

Chris Soal bags Dior Lady Art project collab



By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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Chris Soal, an emerging South African artist living and practising in Johannesburg, uses unconventional found objects such as toothpicks and bottle caps in conjunction with concrete and other industrial materials. He is the youngest artist to be chosen to participate in the Dior Lady Art project, where 10 artists from around the world were hand-picked to reinterpret the Lady Dior as a unique work of art in their style.

His first solo show also just launched at Cape Town's [WHATIFTHEWORLD](#) gallery, where the viewer's experience and existence is considered in relation to the monumental scale of his works.



■ Growing up, were you always creative? Or when did you realise you wanted to become an artist?

I would say so. TV wasn't a fixture in my home courtesy of my parents (genuine thanks to mom and dad!) and so I read a lot, often played outdoors, and kept myself busy with a rotating series of new obsessions - from geology to astronomy, to chemistry, music, biology, robotics - there was little that I wasn't experimenting with during my childhood years, and it was a case of new-month-new what-I-want-to-be-when-I-grow-up. I'm grateful that I was given a platform to be curious and ask questions. I think this is the essence of creativity.

“ I've often spoken about “looking at the world as if seeing it for the first time” as a creative approach, and I think that there is a childlike approach to creativity that lies deeply embedded in my work. ”

I only really decided to pursue art a year after finishing high-school. The decision to study a BAFA at Wits from 2014 on felt radical at the time, but looking back I can see how it was a combination of having travelled around the world in 2013,

having met people who were young and embodied a non-linear career path, and also very importantly, having received much support for drawings that I did when I was in high-school. I even sold a few of the drawings I had done as a matric student and something clicked inside me that this might just become a feasible career path.

■ ***There's the opinion that being an artist doesn't pay the bills. What's your take on this?***

It's a difficult question to answer, however I think that the myth of the starving artist is just that, a myth. We've held up fantastically tragic stories like Van Gogh's, and while one cannot pretend that being an artist is a straight or easy path to financial success, there are too many living, breathing, and healthy artists practising around the world for us to continue buying into that false narrative.

“ *The market is bigger, contemporary art is getting more attention than ever, and while success is not guaranteed to all who start on the journey (as with any career path), there are many who have gone before and left footprints behind for others to followin.* ”

There is also an overwhelming amount of resources out there for artists who want to understand the business of art and how to monetise what they do.

The question now is not “can I pay the bills and make this a career?”, but, “what work do I want to do, and where can I find support for that work?”



■ ***You've scored a collab with Dior. Tell us more.***

That has been an unbelievable experience, one I certainly didn't expect to appear on my horizon, especially not at this phase of my career. I had a work shown in London in 2019 that generated a bit of a buzz, it was featured by *Forbes Magazine*, and ultimately caught the eyes of the Dior team who invited me to participate in the 5th edition of the Lady Dior Art Project.

It was a year-long process, a year of keeping a very big secret and liaising with their salon to bring the three Lady Dior bags to life. It was a bit daunting working with an international fashion house with a 75-year legacy, but I simply tried to look at my own work, trust my instincts, and bring what I felt only I could to the collaboration.

■ ***You use unconventional found objects, such as toothpicks and bottle caps to create art. What's the reasoning behind this?***

As an art student, I didn't have resources to utilise more traditional, and rather expensive art forms like oil-painting, so I looked to what was in my everyday environment and what was in surplus. We often take the accessibility of these materials for granted, instead of asking, "What are the conditions that allowed for this material to be present in such abundance in our society?".



I'm often hesitant to say that I chose a material - it mostly feels like the material chooses me. There's always a relationship with my body, a way of fiddling with the material (in the case of the toothpicks and the bottle tops) and the way the material imprints itself on me, both physically and conceptually. Not only are these materials readily accessible, but they're embedded within the larger social fabric, which allows me to engage with concerns that I feel are significant to this time and place.

