



## 4A Talks //

### *Off The Page: Design, illustration and authorship in contemporary comics*

Panel discussion with Jin Hien Lau, Meg O'Shea and W. Chew Chan, moderated by curator Con Gerakaris.

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## TRANSCRIPT



**CON GERAKARIS** I think we'll just start formally. So thanks everyone for joining in and coming to this panel. My name is Con Gerakaris, I'm the curatorial program manager at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. And to begin, I'd like to acknowledge the Bidjigal people from where I'm currently working today.

Today we've got Jin Hien Lau, who is exhibiting in our current exhibition, *Acute Actions: Responses to I Am Not A Virus*. And we're joined by W. Chew Chan, also known as Chewie and Meg O'Shea, an independent comics artist from Australia. To start I guess we can let Jin have a read-through and explain his—

**JIN HIEN LAU** Oh, naaah!

**CON GERAKARIS** Cos I guess that was the purpose of today, right? Ah I don't know

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**JIN HIEN LAU** Empty carriage, no sticker. Now, that's great. Actually. Well, yeah, I think I'm going to explain it while I'm reading it. I feel more comfortable that way. So let's go. Yeah. 2009, big Indian student bashings. But that actually is the first incident for me. I've lived in Australia for 20 years, and when that happened, that was big. Um, I think I was away when Cronulla happened, I was back in Malaysia when Cronulla happened, but in 2009 there were a lot of bashings of Indian students in Melbourne and Sydney. That's when it really hit me that this combination of like pure apathy towards just racist actions in public in Australia. And that's pretty much what spurred me to make this comic like thinking back to it. And another incident is 2013 when the ABC presenter Jeremy Hernandez, also another Malaysian. Chewie, there you go.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Oh, there you go. We're everywhere.

**JIN HIEN LAU** We're everywhere cos we're the closest to Australia. He got called a black "bad word" on a Sydney bus, and he's such a public figure. He's on the news every night. And this incident, he actually was with his kid. His kid was like six or something. And someone just turned around and told him... I'm not—I don't know the specifics now. I think it's a bigger incident. But someone just called him — a public figure, a newsreader on Australian TV — a black c\*\*\*, basically. Uh, content warning.

**CHEWIE CHAN** [Laughs]

**JIN HIEN LAU** Another incident that really stayed in my mind is the Karen Bailey incident. This was the closest one. This is the one where a woman on her way back to Penrith or something, I forgot where she was heading, but it was the T1 Western line and she just started yelling at an Asian woman and she started doing like the chinky-eye thing. This incident takes it to the next level because this is where smartphones were readily available. And it was footage captured by people on the train. It became a whole big national news story. And she, yeah, it's just interesting how she was different. She was highly defiant, that's what really shook me, is that she knew what she was doing and when people confronted her about it she was actually highly defiant about all of her actions. And that really makes me question, what makes the person this way? Is this some sort of encouragement? Is this some sort of zeitgeist that they feel that they can do this kind of stuff in public? But, yeah, I pretty much just explained the whole comic on the first page. [Laughs]

**CON GERAKARIS** [Laughs] Oh we've just flown through it then. Shall we?

**JIN HIEN LAU** Yeah, we're just going to fly through it. Yeah. It's also another thing that I really thought about is that it's always on public transportation that these kinds of things get, you know, get exposure almost to a point where you think that the news media kind of sees it as a form of entertainment, like some sort of spectacle.

And yeah, and with that, I think about the relationship with media, especially so-called news media and how their role in, you know, kind of like directing the zeitgeist in how... the kind of etiquette we deal with racism and displays of racism. And you know, even though we have MasterChef now and strangely, MasterChef, I do think this might just be my opinion that MasterChef has probably done the most in bringing non-Caucasian faces to Australian media, because otherwise it's just like SBS and people who don't watch SBS, they look at SBS as the one place they don't want to look at. I think MasterChef kind of bridges that a bit. But then again, it's all just like, hey, they cook. They cook.

**CON GERA KARIS** That's alright. Thank you for sharing your thoughts on Masterchef. Yeah, well, just launching from this comic, it's obviously sort of autobiographical in nature, especially with these panels here. How do you kind of translate these personal stories into a visual medium like this? And what is the thought about writing and how do you approach that kind of thing?

**JIN HIEN LAU** I think my process is to take a note on my phone. I went back in the olden days I have a small notebook that I take everywhere or I write immediate ideas down and it's just like there's a certain level of narcissism in always drawing yourself. If you go to my Instagram, nothing but me in all situations. So for me, I think Meg can come into this question as well now.

**MEG O'SHEA** Ah, sure. You know, maybe it's just me trying to self-soothe here but I don't—I'm not sure that you should necessarily call autobio comics narcissism, but personally, I feel like I can't really speak for anyone else.

**JIN HIEN LAU** Oh yeah, that's true.

**MEG O'SHEA** You know, the only thing I really kind of feel like I have a right or any sort of authority to communicate is my own experience and things to do with that. So, you're not a narcissist, Jin.

**JIN HIEN LAU** I'm a solipsist.

**MEG O'SHEA** [Laughs] Maybe! Imagine racism out of existence then if that's the case.

**CHEWIE CHAN** We can help build it out of existence by doing comics like this, like having voices. I think what you say is true, like most of us think we can't speak for anybody else. But I think that putting out an opinion that's not autobiographical doesn't mean you're speaking for anybody else. You know, you can make characters that are like you or not. Right. It's really the message that your comics are going to carry.

