

WALLACE CHAN

# TITANS

A DIALOGUE  
BETWEEN MATERIALS,  
SPACE AND TIME



21 Feb - 8 Apr 2022  
Lobby, One Canada Square,  
Canary Wharf, London E14 5AB



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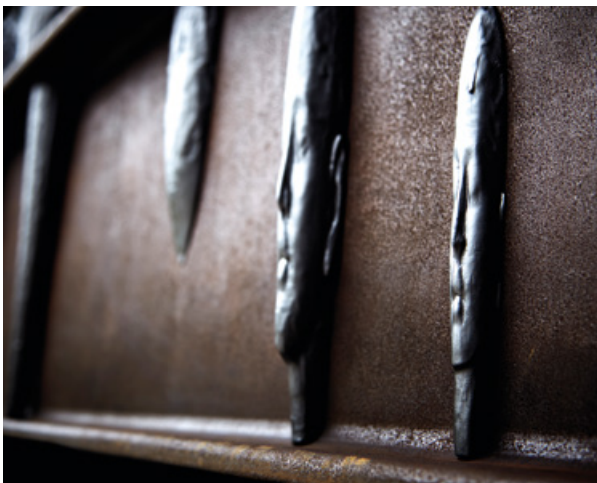
Titanium is one of those silent, unsung heroes. Carrying weight with incredible strength, it is almost invisible. I want to honour its discreet greatness.

Wallace Chan

In Greek mythology the Titans were strong immortal deities. According to legend, it was the Titan Prometheus who gave humanity the secret of fire and the skill of metalworking. After considerable experimentation, Wallace Chan discovered how to work with the metal titanium and created large sculptures for his TITANS exhibition. He used TITANS as the exhibition title because titanium is named after these mighty mythical beings, with its attributes of strength, lightness, and longevity. By juxtaposing titanium with iron girders, he sets up a dialogue between the two materials, with the lightness and durability of titanium providing a dramatic contrast to the weightiness and susceptibility to corrosion of iron. He calls this series ‘A Dialogue between Materials and Time’, as the materials also refer to the passage of time; the iron will eventually rust away, while the titanium can last for eternity since it doesn’t corrode. In this context, titanium suggests something upward and ethereal, while iron is grounded and earthbound.



DETAIL TITANS V



DETAIL TITANS II

Chan has carefully considered the expressive character of the different surfaces of both metals according to the balance and distribution of their volume, light, shade and colour. For instance, the russet colour of oxidised iron provides a striking contrast to the polished silver surface of titanium. Juxtaposing these two very different materials not only focuses on their oppositeness, but also alludes to the wider notion of duality. Everything has duality, whether it is in nature, words, actions or emotions. Chan’s work relates to the fundamental principles of duality - that there can be no positive without negative, no light without darkness, and no space without matter or material. In addition to their intrinsic aesthetic properties, Chan’s sculptures have an expressive character, which is powerful and tense, yet at the same time delicate and serene. This reinforces the notion of dualism and the principle of the contrary forces yin and yang, which is fundamental to Chinese philosophy.

The central motif of the sculptures is the colossal head, whose facial features are calm, with a peaceful aura and an enigmatic expression that seems to reference Buddhist imagery. It evokes both past and future, as it can represent either an ancient archetype or an extraterrestrial. The sculptures are quite complex and feature smaller versions of the head (for example in TITANS II and III), occasionally ‘framed’ within a square configuration of iron girders (TITANS V). This creates what is often referred to in art as the ‘Droste’ effect, which involves placing a copy of an image within itself, thereby suggesting an endlessly recurring sequence. The term originated from a vintage advertising image used by Droste, a popular Dutch chocolate brand, which depicted a nurse presenting a box of cocoa powder with a label showing the same image. Chan uses this device, with the recursive smaller version of his sculpture becoming an even smaller version, evoking the notion of infinity and its relationship with space and time.

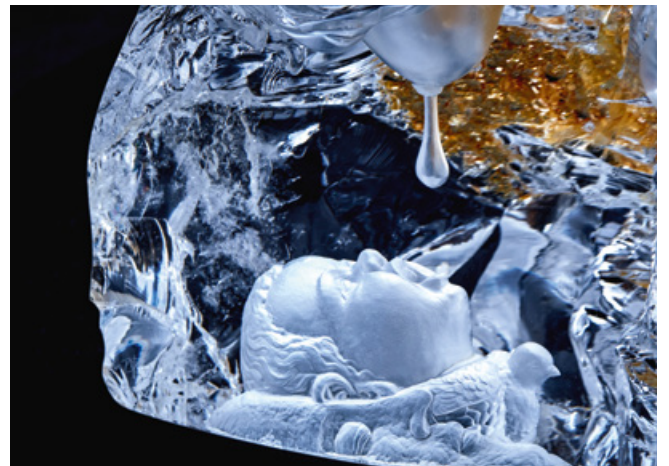
The dramatic use of the Droste effect can be seen in the graphic works of Dutch artist M.C. Escher, who often combined it with a distorted perspective. Chan has a similar penchant for using distortion, as well as deconstruction and fragmentation, which has precedents in art history in both Baroque and Postmodern sculpture. One of the most extraordinary works in the series is a hanging sculpture (TITANS XIII), where the head motif is totally contorted into an elongated, twisted spiral form as if finally melting into a globule of molten titanium on the floor. This form suggests a flowing liquid state, which highlights its materiality, while at the same time expressing its transience or ephemerality. This creates



