

Real-time Design

Interview with Jackson Wang

By Constance Conscious

Jackson Wang is the founder of Take Heart, a small studio in Los Angeles that literally wears its heart on its sleeve. Since 2007, after graduating from Art Center College of Design, Jackson opened a silkscreen studio that designs and prints t-shirts and posters that have something to say. His work focuses on making meaningful products created in response to real-time events. The most well known work that came out of the studio was the t-shirt with the words emblazoned on the front, "Illegal Alien since _____", in response to the immigration protest rallies in 2006. With a first run of 100 t-shirts, word spread and suddenly everyone in Los Angeles began wearing the "Illegal Alien" t-shirt as a symbol of immigrant pride. Since then, the studio has been conducting screen printing workshops and making more things.

You used to design in the corporate sector. Why the change in heart?

I worked in agencies and design firms for 7 years before going back to school at Art Center.

Designing for corporations pays very well but is morally dissatisfying. My last corporate client was a financial services company. And I remember typesetting a customer quote that said "Maximize your business opportunities and profits with us" and thinking, I don't want to do this my entire life.

Not to say all corporate work is dissatisfying, it's really the content that makes it fulfilling, and corporate marketing design, for the most part, lacked the heart I look for in great design. It's the content that matters for me and talking with non-profit organizations, the people in charge of marketing are closer to their cause than many marketing managers I've encountered designing for

corporations. For example, I worked with Sydnee Stewart who organized after school programs for high school kids who were interested in music and art. She invited me to join her after school and it was an amazing experience for me to have these rather cynical and at-risk kids genuinely interested in design. The emotion was infinitely more tangible to me, as a designer, than any marketing quote about how company XYZ affected the bottom line.

What are some of the benefits and challenges in designing for non-profits?

Designing for non-profit organizations, the content, the challenge and the need for good design was there. I saw a huge opportunity to do something where I could make a difference. Designing for non-profits, being financially stringent can also be very challenging. Since they don't have the money to pay for good design nor good printing, most designers are reluctant to do work for free. Fortunately, some non-profits compensate money with creative freedom. Volunteering design skills to a non-profit has been a great way for me to try out some experiments that might have been shot down in the corporate world. Another particular challenge that doesn't happen as much in corporate work is the idea of volunteers that exist in non-profits. On a grass roots level, volunteers are often hired to help non-profits in creating campaign materials and public service announcements. Working with volunteers, I've realized that they come from all walks of life and won't know how to use your Quark files. And most likely, the designs will be printed on a 11 x 17 black and white Laser printer hooked up to a five-year old PC running on Windows 95. It's a design challenge but, as a designer, you work within those constraints and come up with something functional, easy-to-use and meaningful.

Do you believe graphic designers can make a huge impact in doing social work?

Absolutely. Designers are taught to communicate and be able to evoke the necessary responses from their audience. Graphic design brings eyes to your message and hopefully that message stays with the audience and is able to create a response to action. It's great to see how other designers address a social problem because that one idea could advance what we understand about the problem, raise awareness about it or solve it. In graphic design, the posters from the 80s from Eastern Europe were extremely powerful in voicing social unrest in a totalitarian regime. At a more corporate level, Ben Cohen of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream fame is collaborating with Stefan Sagmeister in designing promotional materials for his non-profit business organization called Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities. In a recent lecture, Sagmeister mentioned he was interested because it was organization responding to political issues such as military spending, oil crisis, and education with the financial prowess to really make an impact. At Art Center, the Media Design Program not only teaches designers how to communicate and design but also, to think differently about how to solve problems with well thought strategies and how to make a difference. In the first year, Brenda Laurel, Lisa Nugent and Anne Burdick led a six-month class called Superstudio. The project was to examine six-year old boys and find an opportunity to create a product or service that would make a difference in their lives. The research and development process inspired me to start my own studio because it was enlightening to find opportunities and voids that my skills could fill in. One example is the "Illegal Alien since _____" t-shirt. I'm not a very politically active person nor extremely charitable person but I do want to help communicate. It's more satisfying to see a community be turned around for the better because of a design I did than affecting a company's bottom line.

Please define "real-time design" as it applies to your work.

The idea of “real-time design” is how fast can a designer successfully respond to a current event story. News broadcast designers have only a few minutes to design a graphic to communicate a major story before the television broadcaster will have to report it on air. Similarly in process, Jon Sueda, who teaches graphic design at CalArts, explains the immediate reaction time necessary to produce an event poster at CalArts. A student is given only three days to design and screen print 50 posters. How is that for a tight deadline? Borrowing that idea, I invested money into a silkscreen studio where I could do more of my own printing. I printed the “Illegal Alien since _____” shirts as well as other posters and t-shirts that didn’t do so well. Real-time is a term that is borrowed from Internet talk, meaning the information that is happening in the real world doesn’t lag when it’s communicated to your PC via the Internet. The studio tries to bridge that gap between work that is handcrafted and events happening in the real world. For instance, the success of the “Illegal Alien since _____” t-shirts wouldn’t have been successfully if it took longer than 2 weeks. The first rally happened on March 25, 2006. We responded with t-shirts in one week and made them available for the second rally that occurred on April 10. The tricky part of the whole process is that the studio philosophy is to try to make something outside of the computer. I want to get my hands dirty and create something tangible. It would be too easy and uninteresting to me to take in data via the Internet and output it back as designed data. And plus, it wouldn’t have the visceral impact of getting it out into the public space. The appeal and challenge of the process is taking virtual information that is immediate and making it live as a physical object that has a point of view.