**MEG O'SHEA** Yeah.

**CHEWIE CHAN** I think one of the defaults about comic art is, I think there's a lot more autobiographical works in comics than in any other medium, mainly because we still suffer from, you know, self-esteem issues as a mystery writer, right. [Laughs] We're still trying to be like everyone else. And, you know, I don't share that view. But

obviously it's harder. I think from there we think we [can't have as much.] I think that's why we put ourselves in there just to say that, you know, "I thought this... that's all I can say", right? I think we should totally do all kinds of comics. It's easy, it's an easy vehicle. It's got such a low barrier to entry for anybody to come in. You know, speaking to what Jin said before about the news media, you know, news is not the news that I grew up with already. Maybe the same, but I just didn't know back then. [Laughs] But I don't know if they necessarily carry the self-proclaimed obligation to tell the truth anymore. Right. They just say what they say. They're not obligated to tell the truth. So I think that where comics come into play is that we can just tell truths, our truths. That's how autobiographical comics come out, our truths. But also tell truths as we see it. I think that's why they're great comics like this one.

**JIN HIEN LAU** That's true, but also because of the low barriers of entry, Stormfront has a lot of comics too—

**MEG O'SHEA** [Laughs] Which is an even greater tribute to comics as a means of clear communication.

**CHEWIE CHAN** You know, it's—

**JIN HIEN LAU** I hear they pay more in terms of political comics. I hear on the right side pays a bit more.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Well, the right side has more money, right? In theory, if we're going to subscribe to right and left, left side has more people, right? So in theory, if it goes by those lines, the right side might be better paid but the left side should have the more popular webcomics. [Laughs]

**JIN HIEN LAU** Left side can rely on Patreon.

**CHEWIE CHAN** [Laughs]

**CHEWIE CHAN** But it's true. I think that's a really good point to bring up about how to make comics, like there is an audience, I think, for everybody, you know, whether - I'd hesitate to say there's Nazi fans out there - but, you know, all kinds of fans out there. And everyone's entitled to their opinion, obviously. And so, you can draw anything you want, you know, say anything you want. And if there is traction, then, you get to do what you do. And I think that's where comics come in. Like we're able to say a lot of things. The low barrier to entry for us (drawing) is actually reflected on the other side. It's a low barrier of accessibility as well. You know, visual literacy has improved so much in the last 20 years that people readily want to read cartoons and political cartoons and webcomics, so you can actually get your point across a lot better than we used to 20 years ago.

**CON GERAKARIS** So then is there a sort of appeal in making a character study or making a character that reflects kind of you as a person? Or is it, I don't know, is it sort of easier to just draw yourself? Rather than create something to represent you and sort of what you stand for, if the idea is that comics are so sort of universal now.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Interesting. Jin?

**JIN HIEN LAU** Oh, yeah. I think one interesting thing, if you talk about the universality of visual storytelling is you have to remember, memes essentially are comics. Like meme pictures. It's just that—

**CHEWIE CHAN** They're words and pictures, right, together?

**JIN HIEN LAU** Yeah, but if you think about it, if you break it down, memes kind of kill comics because like 15 years ago, maybe 20 years ago, there was still a culture of people who liked stuff like Cyanides and— what's it called again? Like Cyanides and...

**CHEWIE CHAN** Cyanide and Happiness.

**JIN HIEN LAU** Cyanide and Happiness, you know, they sort of have a place in pop culture, but that kind of content has been replaced by memes because that kind of immediate humour is actually easily produced with meme apps and stuff. And I think that comics are moving into a more niche target audience. Visual communication is highly universal but the practice of ink-to-paper comic itself is actually becoming more niche. It's more like people have to seek out comics to find comics. But stuff like memes and Tik Tok has replaced that kind of low entry visual narrative with visual communication. Yeah, so. I think I'm just giving a rather cynical view. [Laughs]

**CHEWIE CHAN** [Laughs] No, I don't I don't think, exactly, I agree. Like one of the reasons memes, as you say, first of all, they're all comics. Right. Even though they're using photos, it's basically pictures and words used, juxtaposed together to get a message across. Even though they're single images, although these days the kind of ones with Star Wars, uh, Anakin Skywalker and what's her name—

**MEG O'SHEA** Padme.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Padme — having a four-panel thing, that's a comic. That's a meme using photographs. But that's a comic because it's four panels and it actually has a narrative to it. The reason it is taken over from comics is probably like you say, it's faster to pick a photograph for someone who doesn't draw. For someone like you, you might be able to whip up a cartoon based on the incident in the day pretty quick.

**JIN HIEN LAU** Right.

**CHEWIE CHAN** But not everybody draws, but some people can find those photographs. So I think that what you say is correct. Like, I think less people seek out comics. But that doesn't mean the visual literacy is not good, as a matter of fact, I believe it's streaks ahead of what it used to be. Having said that, I think that's why comics have been elevated. If you draw, people understand it's talent because they know they can't draw when they want to send out a meme. They just have to go collect an image from someone else. Right. And some people use other drawings, not just photographs. Right. But I think there's an understanding of people who are using social media that art does take time, effort. And I think that's why I think webtoons and comic platforms have come about because, like you say, people want to seek out well-made comics. And I think it all helps.

