creating a new work, what inspires you?

Nature is inevitably a primary inspiration for all my works. It is not so much the figurative pattern or representational aspect of nature that enthral me but its life force and suggestion of growth, continuity and connection. Interestingly, the composition and formation of my works also share a close connection with nature the manner in which they are constructed.

What do you hope your audience gets out of your work?

I find it pretty impossible to anticipate how the audience will feel or respond to my work. I hope my work has the freedom for the audience to make their own meaning and personal connection to. It is very important to me as I always intend my work to have a certain openness and continuity. Perhaps through the interaction, the work is able to offer a kind of respite and impetus for the audience to slow down and to reflect, on themselves and their surroundings.





Building as a Body (2012)
Photo Credit: Jeremy San



kwodrent Series (2005)
Photo Credit: Darren Soh



MM (2011-2013)
Photo Credit: Jeremy San

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

“ I would like to take this opportunity to thank my parents, especially my mother who has been a great support and role model to me. She stood by me when I made the decision to pursue my design education against the conventional route that was expected of me. I am deeply grateful and touched by the encouragements and kindness my associates, collaborators, mentors, colleagues and friends have shown me in the last ten years of my artistic pursuit. I would also like to thank my partner for his generous understanding and unabashed critical insight. Most importantly, I want to thank God for being there and guiding me all these years. ”

Grace Tan