DETAIL TITANS I

a play on weight and weightlessness, which evokes a floating and haunting quality, and the strange, compressed perspective causes its appearance to shift as the observer walks around the sculpture. There is tension between the sensuality of its form and the distancing effect of the material. The sculptures convey a sense of concentration, inviting the viewer's gaze to penetrate their peaceful, idealised Buddha-like faces with exaggerated ears, features that have their origins in the gemstone carvings of goddesses he made in his formative years.

Chan was born in Fuzhou, southeastern China, in 1956, and moved to Hong Kong at the age of five. Having a humble upbringing, he had to start working when he was just 13 years old. He developed an early interest in sculpture and became an apprentice gemstone carver in 1973 at the age of 16 and set up his own workshop in 1974. He carved and sold figures based on Buddhism and Chinese folklore, using mainly opaque gemstones. He moved on to carving transparent stones like crystal and became skilled at combining cameo, intaglio and internal carving in a single work. He was inspired by themes from Greek mythology, as well as Western fairy tales and folklore, so common subjects in his crystal carvings included Greek goddesses, European castles and romantic imagery. In the 1990s, his works came to the attention of an important Taiwanese collector, who became Chan's patron, mentor and close friend. A devout Buddhist, he urged Chan to study Buddhist philosophy, which Chan soon incorporated into his works, at first figuratively and later with more abstract expression.



Crystal carving - Manning

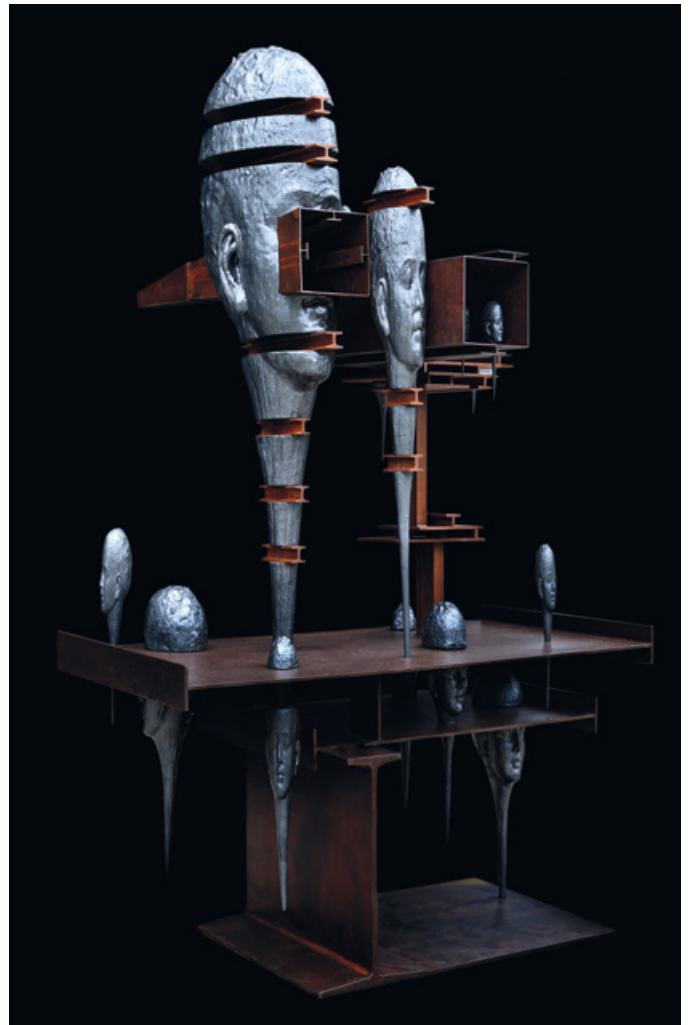


DETAIL TITANS III

Chan received a major commission from his patron to create an extraordinary sculpture for a monastery in Taiwan to house a holy Buddhist relic. Soon after completing the project, his patron and mentor sadly passed away. Chan was distraught and grew fixated on the mystery of life and death. Having become immersed in Buddhist ideology, he became a monk and embarked on a journey with a Zen master, visiting the sick and the dying. In pursuit of a pure state of existence, he meditated, fasted and forfeited all his worldly goods. During that period, he felt truly connected with nature and the universe, which would have a profound influence on his subsequent artistic practice. In the early 2000s, after six months of devoted monkhood, he returned to art making. Lacking resources, he used cheap or discarded materials, such as concrete, copper and stainless steel. In the 2000s, most of his sculptural works were created with mixed media, on themes related to questions about life, growth, death and the struggle of humanity.