**CON GERAKARIS** Well, I wanted to also reflect on the idea of memes as a comic. Do you think that like— well, I don't know, you were talking about how physically drawing a comic, Chewie, elevates the art form. When you're sort of designing something, where do you draw from? Because memes obviously coming from, like, everyone just replicates like a format that's out there. I wanted to know about the instigation of a blank piece of paper, where do you go from there?

**CHEWIE CHAN** I know, as the turn of phrase: tyranny of the blank page. It is quite terrifying to have a blank page. I get my inspiration from real life, so like Jin, I take a sketchbook everywhere I go, constantly draw, constantly try and well, we say improve. That goes through what's like a work process. I just like to learn to draw things I have drawn before, you know, so that I see things that I haven't drawn before. I just try drawing.

I think for me, in my experience, I've found that there are two types of artists — people who know exactly what they want to draw, which— they can see an image in their minds. They draw fairly slowly, but they're basically tracing the image in their mind because they see so clearly. I, unfortunately, am not like that. I, I can never see any image in my head. So I'm basically sketching as I go. I use my storyboard process, my experience. Basically, I tell myself, what is it I want to say in my drawing? And then work it out kind of mathematically and then go through composition and put things down. And how I do that is I use my knowledge of my real life. If I need something, I pick from my knowledge of real life. That's why I do a lot of practice. Yeah. It is a bit difficult for me to draw them real quick. But, you know, on the flipside, I am always as excited as anyone else to see what comes off the page. [Laughs] Yeah. Yeah. But it is an enjoyable process though, right. You know, drawing and bringing out what comes on the page.

**CON GERAKARIS** Right. And Meg, are you similar, or no?

**MEG O'SHEA** I think I tend to approach things a little more verbally. Like, I do get a lot of my ideas just out and about. I make a lot of autobiographical stuff. So it's obviously based on my own experiences. And I think I tend to process those things verbally. But at the point at which it turns into a comic is when I usually reach sort of like a, like an impasse or like something I can't kind of articulate verbally. And then I have to incorporate drawing and then often go back and find that like, you know, language falls down in other parts as well. And images are better for that. [Laughs]

**CHEWIE CHAN** That's good, go back to the appreciation of a picture — a picture is worth a thousand words. [Laughs] But there is some truth in that, right, that images can convey feelings rather than very specific words. I think sometimes you want a generalised feeling better than an articulated thought.

**MEG O'SHEA** Yeah.

**CON GERAKARIS** So sometimes when you're working, does your brain outpace your pencil? And like, how do you navigate that?

**MEG O'SHEA** Yeah, definitely. I guess just with — I don't know if I really navigate it

that well — I just get incredibly frustrated and be like, 'oh f\*\*\* it, I've had enough of doing this part, I have to move on'. Because I think, I don't know, just with my practice, in particular, I use it a lot for processing things I can't articulate any other way. So sometimes there's like, quite an urgency of like, getting stuff - getting yourself into some sort of physical form like an image or writing on paper.

**CON GERA KARIS** When do you know, I guess this is quite a nebulous question, but when would you know to sort of break the rules on paper? Like when do you know to literally sometimes colour outside the lines and things like that?

**MEG O'SHEA** I don't know, I guess like, I guess this is sort of a very nebulous answer. When it feels like you— [laughs]

**CON GERA KARIS** Sure, sure.

**CHEWIE CHAN** When it calls for it, right? I mean, that's I mean, I think that's a perfect answer because you know, like because you never know when you need to do it, right? I mean, I got to make a distinction like with the guys. I mean, these guys are way more talented than I am. They write and draw. I mainly draw people out of people's stories.

**CON GERA KARIS** That's why I've literally got a note down, "drawing other people's stories", for you but I do want to ask you about that. That'll come a bit later because I also want to talk about pacing, but I'll pace myself. [Laughs]

**CHEWIE CHAN** For me it's easy to decide how to do things because I can only have a brief to work towards because I have a script so I know what to target. So generally when I draw commercially speaking and for other people, I tend to come to it quite scientifically, quite mathematically. You know, I have to, you know, provide the brief. Yeah. So usually they ask for something, then it makes it quite clear to me they demand a certain amount of composition, a certain amount of drawing, you know, and if I fall back on that brief, generally speaking, I have a very successful drawing.

**CON GERA KARIS** So what's your kind of average brief like? Do you sort of just get the script and it needs to be this many pages? Go for it?

**CHEWIE CHAN** At different times. I think, from what I've learnt from intense sessions of storyboarding with movies and different comic scripts, that it doesn't really matter what form the script comes to me. It's just I have to be sure that I know what the writer wants to achieve. So whatever form the script comes in, I'll make my notes go back to the author, the writer, the director and say, is this what you meant? And if it's yes, no. Once I get all those answers, especially the why of any image like why is this image here, then generally speaking I can work the rest out. Like I said, for me, it's very scientific.

**CON GERA KARIS** Jin, did you have any experience like that when you were making this comic that we've seen earlier today, or was that just all getting it out?





