

SPOTLIGHT ON JACKY CHENG

VISUAL ARTIST & ARTS FACILITATOR,
BROOME



Paper is like a second skin to visual artist Jacky Cheng. From a very early age, she'd practiced the tradition of joss paper folding with her grandmother. Even as an architecture undergraduate, she'd go bin diving for discarded paper to use as layers in her model making. Both practices have been major influences on her evolution as an artist, but it's the sharing of culture through storytelling that really puts the creative fire in her belly and her work.

I am the carrier of my culture's rituals and the best way to share my culture is through contextual experiences and storytelling.

Give us your bbq pitch. What do you do?

I'm a full-time practising visual artist and arts facilitator, based in Yawuru country. So while I'm creating my own artwork for exhibitions and commissions, and engaging communities with workshops, I also sit on the Board of Regional Arts WA, advocating for regional and culturally and linguistically diverse arts practitioners. We don't have a regional gallery here, so it's important that they have a go-to local practising artist they can turn to for that.

Did you always plan to work in this industry?

I always wanted to be an artist, but in my culture and country of origin (Malaysia) being an artist was not seen as a respectable profession. Architect was the closest traditional profession to what I desired to be, so I had to take a detour to study architecture. And that wasn't the only cultural barrier I faced. Traditionally, women were the matriarchs of the family home not makers of their own careers. I have my big brother to thank for convincing my father to invest in my education, but I had to really prove my worth, smashing out high distinctions and graduating with first-class honours in the top ten in my class.

I went and worked at a firm for a short while after graduating, but quickly realised a desk job fiddling with a mouse and a screen just wasn't for me. So I rebelled, jumped ship and went after my dream of working with my hands, head and heart!

So, how did you get into the visual arts in WA?

In my fourth year of study, my lecturer offered me a position tutoring his students in the arts electives I'd taken as part of my degree. So, arts education became my income stream for the next six years. I learned so much and discovered my passion for sharing art with others and giving back.

From there, I got the opportunity to go to Broome for two weeks working as a babysitter for a family. I was ready to give up after just three days, but then a chance encounter in a café with a local lady changed the course of my career. Like me, she had a multi-racial identity that was fascinating – Japanese-Aboriginal-Malay-Scottish. After my conversation with her I felt closer to home in Broome than I ever felt in Sydney and a desire to learn more about First Nations culture. So I packed up my life in Sydney, moved to Broome, and was offered an arts educator role at TAFE where I was sent out to remote communities teaching Cert 1 in Visual Arts.

Months went by without much vocal engagement from my students, but when I remarked that one of their works reminded me of the traditional

Malay crafts my grandmother practiced, the students asked me to tell them more and we started sharing our stories. They invited me to ceremonies, and I learned there were many similarities between our cultures, especially in respecting elders and carrying rituals and stories. That's when the penny dropped. I am the carrier of my culture's rituals and the best way to share my culture is through contextual experiences and storytelling. That's how I found the motivation to embark on my own journey as an artist. Those women lit that fire in me.

How would you describe yourself?

I'm fiercely independent and very disciplined with my time, purpose and intent. But as much as I really enjoy my own company, immersed in my own world in my studio, I love engaging and working with people from all age groups, backgrounds, and all walks of life, sharing skills and giving back to the community.

What do you love most about the industry?

The opportunity to learn from and be inspired by a diverse global arts cohort and to connect online with community organisations, art curators, art administrators and other art workers. Social media has been a real game-changer for visual artists. It's where we meet new artists, share knowledge and sometimes engage in collaborative projects.

What's the best part of your job?

I love the flexibility, and being in control of my own direction and ethical decisions.

What's your best advice for anyone starting out?

You need rigour and lots of self-discipline. Be prepared to work hard and practice, practice, practice. Reach out, connect and collaborate with others. And remember your name is your brand, so nurture and protect it, and make sure you understand copyright.

And what's next for you?

I'm loving working as a full-time artist. I've been working on commissions for large corporations, participating in art competitions and receiving invitations for art residencies and exhibitions. I'm currently in Margaret River for an art residency facilitating community workshops commissioned by SPACED. Before that, Fremantle Art Centre offered me an art residency in a beautiful studio while I worked on new methodologies, investigating how to make paper threads. In this lifetime, I will never learn enough about paper, but I'll never stop exploring.

Follow and connect with Jacky on Instagram

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