What type of current events do you choose to make something out of?

I'm addicted to news sites, blogs and magazines. But I try to keep my radar on events that shift the way we see things. The most obvious one is 9-11. Since then, there has been the invasion of Iraq, Abu Ghraib, SARS and Hurricane Katrina. It's difficult not to be biased when you are designing. Skewing the facts only weakens your point. I feel honesty is best method of communicating your message in a public space. I don't want to be in the position of a demagogue on the soapbox but rather an anthropologist who is interested in presenting the data in an illuminating way. The issues need to be handled carefully but that's what makes it exciting. If the message is not objective, it can easily be dismissed as propaganda.

The "Illegal Alien since _____" t-shirt was a huge success for your studio. Describe how you came up with the idea.

The issue of immigration is a big part of my background. In 1970 my father immigrated to the United States illegally, working and living in New York until the INS instilled an open door policy for immigrants. Shortly afterwards, a huge influx of immigrants came into the United States in search of the American dream. For my father, the dream came true after many years of working hard in Chinese restaurants and finally owning one. Times have changed but the American dream should be accessible to everyone especially those who have been working in the United States for many years illegally or not. I remember clearly, as a child, looking at his green card, wondering why it said "Resident Alien" and how cool it was to have an alien for a father. So, for me and hopefully, many others, "Illegal Alien" shouldn't be a shameful or xenophobic label but a badge of accomplishment for overcoming many obstacles to follow a dream. There's something romantic about believing in an American dream and people should wear it on their chest. On March 25, 2006, while I was attending Art Center, the biggest recorded rally in Los Angeles history occurred

one Saturday afternoon in downtown. 500,000 people gathered en masse to protest the possible crackdown on illegal immigration in the US. So the idea formed in my head and decided to make a small run as an experiment. The t-shirt was designed with the words "Illegal Alien since" and a space for the wearer to fill in the date he or she entered into the US. 100 t-shirts were printed and given to friends and family. Soon the word spread, and Los Angeles, being a city of immigrants, everyone started to wear them to the protests from little kids to grandmothers. I had to get them professionally done to keep up with the demand.

Why t-shirts?

Good question. The strategy of using t-shirts was twofold. From the start, the tactic was to reach an 18 to 40-year old age group who were neither politically active nor interested in world affairs but perhaps more interested in making a fashion statement. Screen printed t-shirts are hugely in fashion now but the printed messages were uninteresting, shallow, and lacked any personal expression. Personally, I was also curious if anyone would be brave enough to wear this shirt in public and actually stand up for something. In the past, cultures under oppressive regimes usually produce an extraordinary creative output that expressed their frustration about their conditions. After all the mishaps of our own government, why has the US public been so lenient on the Bush administration? I think there should be more design with a social and political point of view.

Posters are a good way of expressing point of view in a public space however it doesn't really work in a city like Los Angeles since public space is not on the sidewalks. However, there are always opportunities that others don't see. For example, Julia Meltzer, a Los Angeles-based artist, has successfully created a public space on her billboard above 6150 Wilshire Blvd. In her Clockshop billboard series, *Test Site*, she curates artists' responses to the test site photographs of Yucca Flats,

Nevada. The large size of the billboard in a prominent street in Los Angeles allows a high number of viewers that a poster would not have achieved. While not every artist has that luxury, there are spaces where messages are conveyed. I noticed that people do like to express their individuality in fashion. And whether the public space is at Starbucks or at the mall, one person wearing an “Illegal Alien since_____” shirt will get others to read the message. I want to introduce political and social commentary back into the public space and t-shirts were a good idea in this case.

Being Los Angeles, wouldn't bumper stickers work better?

With bumper stickers, the commentary is lost on the type of car and model that is irrelevant when you're talking about a cultural identity that a person has. But the thought crossed my mind but it wouldn't be the right place.

Good point. Sorry, please continue.

The other tactic is directly associated with the immigration protest. In the Los Angeles Times, the news article mentioned protestors wearing white t-shirts as a sign for peaceful solidarity. A collective sea of Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, and African people wearing white suddenly erases the individuality of all and unites them under the label of “illegal aliens”. The strength of many to sway public opinion and government policy is truly awe-inspiring, if it works.

What does the future hold?

Surprisingly, the pro-bono work has led to many paid opportunities with larger non-profits who do have money to keep the studio engaged in making things. We are creating ceramics decorated with the seismic wave activity in California. My wife is knitting sweaters with different weather

reports of Los Angeles. For non-profits, we recently bought another silkscreen press and teaching screen printing workshops for anyone interested in making poster and t-shirt designs. I'm also very excited by rapid prototyping and making toy figurines out of stereotypes of illegal immigrants. I think it will be a huge hit with kids.