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The power of one

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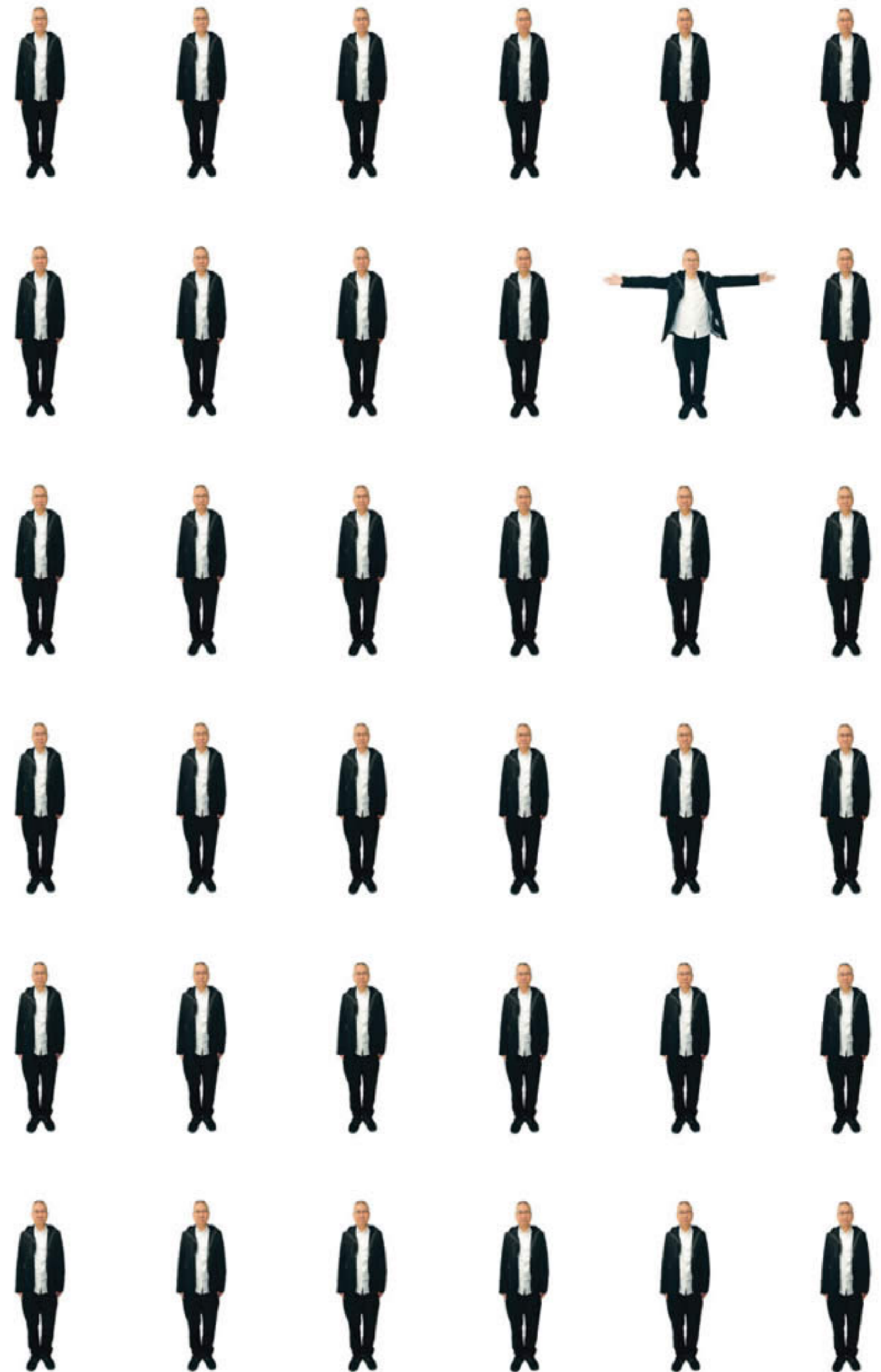


Three consecutive exhibitions to celebrate the 70th birthday of legendary graphic designer Kan Tai-Keung tell the story of how he found his own Tao of art and design. DAISY ZHONG reports.