**JIN HIEN LAU** I'm kind of a mix of every method. Like sometimes I think a lot about how the whole page will look and I plan out how the whole page will look first. Everything happens at once. I have the words and then I get really flustered and I start sketching stuff. Yeah, I plan out how the whole page will look. That's how I will approach stuff these days. And I think this is a luxury different from, say, storyboarding. Storyboarding is constrained by time because storyboarding and especially telling action comics, there is an element of time where, like, this guy throws a punch, the punch lands on someone, that someone falls down. Like



Chewie's line of storytelling involves that element. Whereas I think me and Meg, we can claim, we're not ever thinking about how things occur linearly, but we can just be like this panel was in Spain. This panel was in Malaysia. But at first, you'll bridge it with literacy, bridge it with words. It's more free but at the same time, it's also not more free because then we can only tell monologue stories. That's what I would like to say. You're basically reading someone's monologue or essay with the images as supplements, but with Chewie's line of visual storytelling it can actually transcend all this and become something very amazing and epic. Like Akira is a major example of how basically it's just perfect visual storytelling. Every panel translates perfectly into an action scene and even their conversational scenes are paced in a linear way as well. Whereas if you're reading something like my influence, they will be like Daniel Clowes. Daniel Clowes is a comic artist where he mostly just rattles on about his thoughts and he uses images to puncture his thoughts and that's how I approach it. So basically, what I'm saying is everything kind of occurs at the same time, but it goes back to Meg's method. The words do come first for me as well, nowadays. I used to do more like actiony stuff, but I'm very embarrassed of them and I hide them away from everyone.

**MEG O'SHEA** Oh now I want to see them! Why'd you say that in a public forum?

[All laugh]

I think that is one of the things that really made me fall in love with comics, that ability to be able to simultaneously show all these different points in time and space on the one page and have them be part of this like, one coherent concept and narrative. Like, very reflective of the way I think people think about stuff which is cool - you can see into your head Jin.

**CHEWIE CHAN** That's true, you talk about time. I mean, there's a difference between writing storyboards and comics. I mean, each is a separate medium. They have their pros and their cons. I think the stuff I love about comics is that, as you say, even though physically the picture doesn't move, there is a time element in comics which we can use with a break of panel, a gutter, or just even within an image we can draw things, we could intimate a movement of time. Right. I think the thing about comics, as Meg was saying, because we read it at the reader's pace, the reader can read it at however fast, however slow they might want to read it, they are more intimate with your work. You can put a lot more into one image, when I do a storyboard, it will always be one focal point. It's very difficult to have two focal points in a storyboard for moving a story like a movie, because you don't want people to see two things at once, or force people to have to see two things at once if you want to get them, you know, one twenty fifth of a second to do it. So it's a different kind of storytelling, I think with comics is amazing. You spend a lot more time getting to absorb all the work in the panel, because in movies you can dress the set a lot, but most people see the actor. You don't see the set, the set's important because you need to set the mood, but you don't really pay attention that much, right. And it's not meant to be. But what I'm saying with comics, you get to put a lot of details in those backgrounds that people might pick up and can be part of the story. That's why I love comics. That's why people might say comics are short doesn't mean the stories are shorter, you can get a lot out of comics.

**MEG O'SHEA** Yeah, I love that sense of agency as a comics reader. You can just sit on one page for ages and just be there for ages.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Absolutely! I mean the best comics are like that right. The best comics know that the agency is with the reader and you make them go through it. So even with the punching thing that Jin was mentioning, when I was younger, you read those comics, we all kind of remember the same comic slightly differently, because there's only two panels and all our own images, we didn't know what gutter that we put into it. Some of us put more pictures in between and then others. So we remember the battles slightly differently. But I think the point is that when you produce the correct two images, people see all the moving images in between, and to them the more agency you give them, the more they buy into the agency, the more intimate they are with the story. So when they read it, it's like food always tastes better when you cook it yourself. They finish and go, wow, you know, it feels like an experience, right? People who don't get that, I think they read comics superficially. People who keep asking, you know, do I read the pictures or the other words first, I say you should just be left to right. And the words are actually technically the pictures, too. They're not actually words. And when they buy into that, then they find, you know, I'm following it, it's the intimacy with the story. So they enjoy it more.

**CON GERAKARIS** In terms of engagement and flow and pacing, I just have a note here that just says 'drama'. How do you kind of build drama when you can't control the pace? Because, I mean, in moving and visual media, like TV movies and even video games, there are so many manipulative techniques that exist in the language of those media that are used to manipulate you as a viewer. Is there a similar shared sort of visual vocabulary in comics of how you can get someone to slow down or speed up when they're reading? Because I feel like sometimes, I've been reading something and I've just been flicking through it too fast. I'm like, I didn't even like, look at anything I just read. I have to find my focus by going back a few pages, and be like "nah man I bought this book, I'm going to take my time".

**CHEWIE CHAN** I think sometimes I read, and I have exactly that feeling. You think "ah I'm burning through this", "I'm wasting my money". I think if the story is that good and you're trying to find the next thing, then that's how cool it is. Again, that's what I love about comics, is that you're clearly into the story so you're trying to get to it. I think that's a greater debate between plot and story, but you use the same drama. There can be a story that has no plot. You know, two people sitting in a cafe, for the entire comic. But it could be a lot of drama based on what they say. I think like sometimes when you read too fast, it could just be you just getting into the plot. And then when you want to slow down it's because you say, "oh, maybe I am missing something". But I think that for me personally, like the visual language is identical, it's the same. It's literally the same because it's called the visual language, within the frame that is, image within a frame. People interpret that exactly the same way whether you are watching a movie or reading a comic, looking at an advertising poster, or looking at a zoom screen. The idea is that they'll pick up, they're reading the same way. Like in film, you have the movement to help direct the person's focus, you have music, dialogue, you have voices. Comics rely a lot just on the visual element, but it's the same thing you can try and control the reader's eye when they move along on the page.