■ ***What's your inspiration behind your creations?***

Inspiration only comes when you're working, and sometimes (actually often) that means creating work for yourself to do.

“ *The themes that arise in my work are always informed by the direction and forms that the material leads me in.* ”

However, I am aware that through the use of ubiquitous, and often discarded, objects, the very fact that I am working with them in the way I do engages the viewer's perception and challenges their assumptions around value. My sculptural sensibilities have led me to take a phenomenological approach to my practice, considering my work as thought-embodied through its very nature and process.

■ ***Most artists have a message they want to share with the world. What's yours?***

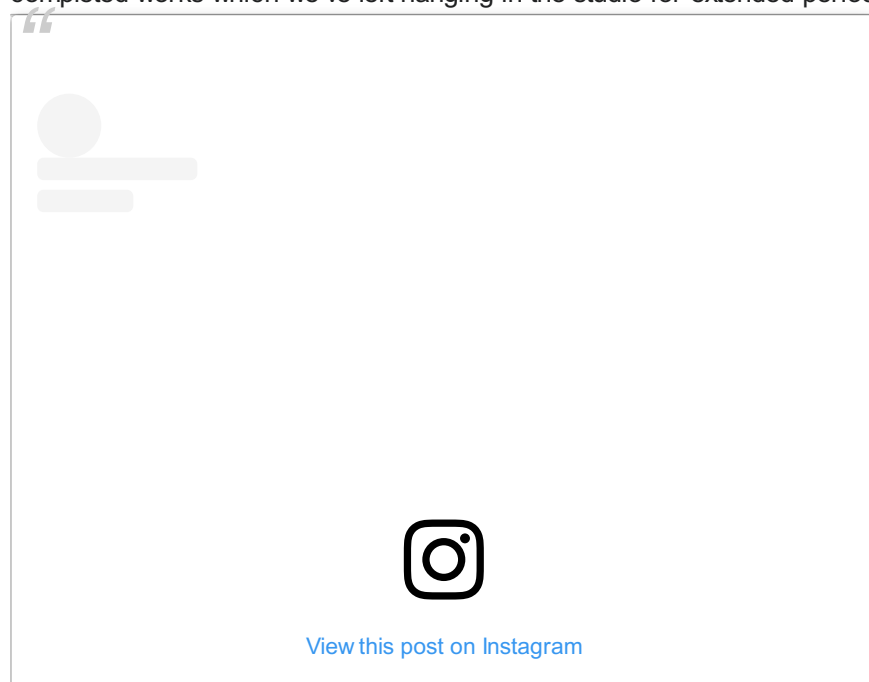
The same message that Bruce Nauman shared when he made the 1973 Lithograph, “Pay attention” (worth a Google search).

■ ***As an artist during this global pandemic. What has it been like for you?***

It's been a very strange time. Firstly I'm incredibly grateful and fortunate to have been able to keep the studio running, to keep my assistants employed, and since level 5, to continue operating without health issues affecting our workplace. I feel like as an art student you get given regular assignments and that creates a certain pace of working, but then as a practising artist exhibitions, group shows, art fairs etc just reinforce that pace and it's very difficult (but enormously important) for an artist to find the rhythm and pace of their own work.

“ *This period has really encouraged me to take the time that the work demands, and it's been a privilege to have time and space not only to work at my own pace, but also to give the work time to breathe before sending it out.* ”

This has been enormously important, and I've found that much new work has been developed upon observations of completed works which we've left hanging in the studio for extended periods of time.





A post shared by Chris Soal (@chris_soal)

Do you have any exhibitions currently taking place?

My solo exhibition “As below so above” is on view at WHATIFTHEWORLD Gallery in Cape Town until 1 May 2021. I have another solo-exhibition opening in the next two months at Nirox Sculpture Park (opening dates TBC), as well as the unveiling of my first outdoor installation there.

For more, go to <https://chrissoal.com/>

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