THE POWER OF One



VANESSA KO



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"DESIGNING A LOGO FOR CHONGQING," says Kan Tai-Keung when asked to name the most challenging project of his career to date. Chongqing is home to 29 million people and has a complex political history (it was once the power centre of Bo Xilai), which would have made creating its logo a challenge for anyone, even an artist who plays by the rules. But Kan's approach has always been unconventional.

"When I started in 2004, people there told me that I should just follow what the leaders asked me to do, but that's not my way," he says. "My belief was that I should ask the citizens what they thought about my sketches and whether they conveyed a clear message about the city's spirit."

To go one's own way with a government-assigned task was a risk and made Kan's task an uphill battle. For two years after he was given the assignment Kan asked ordinary citizens on the street to choose among several versions of his design, give comments and make suggestions. The final version uses two characters in a posture of celebration, which have a shape that echoes the Chinese character for "celebration" with the pairing echoing the city's name, which means "double celebration." Completed in 2006, the logo proved to be extremely popular and has been widely used for the city's external promotion.

During the 40 years Kan has worked in the design industry he has faced many other challenges and along the way he developed a design philosophy that emphasises what he calls the "Tao" of being humane and caring.

To celebrate his unique approach and to mark his 70th birthday, a series of three exhibitions, including one

《WHEN DOING
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PREVIOUS PAGE PORTRAIT OF DR KAN IN HIS STUDIO;
BELOW KAN'S DESIGNS FOR A LOCAL NEWSPAPER
WITH AN ADVERTISEMENT PRICE LIST FOR SINGTAO
NEWSPAPER; RIGHT KAN'S DESIGNS FOR A JAPANESE
PAPER COMPANY, BON FREE SERIES

at the HKDI Gallery, commenced in September 2012 and will run until January 2013. The trio of shows featured a total of more than 700 exhibits, ranging from graphic design, products, installation and multi-media work. The exhibitions also featured talks by Kan, two workshops and a lively forum that brought together designers from Hong Kong, Macao, Mainland China and Taiwan.

The exhibition at HKDI took place from October through November, and featured thin wooden boards laid out to represent a river that took visitors on a journey through more than 250 of Kan's designs and artworks.

"The HKDI exhibition was set up so that young designers could see how to walk into the world of design," says Kan. The items chosen for display were especially selected to focus on the design process and ranged from inspirational sketches, a rare collection of books, design



layouts and other inspirational elements. Kan also donated some of the exhibits to the Design Archive at HKDI for permanent preservation and record.

Sitting in the HKDI Gallery in front of a screen that played a documentary about his work, Kan described his life-long search for the distinctive elements of his own style.

"I came to Hong Kong from Guangdong in 1957 when I was 15 years old," he said. "I was already interested in design and painting but we needed to make ends meet." Kan was assigned by his father to work as a tailor's apprentice, but he continued to draw and sketch whenever the weekend brought him free time. In order to acquire some formal training, he enrolled in a 24-lesson design course at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, taught by Wucius Wong, a brush and ink artist he much admired.

"I worked during the day as a tailor and studied at night. The course was simple and short, but enlightening. It got me to appreciate art and I rediscovered my dream of painting."

That was 1964, when Kan was 22. His talent proved to be as strong as his interest in art. In 1967 Kan became

a designer and was delighted when his work began winning awards in competitions where he was pitched against some of his teachers and other design masters. In 1969 some of Kan's works were displayed in City Hall as part of a student exhibition for buyers and collectors. Kan was thrilled when someone bought his some of his work.

In the 1970s Kan became one of the shining stars on Hong Kong's design scene and in 1976 he was able to found his own company, Kan Tai-Keung Design & Associates. After winning a place at Hong Kong's Ten Outstanding Young Persons awards in 1979, Kan went on to win numerous awards and honours in Hong Kong and has since won prestigious design awards in the United States, Poland, Switzerland and Japan, and his design work has been collected by museums in Germany, Denmark, France, Japan, and Hong Kong.

