



DAMIEN SHEN

Damien Shen draws from his Ngarrindjeri and Chinese heritage making powerful images that reflect the complexities of race and identity in Australia. He's "interested in the Coorong region, work that relates to the stories my family has about their early memories of growing up on the Raukkan mission in the early 50s". An accomplished story-teller, he will work with Mt Gambier artists, producing tintypes through a travelling interactive project involving local communities.

My Chinese grandparents lived in Hong Kong after they fled from mainland China at the time of the Chinese Communist revolution. My father was born in Hong Kong and subsequently sent to Australia in the mid-1960s to attend an Adelaide boarding school. My grandparents then joined him in Australia when my sister and I were born.

My mother was born at Point McLeay, on the Aboriginal mission, now called Raukkan, located on the eastern shoreline of Lake Alexandrina in South Australia. It just happens that the church from the mission is featured on the back of the fifty-dollar note behind David Unaipon, a Ngarrindjeri inventor, preacher and writer. The Ngarrindjeri lands extend from the Coorong of southern, central Australia to the western Fleurieu Peninsula and about eighty kilometers southeast of Adelaide. Mum came from a large family of eleven kids. Half of them were born on the

mission but the family later moved away from the area eventually settling into the Adelaide metropolitan area.

I only made the decision to begin an arts practice about five and a half years ago. My very first project was a series of portraits based on my mother and her sisters and brothers who were born on the mission. I interviewed them about their experiences growing up on the mission and one of my key aims was to create a visual/audio experience to bring their story to life.

Fortunately, interest in my work developed across South Australia fairly quickly. I think it was partly due to the universal theme of my first project that was a large series of work around genealogy and place, and partly due to my initial enthusiasm to get some traction for my practice. I'd made the decision to build up a body of work and tour it around the regions rather than put it up for sale in a commercial gallery. I wrote

to the association of Regional Gallery Directors with a proposal; most of them accepted, and the work was soon on the road and touring. It went to a range of destinations including Tandanya, the Adelaide Festival Centre, Adelaide Town hall, Port Augusta, Port Pirie, Kapunda, Goolwa and Murray Bridge. As part of the tour I ran drawing workshops in most of the communities. The combination of having an exhibition and then engaging the community via drawing workshops worked really well – I really have a soft spot for the regional galleries and the way they bring the local community to the work and the way they're keen to participate in the dialogue.

In the beginning, I had a very basic, unwritten business plan in my mind: don't sell for three years, just focus on making, exhibiting and building my practice. So as things went on, one opportunity led to another and I would just work hard and keep motoring along. However, I think there was a key turning point where I was invited to do the Cicada Press Printmaking Residency at the College of Fine Arts, Sydney. That residency brought together Aboriginal artists from all around the country. I met Tony Albert, Ryan Presley, Dale Harding, Brenda Croft – a lot of artists with whom I felt a close affinity - and all of a sudden, I felt I was in the middle of it, so to speak. There was another really important outcome from that residency: I produced an etching that referenced an anatomical study by the Flemish anatomist and physician, Andreas Vesalius, who was working in the sixteenth century, at the same time connecting it to the dark history of the stolen Ngarrindjeri remains that were sent to a number of European museums to be studied. That particular work, titled 'On the Fabric of the Ngarrindjeri Body', went on to win the Prospect Portraiture Prize and the emerging category of the Blake Prize, both national prizes. Many doors have open since then.

What makes where you live and work different? (to a metropolitan area/to other regions you've experienced). What might make it difficult?

In terms of 'art world' considerations, I now consider myself an Australian artist rather than a South Australian artist, as most of the exhibitions I participate in are interstate. Property, transport and daily living costs are lower in Adelaide, and that makes things a bit easier - plus I'm only a one hour plane flight from Melbourne where my dealer is. I think it's important to turn up to certain events in metropolitan towns if I want to plug into the local arts community. But, that being said, there's still that sense of a distance between you and those who live and work in the big metropolitan centres, that leads to a sense of not completely being able to integrate – you end up feeling like a kind of FIFO (Fly In/Fly Out) artist I guess.

Where do the other challenges lie?

I don't tend to think of things as 'challenges' per se – I'm reasonably optimistic and tend to consider multiple angles of approach when I consider the making and business aspects of art. To a large extent my *modus operandi* in all this has been steered by my grandfather's influence as an entrepreneur. He used to talk to me about basic kinds of approaches and planning techniques when I was a child. The challenges, if you what to call them that, are more to do with life-stage priorities; I'm in my early 40s with a young family, a mortgage, a day job – the whole kit and caboodle - and the biggest part of that life stage is how does one fit everything into a day. The only way I can deal with the squeeze on time and resources is to think everything through very carefully. My time in the studio is limited, so I spend roughly ninety percent of my time on the conceptual development. The final ten percent consists of executing the idea to the best of my ability – and that can be done either by myself or through collaboration with other artists.

But are these challenges worthwhile? And what kind of benefits are there?

I feel happy when I'm making art and my family is happy when the art/work/life trifecta balance is going ok. This is important to me.

Do you think your galleries and the artistic communities around them (the artists, designers, arts workers, volunteers) have shaped the local community? To what extent?

I think Adelaide's creative scene is strong and flourishing. There are tiers of support for local artists, from ARI's (artist-run initiatives) to established commercial galleries and a strong link-up of regional galleries. There's also a group of artists who have established reputations for their work outside Australia and also contribute to the local scene. The SALA (South Australian Living Artists) festival is held every year, and this festival's contribution at the local grass roots level is important too – it drives the confidence of the emerging arts industry as well as showcasing mid-career and established artists.

What relationship does 'your' place have to the general scene in metropolitan-focused art in Australia?

As I mentioned before, I'm considering my art making more in terms of being an Australian artist rather than a 'local' artist as such, but I have the privilege of being able to share my local stories and history. Through the growing interest in my work I've been given a platform from which to speak of these things.

Is it cheaper to live in the regions? Do you think it's important to 'get out' and come back in again?

I live in Adelaide. I guess you could almost call it a region in comparison to the other major cities. It's certainly cheaper to live in Adelaide than many of the other major cities in Australia.

It's important for me to go back into the region where all my history comes from - it's refreshing and re-

charging and it's important for me to take my family there too. The other weekend we went down to Ngarrindjeri country, near the Coorong, with Uncle Moogy (Major Sumner), and we all collected the reeds and sap for spear-making while Uncle took us through the processes and stories. My son Takoda really loved the experience and I plan to keep going back there with my children so they have a good understanding of their roots and where their ancestors came from.

How important are region-to-region contact and relationships?

From my experience with engaging regions through exhibitions and workshops, the arts communities in the regions are reasonably small - so those inter-regional contacts are important in terms of the support and opportunities they can give each other – and there are a lot of logistical benefits to having regional networks. It's not easy for regional artists to get exposure in Adelaide, much the same as it's difficult for Adelaide artists to get exposure on the east coast.

Is place still important? ...or do you just think that the importance of place has been dissolved by social media, international marketing and the onslaught of the multi-national conglomerates (Facebook; Apple; Amazon; Netflix; Google etc.)?

For my practice, the location or place of my history is crucial – I couldn't talk about the kind of things I do, in an honest way, without sincere reference to them. There's no substitute to being physically in that place and being on the ground – social media can help in some ways in terms of making everything seem closer – and sometimes you meet people in exhibitions and you get a sense of connection that makes the nation feel smaller, but in the end you have to ask yourself about the extent to which you can really get to understand or know where that other person is coming from when you only get the online interpretations, because everyone curates their own presence online.

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