While you can't stop them from doing exactly what they want to do and have them do what you want them to do, they have many, many, many techniques to make people stop and consider some things. You can have a big splash page with a lot of words. You can stop a scene with a huge close up. Even if it's a smaller panel. Close up makes people want to look into people's minds. So there are techniques. I feel like they're identical across the visual medium, which is why I can do all sorts of things outside in a commercial area as well that doesn't have to do with comics, but it's about leading people's focus. Yeah.

**CON GERAARIS** Jin, Meg, any thoughts or anything to comment on that?

**MEG O'SHEA** Um, yeah, like I'm largely in agreement. I think, one place where comics might differ as opposed to something like film might be well, in the case of printed ones, at least the page turn or the opportunity for a blank page. There's the physical reveal that a page turn can bring is something that you can use a lot for pacing. And just literal big blank areas, around an image or after an image, they're something I use a lot.

**CHEWIE CHAN** I think a page turn is one of the most powerful assets to comic text, because that's where people stop and you can absorb eight panels across two pages, whatever, peripherally. But at the same time, until you turn, you're stuck on that side. So the page turn is definitely one of the most powerful things comics have. Which is quite interesting because think about comics and you do the scroll, there's no such thing as a page turn. But obviously when it's not on the screen, it's still a nice surprise. Yeah, so that one can theoretically have a similar effect to the page turn at every level.

**JIN HIEN LAU** I think with monologue comments the writing can lead the pacing as well. Like, if you're writing a mystery, it's like, you're going to save the reveal of the killer to the last page. So the writing kind of leads as well. That's what it's like for me, I don't know about Chewie, but I think it's the same with Meg as well. I think most, we do let our writing lead the storytelling and the image supplements it. I think for me to go away from that, it will be on something very different, it just becomes a whole other medium for me if I have to let the drawings lead the writing. So that's actually something I would like to try in the future.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Yeah, I mean, I would say like when I teach, I generally make a point to say that at the end of the day, if we're doing comics or film or storyboarding or commercial stuff, we are doing a commercial product. And so at the end of the day, it is about the story. The story leads the art, definitely. The other way where art leads any kind of message is fine arts. You know, there's a whole other level of art right there. Where a lot of artists discover the message on the canvas, you know, you start with a red dot, put some paint on it whatever, you can do that's fine arts, right? I think that's a totally different thing. And I think that's an extremely valid medium as well. But I think where we're at in terms of comics and stuff, I think definitely it's solely driven in the sense that its message driven. We all have a point to put across, and that's what we're using comics to do. I guess I think that's the difference between that level.



**JIN HIEN LAU** Also, in regard to all the technicality questions, just read this book. It does help, it goes through all kinds of comics, it goes through the kind of stuff that me and Meg do, the kind of stuff that Chewie's does. Yeah, I recommend if you're actually really interested in studying how comics are made, this is a really good book, 'Making Comics' by Scott McCloud. It gets a bit repetitive, though, if you kind of know a lot of stuff about visual storytelling, but for people who actually want to get into it, it actually is a really, really good purchase.

**CHEWIE CHAN** It's probably one of the best things around. You don't even have to want to make comics, but if you just want to, as I say in the title, understand it more, it's an amazing book.

**JIN HIEN LAU** His actual comics aren't that good though. [laughs]

**CHEWIE CHAN** I think it's true. A lot of people think he's technically savvy and maybe if he had a different writer. Yeah, I mean, everyone's style is slightly different.

**CON GERAkaris** So speaking of writing, is it something that sort of - I guess this would be more for Jin and Meg - do you just sit there and write sometimes or is it sort of, I don't know. Why did you gravitate towards comics rather than just fiction or nonfiction?

**JIN HIEN LAU** Because I'm not confident with my writing, so comics become the compensation.

**CON GERAkaris** There's always poetry as a compensation Jin.

[All laugh]

**CHEWIE CHAN** Nah I think like maybe you say you're not as confident in your prose. But you're very confident in your visual storytelling. So I think that's why comics, because comics are both. Pictures and prose. I think if your strength is in the

visual language, then you should probably put it up front and centre. It's still a powerful story at the end of the day.

**JIN HIEN LAU** Yeah but then I'm not confident enough with my visual storytelling that I throw words in to supplement it. So it's just this concoction of insecurities.

**CHEWIE CHAN** I think that's why comics are great. When we speak about low barriers of entry to be a comic maker. That's it. There are no rules. Like you say, you can be self-effacing. You can have doubts about your writing or not. But the fact is, no one can stop you, and the fact is in our industry, because we haven't had much formal education, most everyone taught themselves. But I think that's where our greatest strength is. Like everything is valid, you can start from stick figures and words, much like you were mentioning Cyanide and Happiness you know, those are seemingly simplistic drawings. But the idea is they carry a powerful message. And if that's the level of art you've got and you can create a world using those stick figures, then you've got a powerful comic and then you can learn from there. That's what we all did. I mean, we all started with stick figures, like, wonky drawings I used to draw.

