Artist Sammy Chong was working as an illustrator at an international advertising firm in his native Ecuador when a near-fatal car accident changed the trajectory of his life. This close brush with death left him with so many questions about life, good and evil, what it means to be human, and more. He decided to find his answers by quitting his job and enrolling in a philosophy and theology program in Colombia.

But after getting his master’s degree and teaching college courses for a few years, there was still a piece missing. He had all these tools to explore philosophical and theological issues, but he didn’t have a way to make his insights accessible to a wider community. He dabbled in art since he was a child growing up in Ecuador. Even though his family had persuaded him to enter the more stable and lucrative field of advertising, he’d never stopped drawing and painting.

“Art was always present in my family but I never thought I would be interested in developing a career as a visual artist,” he said. But he realized that now he could use art to start a conversation about these transcendent issues that meant so much to him.

“I decided to come back to my original passion,” he said. Chong enrolled in the master of fine arts program at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and started developing his body of work. A self-taught painter, Chong said the program gave him the tools to defend his work, handle criticism and build his career.

In his Mixed Media on Plexiglass series, he explores the social, physical and spiritual phenomena of disengagement in public spaces.

“I attempt to bring forward an awareness of the meditative nature of being both immersed in and removed from the activity around us,” he said.

HIS WORK
Chong says his studio practice “builds on the concept of individual identity in contemporary urban life.” The subways, trains, malls and grocery stores of Boston have been his inspiration.

“I noticed the aloofness, coldness in human interaction there, and I wondered why this was going on,” he said. His work touches on the idea of disengagement, the feeling of being lost in the midst of a crowd.

TEACHING
Three years after graduating from the MFA program, he’s finishing up a visiting professorship in the studio art department at Boston College, creating work for group and solo shows, and researching teaching positions at colleges across the country.

He likes that teaching affords him some stability while he’s establishing himself as an artist. This way, he said, he has more creative freedom because he’s not focused on selling art to pay his bills. Some of his fellow graduates haven’t been so lucky.

“The fact that I have a teaching position is a blessing,” he said. “I have a friend from art school who is working as a security guard at night.” He admits he doesn’t want to teach the rest of his life. His dream is to build up his art career enough so that he can spend most of his time in his studio.

KEEP GROWING
Chong is continuing to get work seen by entering competitions and group shows and attending open studios. He’s exhibited in mostly non-profit galleries, and his goal is to get into commercial gallery spaces. He hopes to land another teaching position in Boston but is open to relocating across the country to teach.

At the end of the day, he hopes that his work will have an impact on those who see it, triggering bigger questions.

“It might sound cliché but who doesn’t want a better world? Art can help in that regard.”

Visit SammyChong.com to learn more about Chong and his artwork.  

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