A constant experimenter and innovator, Chan is on a quest to improve the quality and durability of his materials and to discover new work processes that seem scientific but are also somewhat alchemical. This includes unique gemstone-carving techniques, developing super-strength porcelain, and using sound waves to melt gold. After eight years of research and experimentation, he started using titanium, first for jewellery and then for large-scale sculptures.

Although titanium was discovered in the 18th century, it was isolated as a pure metal only in the early 20th century and was not commercially produced until the 1950s. As it is the strongest, most durable and lightweight metal, titanium is used mainly in the aerospace industry and was chosen by Frank Gehry for the outer skin of his innovative Guggenheim Museum building in Bilbao. However, because of its cost and complex production process, artists have tended to use it only for small-scale works. Therefore, Chan's new series of titanium sculptures



TITANS V

on this monumental scale are radical and unprecedented. The physical process of working the titanium for him is an integral part of the art of sculpture and his personal expression in response to the metal's inherent qualities: its plasticity, hardness and texture. Design and craftsmanship are intimately fused in the shaping of the material, a process involving every sculpting technique: modelling, casting, carving, welding and assembly.

Another of Chan's innovations that is central to both his jewellery making and his sculpture is the 'Wallace Cut', an illusionary three-dimensional carving process that he applies to gemstones, which he developed in 1987. This involves using the reflections from their facets to achieve a remarkable visual dynamic and was inspired by the multiple-exposure technique used by photographers. An illusion of five carved faces appear inside a single gemstone, but only the central one is carved; the faces on each side are merely reflections.

One of his large freestanding sculptures (TITANS I) refers specifically to the 'Wallace Cut', with its extensively carved and modelled surfaces, viewable from multiple angles. Chan's use of multiple viewpoints was also a device used by Modernist artists like Picasso. At the conceptual level, the presentation of different perspectives allows the viewer to see the same sculpture from different angles and thus subverts the rationality of a single narrative or truth. There is no principal view since the forms move around the central axis of its composition, inviting multiple readings of the spatial design.



The Wallace Cut



TITANS X

Creating this new body of work has given Chan winged freedom for his thoughts and memories, concentrating their essence into sculptural form. His sculptures go beyond their outward figuration and relate to the profound themes of space and materiality, transience and permanence. They possess fundamental sculptural considerations, like proportion, scale and balance, and are concerned with the dialogue between rhythm and form and the space it occupies. By exploiting these inherent formal qualities, he is able to create sculptures in which the subject matter and expressiveness of form are mutually reinforcing.

Chan is sensitive to the character of the metals he works with and believes that the inanimate materials possess some innate metaphysical energy or life force. It is as if the silvery titanium expresses Chan's state of consciousness, capturing dreamlike moments that allude to his formative background in carving the heads of deities on gemstones in miniscule detail. His skills at creating both miniature and monumental sculptures seem to give him unique insight into the connection between the Microcosm and Macrocosm that characterises his practice. With his background in Buddhist philosophy, the work is linked to a contemplation and curiosity about life, nature and the mysteries of the universe. In this context the sculptures can be seen to epitomise the Titans who according to Greek mythology were the children of the primordial deities of heaven and earth.

Chan's largest sculpture in the present exhibition (TITANS XIV) is a 5-metre-high monolithic work situated by the fountain in Cabot Square, in the foreground of Canary Wharf's iconic building. The verticality of the sculpture's elongated, multi-tiered silver face creates a fitting dialogue with the 50-storey steel-clad skyscraper that rises behind it on the London skyline.

Words by TITANS curator, James Putnam.



TITANS XIV

## List of works featured in exhibition

Dimensions in millimeters, height x width x depth

**TITANS I**  
2020  
Iron, titanium  
1840 x 1150 x 2800

**TITANS II**  
2020  
Iron, titanium  
800 x 1520 x 2800

**TITANS III**  
2020  
Iron, titanium  
1000 x 1822 x 2800

**TITANS IV**  
2020  
Iron, titanium  
400 x 400 x 2210

**TITANS V**  
2020  
Iron, titanium  
1640 x 1475 x 2800

**TITANS X**  
2020  
Iron, titanium  
350 x 350 x 2200

**TITANS XIII**  
2020  
Iron, titanium  
810 x 810 x 3380

**TITANS XIV**  
2021  
Iron, titanium  
1460 x 2100 x 5445

**TITANS XV**  
2021  
Iron, titanium  
760 x 680 x 2380

**TITANS XVI**  
2021  
Iron, titanium  
500 x 440 x 2230

Soundscape  
collaboration  
by Alistair Smith

Making of TITANS II – Wallace Chan



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