I remember distinctly as a kid now that I used to draw people with two biceps because all I saw was bulging muscles. So for the longest time, all my drawings had, like, you know, people with just bulges everywhere. And look, they go like, "oh, yeah, the guy's got two biceps on each arm - and that's not including the forearm". We all start off at whatever level because no one is taught. But then, you draw your own language. And if you're serious about it, you learn, you know, anatomy, thank goodness. And then you carry on from there. But it's easy. Everyone can do it and that's what I love about comics.

**MEG O'SHEA** Yeah. I think also the fact that kind of everyone can do it means that it's also legible to so many more people too. Before I got into comics, I did a fine arts degree and I was taught this very kind of specific conceptual language where I could talk about stuff that I gave many s\*\*\*\* about, but only a very small number of people would be able to understand it. And I think there's something very gratifying about having a language to communicate with, that people will be able to understand and be able to receive the stuff you're putting out easily and you can do it outside of a gallery space or yeah. Sorry, I got too inside my head in the middle of that!

[All laugh]

**JIN HIEN LAU** I love SCA too Meg. I love it more than I hate it now.

**MEG O'SHEA** I have a very good friend from SCA who's watching right now.

**CON GERAKARIS** There was one thing that you mentioned that I wanted to get back to - how easy is it to get inside your own head when making comics and just to get hung up on every sort of detail?

**JIN HIEN LAU** Yeah, it's so easy but like I said, I'm a narcissist. [All laugh].

**CON GERAKARIS** I thought we established you're just a solipsist?

**JIN HIEN LAU** I just think about myself a lot.

**MEG O'SHEA** Isn't solipsism like the ultimate form of narcissism?

**CON GERAARIS** Yeah.

[All laugh].

**CHEWIE CHAN** Well, we do need to love our work to some level in order to be able to put out in the world.

**JIN HIEN LAU** It might be a call for help though Chewie, think about it.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Again, you might think it's a joke and stuff. I think that's one of the reasons why a comic is great and comics have been such a big part of the next generation, than say in our generation because it's an incredibly powerful form of expression which includes self-expression. So let's say with the low barrier of entry, people can draw their own comics. What's that line from Sandman? There's a book in everybody that's living in their dreams. For all we know there are tonnes of great comics living in somebody's computer because they need it for themselves. I think that's the cool part about comics, you can literally do that very easily. So I mean, I believe in all our doodles, all our stories that never made the page, there are valid stories in there somewhere.

**JIN HIEN LAU** I just want to know when comics can takeover street art so councils can give us twenty grand a weekend. When will that happen?

[All laugh]

**CHEWIE CHAN** To be fair, I think there are some grants that give some comics money. I think eventually it's just going to get better, it's going to bring stuff like yours out a bit more to the world.

**MEG O'SHEA** I feel like we're going to start some sort of medium war.

[All laugh]

**JIN HIEN LAU** We're from SCA, it's going back to studio wars again.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Oh, I think all that is a separate argument between politics and government and who is in charge of these things. As the younger generation goes into these positions of power, you'll find that comics will probably take more precedent in the next decade.

**JIN HIEN LAU** I think one thing we can talk about in terms of visual storytelling and its place in making money is that there's a big market, the so-called graphic recording now. So that's like a big thing if you're a comics person.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Yeah. People make six figure salaries apparently on that one. Yeah, so again, I think people are acknowledging the power of visual storytelling. We find in

our current world of TL;DR (too long didn't read) that the base level is that the less time it takes to do something the better. So I think visual storytelling, if you get to put across a government PSA or whatever, and an image stops someone's attention and then passes on 50% of the message within that first image. And then you have to read the details in one of the texts there is, I think that's going to be the way of the future. That's why visual storytelling is going to be huge and it's getting huger.

**JIN HIEN LAU** I want it to get so huge that even corporations just start doing TikToks.

[All laugh]

**CHEWIE CHAN** You'll find that –

**JIN HIEN LAU** It's just like [singing]; “Hey Optus is gonna fire 7000 people this weekend!”

[All laugh]

**CHEWIE CHAN** You'll find that someone's trying to do something exactly like that right now.

**JIN HIEN LAU** Yeah, definitely that's going to happen.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Again look comics have always been a populist medium. I think somewhere along the line, it was deemed juvenile, but I think the next generation has picked it up again. And I don't think anybody calls it juvenile anymore. Ah, I shouldn't say - mostly young generations and people who support it don't call it juvenile anymore. And I think there's more and more of them than of people who call comics juvenile. So I think you'll find that in the years to come, comics will only get much, much bigger.

**JIN HIEN LAU** I think one thing with comics is that you have to find your own audience, because content is so readily available, you have to kind of find your own tribe. You have to really think about how you can define who you are and the content you create to find your own audience.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Look, I think it's competitive, but here's the thing. Webtoons, ComiXology, all kinds of comic platforms have ballooned out in the last five, six years, maybe ten years. But yes, as a competitive creator, you have to find a niche, I think, make money, that sort of thing. At the same time, I think people are looking for comics. That's why these platforms are coming out. People are looking for comics to read. I think that's where those platforms are making money because they are providing a platform, you just gotta put in there and then people are going to Webtoons and saying, well, what's new today? Because I want to read a new comic, I've come to Webtoons. I think that's the future people, I think there's more demand for comics than we can supply right now actually. Because there's gatekeeping happening all the way because we're still in the old mind process of, you know, what is a comic? How do we get comics out? Going back to again, what I always say about the low barrier of entry to making comics is that people can absorb comics



very easily. I seriously think they are looking for more and more material.

