

## **Q&A with Artist Susan Chen**

**The interview was conducted by Prof Jing Han - Director, Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts & Culture:**

**When did you know that you wanted to be an artist and what made you believe that you could become one?**

I've always liked making things, especially with my hands, and I've always been quite good at working in 3D. I enjoyed doing all sorts of creative things when I was growing up, but I don't really remember anyone around me being particularly creative at the time to offer any encouragement. I do, however, remember the first time something I was doing at school was acknowledged as creativity. It was in first grade, and we were learning about space. All the kids were colouring in spaceships, and I had finished mine well ahead of everyone. I had already started cutting out stars and I had another piece of paper ready to create a collage. Then the teacher walked past and asked what I was doing. I said I'd finished but I wanted to create more. I thought I was in trouble, but she invited me to create a whole space scene for the back of the classroom wall. It was fun. I didn't realise that I was being creative, it just came naturally. So I don't know if I ever thought I would like to be an artist — I think it's something that I've always thought I already was.

**Growing up in Australia in a family of Asian background, migrant parents normally expect their children to study a pragmatic subject that will lead to a stable and secure job. Visual arts is not one of those subjects. Did you have to resist any family pressure to become an artist? And how did you convince your parents to support your choice?**

My parents are very typical Asian migrant parents. They came here because they wanted a better future for their kids. It was important for my parents that we would have secure, respectable jobs when we finished school, like a doctor, an accountant, a lawyer, or an engineer. Unfortunately, none of those things appealed to me — I always wanted to do something creative. But I was also a very good Asian daughter. When you grow up as a child of migrants you have this huge burden to want to please your parents and make them proud because they've sacrificed so much to come here. I put all the artistic stuff aside and studied hard at school and I was accepted into university to study science. But I hated it, and I couldn't get the whole creative urge out of my head. Eventually I transferred to a design degree. I thought if I was going to do something creative, then I'd do corporate art that could potentially get me a good paying job. I loved design but it still wasn't quite right. I felt there was something more that I needed to discover and the urge to be a creative never went away. After several years working in the design industry, I applied to study visual arts at Sydney College of the Arts. I was accepted as a mature age student, and I've been creating what I want ever since. Now my parents can't be bothered to be annoyed and I don't think they really care anymore either. They now accept this is what I do and understand that you've got to let your kids do what they've got to do. So being creative is never something I had to actively fight for, I just snuck my way in slowly over the years.

**What drives your artistic pursuit and what do you think you aim to achieve through your art practice? And where do you draw your inspiration from?**

I always struggle with this question when people ask me what I do. There are so many aspects and layers to my art practice, but at the core of it is the idea of the “in-between.” It's that liminal

space between the real world and the digital world, technology and traditional techniques, art and design and, more recently, what it means to be an Asian Australian artist — that liminal space between the two cultures I've grown up in.

Much of my practice also involves looking into patterns and codes. They can be patterns from the natural environment, scientific and mathematical world but I have a particular interest in human behavioural patterns. I'm fascinated by online digital culture, especially things like social media, and observing how people move and act online. I draw many observations from people watching but also from looking at things that are almost hidden in plain sight that most people would find boring and mundane. I try to shine a spotlight on seemingly insignificant things or moments that don't get acknowledged.

In terms of what inspires me, my artwork is often quite process driven and methodical. I use a lot of physical and online data, what I like to call “social debris” to inform my work. I look for remnants or clues left in the urban environment or online, from which I can create a visual narrative in clay.

**As a second-generation migrant growing up in Australia, how and when did you become interested in Chinese and Asian art traditions and cultures? And what have you found in them that has formed and informed your artistic creation?**

I was never really that interested in my Chinese heritage and my culture when I was growing up. I was a teenager in the nineties, and it was very hard to be Asian with people like Pauline Hanson around spreading all that anti-Asian rhetoric. I tried to distance myself from my culture, to adapt and fit into what the so-called acceptable norms were and deny who I was. I feel sad that I did that, but I also understand why I did it. Now as an adult I have obviously developed a lot more confidence and appreciation for my culture and I feel it's a huge privilege and a duty to pass on these traditions and customs. As a second-generation migrant a lot of that gets diluted. With each generation you sadly lose a little bit, but at the same time you're also adding to these traditions by creating your own and making them work for the new life that you're living. For me it's something that I've come to later in life. There's so much richness and so much more to explore. I'm really excited about researching more about my culture and getting new ideas for future works.

**Why did you choose ceramics to be your main art material in a formal way?**

It was purely by chance, and perhaps a little bit of serendipity, that I fell in love with this material. I took a slip casting class as an elective when I was studying design at university, and I just loved it. Up until then I'd only ever used hard clay at school, while slip is a liquid clay which you pour into a mold and let dry. I realised that I could make 3D stuff out of a material that I could easily access. After I finished my degree and was working in the design industry, I'd find myself sitting at my desk sketching objects that I wanted to make out of ceramics. I just couldn't get it out of my head. And then I went to see a ceramicist friend's show at Sydney College of the Arts, and I just knew I had to work with ceramics. So I didn't choose it because it was a cool thing to do — it most definitely was not at the time — but simply because I loved it.