His paintings and other artworks were equally successful. He was awarded a Fine Art Award from the Hong Kong Urban Council and was also named one of the Outstanding Artists and Designers of the 20th Century in 2000.

But Kan makes a clear distinction between design and painting, although he acknowledges they share a similar background in art and creativity.

"Design is more practical – you must solve a problem according to the needs of the client," he says. "The purpose of design is to serve others, so you have to know what their standards are. Painting, on the other hand,



KAN & LAU

KAN & LAU



« DESIGN MUST BE HUMANE AND IT MUST BE CARING. »

is purely about a desire to express your feelings. Some paintings may be obscure and do not communicate any message effectively, but design must. When doing design you must care about others, but when doing painting, no one cares about you.”

Kan emphasises that the professionalism required for successful design career must be focused on getting to know the market, and what the client wants. “A tailor is making a suit for somebody, and the purpose is to make the product suitable for that somebody, and not for the tailor.”

In both painting and design, Kan places a high value on originality. In common with other masters like Wu Guanzhong, Kan admires Shi Tao, an early-Qing Chinese landscape painter from the 17th century who argued that being bound by established techniques is not good for art or artists.

“Shi Tao not only drew in very original and imaginative ways, but also wrote a book on the philosophy of art, in which he advanced the idea of being oneself in artistic creation, to find one’s own style. He famously said ‘I use my own methods’, the spirit of which has transcended time and is extremely relevant today.”

One wall of the HKDI exhibition featured a row of Kan’s ink paintings that combined Chinese calligraphy and what seemed like a strong sense of Western abstract impressionism and formalism, but Kan says he is not sure what type of “-ism” his works belong to, he prefers to say they were created according to his own style, his “Tao”.

“The ‘Tao’ of design is not just doing design,” says Kan. “Creating designs is about an attitude. As a designer nowadays, you should give more thought to the impact that design has on people. Design must be humane and it must be caring.”

The Chongqing city logo is one of the many examples where Kan balanced the professional demands of design with his own style. The logo of the Bank of China, a widely acclaimed work, is another one. The design resembles an ancient red Chinese coin, with the tiny square hole in the centre representing heaven and

earth. It symbolises good fortune and luck in Chinese tradition, while delivering a simple, elegant and modern feel.

Kan takes care to guide his famous design company, known since 1996 as Kan & Lau Design Consultants, by the same lights, focusing its work on projects that suit the “Tao of Kan”. “My company always cares about the community,” he says. “We make sure that our work doesn’t serve the wrong principles. For instance, we will not do design work for cigarette companies.”

Besides running his own design company Dr Kan is also involved in educating artists and designers, and in promoting art and design as a profession. As the previous dean at the Cheung Kong Art and Design School at Shantou University in Shantou, Kan teaches a new course named “Design Ethics”, which emphasises sustainability, and the need for design to nurture vulnerable groups within the community.

Kan also presides over the Kan Tai-Keung Design Award, which will enter its 14th year in 2013 and celebrates local creativity while seeking to promote emerging graphic designers. For over a decade the award has also promoted exchanges among designers in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau.

“During the first few years, Hong Kong students thought the award was reserved for mainlanders,” he says, “but submissions have increased from a few hundred in the beginning to five thousand in 2012, with an impressive increase from Hong Kong and Taiwan.” In 2011 a Gold Kan Tai-Keung Design Award was given to Wong Wai Kei, a student at HKDI studying for the Higher Diploma in Visual Communication, for her work *The Tram of Hong Kong*.

Kan believes that the future of the design industry in Asia will be focused on Mainland China, posing new challenges for designers in Hong Kong. “Mainland China’s design industry has seen impressive development in the past two decades. It is the most promising because the domestic market will keep expanding and demand will keep growing. Hong Kong’s future designers will have to work hard in order to compete.”

LEFT (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) A VISITOR TO KAN’S HKDI EXHIBITION; DR KAN IN HIS STUDIO IN KOWLOON TONG; DR KAN LEADS A TOUR OF HIS EXHIBITION; BELOW DR KAN WITH STUDENTS AND STAFF FROM HKDI