I think if someone were to come and do, you know, say Jeff Bezos decided to do Amazon platform for comics and put money into it, you'll find that instantly there'll be a flood of people and people's eyeballs will be going to that platform. If every government in every country would put money aside from the government budget, into supporting this medium, I think you'll find that for them they'll reach their briefs by getting eyeballs and they'll be successful because the grants will always be used and will always be popular. You can get to that point, like you said Jin, we'll take over. We will get thirty thousand dollar grants to make comics.

**MEG O'SHEA** Depends who the government is at the time though, it could be a very bleak future.

[All laugh]

**CHEWIE CHAN** I think not to get too political, I think, like it's encouraging with the way the younger generation, or the much younger generation has taken to the climate change debate and the veracity with which they are now speaking. That bodes well for their generation of wanting to be involved in government. And I think as that generation gets into power, because at some stage we will die off, when their group is in power, they may very well love comics more than just this government.

**JIN HIEN LAU** I think it's not about whether they like it enough or not. It's almost like they don't want to spend money on comics. I think that's the issue.

**CHEWIE CHAN** But only because they don't value it.

**JIN HIEN LAU** Yeah, that's the thing.

**CHEWIE CHAN** So if you have a government that values it, if the younger generation is in government and they value it, there's no barrier to saying, let's think about giving money to comics.

**MEG O'SHEA** They spent that money on that comic in 2014 that was like, handed out to asylum seekers.

**JIN HIEN LAU** Oh yeah that one. Safdar [Ahmed]'s Facebook has it. I think Meg you should explain why the comic is.

**MEG O'SHEA** It was basically a comic commissioned by the Australian government, I think it was around 2014, that was depicting the story of an asylum seeker who attempts to come to Australia by boat and ends up in detention. And it was translated into a bunch of languages and basically distributed in areas with high concentrations of asylum seekers around the world who might possibly be coming to Australia to deter them.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Oh right was that the purpose?

**MEG O'SHEA** Yeah.

**JIN HIEN LAU** They basically tell them not to come to Australia, we will lock you up.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Yeah. Right. Right.

**JIN HIEN LAU** Visual storytelling.

**MEG O'SHEA** So they're willing to put money into comics.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Again, I said I guess it's people, like the people who run it. As long as people value comics, then it'll be fine. I mean, it's harder right now, there's more people who don't value comics in power than people who do, right. But like I said, as the generations go on, the older generation, which is where the gatekeeping is, will be less prevalent. And then the newer generation, which we know is quite receptive to comics, you know, if we're lucky and they at some stage, they will outnumber the gatekeepers and then it'll be OK after that, so, it may not be anytime soon. I know, it could be, but it may not be. But I'm very hopeful. I'm actually very confident that it will happen.

**CON GERA KARIS** Well, it is a very hopeful message to end on.

[All laugh]

**MEG O'SHEA** Before Jin or I interject with some other bleak shit, yeah.

**CON GERA KARIS** Yeah keep is possie. [All laugh].

Let's get to some questions. We've got one from Chris; when writing autobiographical comics, do you draw the line when it comes to fully presenting yourself on the page? How much of the you on the page is the real 'you'? I guess that's mostly for Meg and Jin I'd say.

**MEG O'SHEA** Yeah, I mean, they're always kind of is, and that has to be an element of curating the experience I choose to share. But like. I don't know, I like -

**JIN HIEN LAU** How would you gauge this answer, though? Because you will never know how much of us you're seeing, because we will always be the gatekeeper of how much we show.

**CHEWIE CHAN** I think that's the question right? How much do you know about yourself? Are you putting it 100% out there or do you check yourself as well?

**MEG O'SHEA** Yeah, I think a lot of my knowing myself does actually come through comics. I've been finding a lot of the time I actually use them as a reason to think through things I'm feeling and stuff. I don't know. I would like to reach a point where there's nothing of me left in myself and it's all on a piece of paper or on Instagram or whatever. Part of the reasons why I came to comics and like why I fell in love with making comics is because I feel like I can be, you know, more honest or close to honest as I can be as compared to all the other types of art I worked in before. So, I guess to answer Chris's question, like pretty, pretty close? I don't know! Who am I,

someone tell me! That's my whole practice trying to work that out!

[All laugh]

**CHEWIE CHAN** I think that's one of the reasons you're successful. I read your comic about being in Korea for the first time and looking for your birth Mum. I mean, that was powerful stuff. Say, if you put 100% of yourself in there, it'll come out and then people will appreciate it, that you're being 100%. I think people can tell when comics are actually autobiographical and whether it's made up or not. I think, when people are not honest, but pretend to be honest, it does come across. And it's not as successful too.

**JIN HIEN LAU** I think, what we have to talk about, how there's a generational gap. There are some like in the 90s and the 80s, they want this resurgence of American indie comics, then some people kind of do overshare a bit. And when I bring up this comic, I really hate it, but I somehow have a copy of - [Joe Matt] The Poor Bastard . This is one of the worst comics out there. But at that point, this was an incredibly successful comic. He basically is a guy who, actually, he recorded himself physically abusing his girlfriend, but not in a tone where he is regretful. He kind of just goes, hey, this is just me. I'm just being really, really raw. I punched my girlfriend because she accused me of being disloyal to her. But this, back in the 90s, actually got optioned for HBO for a TV show. So I do think that at some point, I think it's like the zeitgeist as well. There was that time where the idea of being super raw was like the goal. I actually do sometimes think about my content a lot, even though I want to talk about a lot of things. Not that I'm like a scum that wants to punch people and stuff more so I sometimes worry about whether it would have good feedback, like whether people care, so to say so, yeah, that's my self-censor sometimes. That's right. Not today on the panel, though.