**How did you come up with the idea of using the very traditional Chinese game of mahjong for your ceramic artwork entitled “I'm not racist but...”?**

It all began when Diversity Arts Australia invited Asian Australian artists to create works that reflected their experience during the pandemic. I came across an article online about three American women who had decided to create their own cute white girl mahjong set because they said the traditional one didn't reflect their personalities. I was gobsmacked by the insensitivity and the whitewashing of this very traditional game. It made me think about the idea of imbalance in power and white privilege because they obviously didn't consider any potential fallout in appropriating the original design.

Unlike these white women, it's always consciously at the back of my mind that I'm an Asian woman, so I always need to question how the things I do will reflect on me as an Asian woman. I started thinking about that imbalance in power, and how all through my life a part of me has tried to live up to the expectation of what a model migrant should be like. This made me realise that on some level we're always playing their game. We put on a persona, we don't want to step out of line and do something that's going to make us, or our community, look bad, but we also don't want society to feel uncomfortable with what we're doing. That's how the whole idea of the game started floating around in my head. And I thought if this group of white women can create a new mahjong set, I can make my own too! It was the height of the COVID pandemic and there was so much awful imagery around, and horrible headlines from tabloid newspapers full of hate for Asians. I took elements from these images, stories and graffiti slurs, and I used them to create a Covid-inspired mahjong set. Each one of the tiles has its own narrative and tells a specific story. For example, there's one tile depicting a girl getting spat in the eye. That really happened just down the road from where I live. I felt these things needed to be expressed, that we needed to open a dialogue about casual racism here in Australia. I wanted to create a piece of art that people could look at and at first glance think it's just a cute mahjong set, but if you look at the tiles individually some very nasty themes are apparent. I wanted to start this uncomfortable conversation that's often difficult to bring up, by using satire and humour. Everybody thinks that jokes are great, so I thought it'd be an effective way to break the ice and talk about this really serious issue in a funny kind of way.

**Recently you've been using digital technology in your ceramic art making process. What do you expect to discover, especially in terms of the differences between using traditional approaches to ceramics?**

I've always been interested in 3D printing since I was studying industrial design at university. I remember thinking how incredible it was to be able to create a 3D model from a digital file. When I started studying visual arts at Sydney University, I read about a new printer that could print in the clay medium. Clay and 3D printing were two things that really fascinated me, enough to write a Master's research paper on this topic. I went as far as purchasing my own 3D clay printer from the States because there was no one in Australia at the time that had one I could access. I've been experimenting with it for about eight years now and the technology is still quite new so there's still so much to learn. I began to wonder what would happen if I took the ancient medium of ceramics and combined it with modern technology. A lot of my practice involves experimentation. It starts with a question — I wonder what would happen if I did this? — and then I just follow those lines of inquiry and figure things out as I go along. I'm always trying to make interesting, innovative work, and I think the way that I merge traditional ceramic techniques with new technology is something that is quite unique. I've created seemingly traditional ceramic vases for my latest body of work but on closer inspection you can see Chinese characters digitally embedded into the surface of the vases. Characters, including *speak*, *listen*, *share* and *understand*, were chosen to capture the essence of positive cultural exchange, and the vases act as tangible objects for this transaction.

The vases are a modern take on classic Chinese blue and white porcelain vases, while still retaining traditional integrity. I visited the Wedgwood factory when I was in the UK earlier this year and I was lucky enough to see some of the artisans working with the same techniques they've been using for centuries. They were making molds to create reliefs that go on the classic blue Wedgwood jasperware. I've created vases for this IAC show using digital technology, and I've also made my floral motifs using the same tradition that they use in the Wedgwood factory. It's been a wonderful opportunity to use both sets of skills to create a dialogue between old and new. So, for me it's all about creating interesting work and asking myself how far I can push this medium.

### **What do traditions and transformations mean to you and to your artistic career?**

I think it's important to carry on traditions, but I also think that they need to be relevant, and they need to be progressive, inclusive and safe. I don't like to think tradition should be followed purely because it's always been done that way before. I think that's quite a dangerous mindset. We need to be able to transform traditions to fit with what's going on in contemporary culture and what's going on in our current society. It's better to evolve, or transform these traditions, than lose them completely. Artistically speaking, I think my work is hard to pin down. I think this is probably why I'm not as successful as some other artists because I don't really have what marketers would call "a brand", that one thing that easily identifies my work. I struggle with that, but I don't know if that's something that I necessarily want to have either because I quite enjoy the fact that my work is always evolving, it's always transforming. There are too many things I'm interested in so I think a huge part of my practice is about transformation and evolution and that's just what I will keep following to see where it takes me.

### **Looking back, what do you think you've learned that empowers you for your future pursuits and explorations as an artist?**

I don't feel I'm at my peak yet and that there's still so much more to learn. But looking back, I can say that getting older has made me wiser. It's difficult to have confidence in your own ideas when you're young but now I have much more faith in my ideas as well as the technical skills to tell a compelling story through the visual medium of clay. I think if I maintain a sense of curiosity and wonder, and follow my intuition while giving myself the space to explore, then I will hopefully keep creating innovative and interesting works into the future. I'm really excited about the show and sharing my new works with everyone!