

NEXT UP... CHERIN TAN

This award-winning
interior designer
just wants to restore
the human balance
in brands.

Viscose dress and
leather boots, both
by **Balenciaga**.



You may have seen Cherin Tan's work with Violet Oon Singapore. That among other projects across commercial, hospitality and retail in her roles as the principal and creative director of self-founded interior design firm Laank, and recently the Interior Designer of the Year awarded by the Interior Design Confederation Singapore. Spanning both local and regional brands, Tan paces on towards a decade with her studio and doubles that duration in her design journey. Still, it goes beyond spatial considerations to creating purposeful environments. Here, in an e-mail conversation, she tells us what it means to design an experience.

ESQUIRE: You've mentioned that you see design as a problem-solving approach, is that what drew you to design? Do you also somewhat see or use it in other areas beyond interior design?

CHERIN TAN: It wasn't what got me started, but it is definitely what keeps me going. I love that side of my job; the feeling of never being done, learning to design better, the endless pursuit in wanting to do better, the creative buzz you get when the challenges lead you to something bigger. My passion for creative solving extends to my daily life, even cooking! I love cooking off a leftover pantry; I'm always trying to figure out how to put together a meal with all sorts of different random ingredients.

ESQ: How do you feel Laank stands out as a design firm? Or what are some values you incorporate to set it apart?

TAN: As entrepreneurs, we're often driven to secure higher-value projects to survive. At Laank, we believe that it should be more—all that we do has to have intrinsic value to our clients, ourselves and the community. At its core, Laank's philosophy is based on my beliefs and the passions of the team: that design should be for the people, and good design carries value beyond aesthetics. I feel strongly that interiors are ultimately where we experience and make memories. Beyond just the look and feel, we need to make that experience memorable. We're driven to create spaces, not through the lens of a camera or phone but how we actually move, feel and live as people. It's about the details in the space and how your senses react to them in a variety of situations.

Laank essentially pieces all of this together, for most of our trying efforts at least. The life of the space and how it lives with people in it, along with the balance of pragmatism which is something we don't run from. It's known that functionality ends up driving the wagon with most clients, but our work is driven by the exploration of an alternative path. I would yearn to see a design of such relevance to be driven by the intended life of the brand and followed by everyday functionality. Much like another necessity, food—one of my personal

passions—the beauty is in weaving these two sometimes disparate needs together to create new landings and experiences.

ESQ: As you never initially intended to have your own company, what is one lesser-known challenge that you face running it?

TAN: I knew it was going to be hard work but what I wasn't prepared for is how complex it could be managing people. Running a firm that's yours also means working even more closely with people; people with all sorts of personalities from all walks of life. I dare say this is probably one of the most common challenges everyone deals with. Whoever said human beings are complex creatures surely wasn't joking! Be it a younger generation, a difficult client, an uncooperative vendor or not, people are or seem to be difficult because they are layered!

Behind each of their actions and behaviours, there are many reasons and justifications that maybe aren't revealed openly. With Laank I've had the opportunity and the first-hand experience of discovering, learning, understanding and then still adapting to the different types of people I meet. Based on my experience, most of the time the person will appreciate just knowing you have taken the time to understand and sincerely care. Listen keenly to what they are trying to say, look beyond their actions so that you see their intentions better; this way you never have to take anything bad personally.

ESQ: Tell us more about your brand of upcycled furniture. Was there a specific incident that led to this focus on sustainability?

TAN: There's a high wastage of materials in my industry. I believe that our society is in the midst of "extreme consumption"; we have an excess of items made to support a very sedentary lifestyle. The ways in which people produce and discard materials and unsellable items nowadays illustrate a gross neglect of the world we live in. I feel strongly that if we can't eliminate that wastage, the least we could do is to make something useful with that wastage. In response, I started Laank with Alvin Tan from Phunk. With "purpose to repurpose" as our maxim drive to our designs, we give material wastage renewed life by repurposing them into one-of-a-kind artworks of furniture pieces and lifestyle items. We create pieces of artistic furniture that would prompt you to sit up and pay attention. We hope that more people will view second-hand items equally, if not more prized; not everything has to be brand new. Everything is down to a matter of perspective.

ESQ: What would be a dream project for you?

TAN: I would love to be able to work on a project spatially that's different from all the work we've done so far. Perhaps a religious space or a theatre play set-up. What I always yearn for is an opportunity to see how far we can push our interior designing capabilities to encompass more than just brand owners. ■

For more information on Cherin Tan's work, visit laank.com.sg.

Polyamide and
elastane jumper, by
Bottega Veneta.