[All laugh]

**CHEWIE CHAN** That's right. We love you Jin.

**CON GERAKARIS** So next question is from Theresa for Meg and Jin; who are your most surprising readers or unexpected followers?

**JIN HIEN LAU** No, they're my friends-

[All laugh]

**CHEWIE CHAN** Yeah, that is because all your readers become your friends though.

[All laugh]

**JIN HIEN LAU** No, no, no. Actually, Kid from Kid 'n Play follows me and he likes my stuff. So there you go.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Excellent.

**JIN HIEN LAU** First of all, I don't even know if most people know who Kid 'n Play is.

They're like an 80s hip hop group.

**MEG O'SHEA** OK, that's cool.

**CHEWIE CHAN** I don't know. I'm not hip.

**MEG O'SHEA** I guess my biggest surprise has been like young, cool, fashionable people, or at least look cool and fashionable on their Instagrams. But also like just Koreans or members of the diasporic or whatever Korean community. Like, it's not a community I've really had much interaction with, and I didn't really expect anything I had to say would resonate with them particularly, but that's been nice and surprising.

**CON GERA KARIS** I think we'll end on a classic final question, if you had to recommend one graphic comic piece or series, what would it be?

**MEG O'SHEA** Chris Ware's 'Building Stories'. It will blow your mind and break your heart and you need to be in a good headspace to read it. But it's amazing on a formal level and on a storytelling level and hurts your soul, in a good way.

**CON GERA KARIS** Everyone's gotta consult their bookshelves [laughs].

**MEG O'SHEA** That was not intentionally there!

**JIN HIEN LAU** It's Naucissa it's absolutely amazing. He drew like 4000 pages of it because he made a movie of it. Like that was Studio Ghibli's first movie, but the story actually keeps going. Also I really, really like Daniel Clowes. I just really like his stuff. Yeah. Those are my two recommendations.

**CON GERA KARIS** I hope people are taking notes.

**CHEWIE CHAN** My favourite book, to teach with, is Asterios Polyp by David Mazzucchelli. Amazing, amazing book. Beautifully crafted, if you're going to learn anything about graphic novels and the heights that you can take graphic novels to, that's that book. Yeah, it's amazing. Yeah. The other person I would recommend would be Tillie Walden. She's a 22 year old phenom from America. Every book she's done is phenomenal and successful. She's already an Eisner winner from the age of 21, I think. Yeah. So starts with autobiographical books, but then carries onto fiction now. And she's got a few books every year.

**MEG O'SHEA** Sorry, I also want to drop Sam Wallman because I've been thinking about him this whole discussion, when we were talking about politics and stuff and kind of meme quality in comics. You keep following him, you learn a lot of stuff.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Yeah. Good stuff.

**CON GERA KARIS** OK, well, I think we'll leave it there. I'm not saying my recommendation because my shelf is not full of comics like Chewie's.

**MEG O'SHEA** You don't have to bring in a prop you can just tell us!

**CON GERA KARIS** Okay I'll get mine...

This is mine. [Makoto Yukimura, Planetes]

**CHEWIE CHAN** Oh, yes, fantastic.

**JIN HIEN LAU** I love that one. Is that a manga?

**CON GERA KARIS** Yeah sorry. [Laughs]

**JIN HIEN LAU** No, no, no I love it. They did an anime of it, I think?

**CON GERA KARIS** They did. I didn't watch the anime but, yeah, I thought it was really great. And I do like depressing stuff in space, so. That's my recommendation.

Thank you, thank you, Jin, Chewie and Meg for joining us on your Saturday - even though we can't really do anything else. So I guess it's been nice.

**JIN HIEN LAU** I know yes, a very serene way to spend a Saturday morning.

**MEG O'SHEA** It's taken years off my life but thank you.

[All laugh]

**CON GERA KARIS** And thank you to all the attendees who came in with questions.

**CHEWIE CHAN** Yes thank you, everybody, for giving up the afternoon as well. Yeah, it's really cool.

**CON GERA KARIS** And I want to thank 4A for letting me put this panel on because, you know, it's not quite what we normally do. And I think it's been fun.

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The recorded panel discussion between Meg O'Shea, Jin Hien Lau, W. Chew Chan, moderated by Con Gerakaris took place over zoom 2021, as part of *Acute Actions: Responses to I Am Not A Virus Part 2*, 9 July – 2 August 2020.

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**Images (top to bottom):**

- 1) Jin Hien Lau, *Train of Thought* (detail), 2021, digital illustration, inkjet print. Photo: Kai Wasikowski for 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, courtesy the artist.
- 2) Jin Hien Lau, *Train of Thought*, 2021, digital illustration, inkjet print. Photo: Kai Wasikowski for 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, courtesy the artist.
- 3) Screengrab of the talk from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czpcp-vB\\_8w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czpcp-vB_8w)