

Birkin
Alexander Si

Home Gallery is pleased to announce *Birkin*, a solo exhibition by Alexander Si on view from August 10th to September 4th, 2023. The artist handmade an exact replica of a Birkin handbag from the French luxury brand Hermès, paired with a video work illustrating the making of the sculpture/bag. Si started with pieces of calf skin leather and patterns downloaded from Chinese ecommerce site Tao-bao. With every stitch hand-sewn by hand, the bag took 85 hours to complete.

The hours are documented in its entirety by the artist, yet he chose to edit the video down to a snappy one-minute, Tik-tok-ready clip. The video, titled *Birkin (making of)*, features fast-cuts, ASMR sound of leather cutting, and an orchestral backing track as the “artisan” on screen cuts, sews, and glues with seemingly minimum efforts. With the close proximity of the window gallery location to Chinatown’s Canal street, *Birkin* contemplates on the glamorization of labor behind ultra-luxury goods and what it means for the artist, as a Chinese American immigrant, to replicate the bag and display it at a storefront window.



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The Birkin Bag was named after the English-French actress and singer Jane Birkin. The design is a collaboration between Jane Birkin and Hermès CEO Jean-Louis Dumas. The two met on a flight from Paris to London in 1984. Birkin confided in Dumas that she lacked a purse with appropriate functionality for her fast-paced lifestyle. Together, they drafted the design on an airplane paper bag featuring two rolled handles, a flap top, clou “feet,” a lock closure, and the Birkin handbag was born.

The bags are handmade in France using the company’s signature saddle stitching, developed in the 1800s. Each bag is hand-sewn by a single artisan, and is then buffed, painted, and polished, taking up to 18 hours to make. Artisans purportedly train for five years before they are allowed to make their first Birkin bag. Leathers are obtained from different tanners in France, resulting in varying smells and textures.

Hermès also employs an impenetrable retail system to limit the yearly production and sales of the Birkin, meaning there is no way you can walk into a Hermès store to purchase a Birkin. There is a designated waitlist and one has to be an existing customer with an amount of purchase history and in good standing with your designated sales associate to get on the list. Birkins are distributed to Hermès boutiques on unpredictable schedules and in limited quantities, creating artificial scarcity and exclusivity.

A bag made of Niloticus Crocodile skin (also known as the White Himalayan) with diamond-encrusted white-gold hardware was sold at auction by Christie’s in Hong Kong for a record price of US\$380,000 (HK\$2.94 million) in May 2017. Thus Birkin bags are feverishly collected by the upper echelons and celebrities across the world for its investment value and cultural cache. They have flooded the up-scale resale and subsequently counterfeit market, and are frequently resold in second-hand boutiques, auction houses and social media.

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Birkin_35

Calf leather (Togo), hardware, zipper, paint,
adhesives, cardboard, electronic wires
14" W x 13" H x 7" D
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Birkin
Installation view

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Birkin (making of)

1 min, on loop

2023

Watch here:

<https://vimeo.com/854530676>



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