



WHERE
Heart & Art
MEETS

Through her work, artist Tiffany Choong aims to bring joy and shine light on important topics.

Text by William K.C. Kee
Photos courtesy of Tiffany Choong



The great Spanish artist Pablo Picasso once said “The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.” When it comes to her art, Tiffany Choong has similar convictions about its purpose. “The intention of my art is to bring joy and celebrate life by giving a voice to nature and wildlife and shining light on certain topics to create enlightening conversations.”

Adds the Penang-based artist: “I feel like I have grown in confidence and I am grateful that I am still able to pursue this journey. The adage ‘life is a marathon, not a sprint’ really holds true for artists. It takes a lot of time, dedication and commitment to endure the course, and the course at times feels like a treasure hunt with the lights off. Having a vision and purpose has helped me to stay focused and motivated.”

As a child, Choong’s ambition was to be a ‘hippie traveller’. She recalls with a laugh: “I didn’t know at that time that it wasn’t considered a career. I saw all these backpackers arriving in Penang, and I wanted to do the same thing - travel the world!”

She may be all grown-up now, but Choong’s free-spirited persona and wanderlust cravings remain unabated. In 2019 alone, she managed to visit Singapore, Portugal, Britain and Germany. “In September 2019, I attended the launch of Fear Not by Dublin’s popular poet Stephen James Smith at the Embassy of Ireland in London. I am over the moon that two of my illustrations were included in his book. My art has connected me with many amazing people and I am thankful.”

Choong describes herself as being a bohemian artist. “Basically, it’s a lifestyle to be able to draw and paint authentically and also be able to travel,” muses Choong, who studied French and interior design at University College London. She is quick to add: “However, the bohemian part is proving to be an ideology; in reality, I have to treat art as a business.”

Although this past year has been challenging, no thanks to the pandemic, Choong has opted to look at the brighter side of things. “Despite COVID-19 and the devastation that it has brought upon the world, it has actually turned out to be my best year. I have never had to work so hard in my life to succeed, as my mindset was to work or die.”

Entering 2020, Choong had two group art exhibitions already planned. The first was BELANG at the Penang State Art Gallery in collaboration with the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (PERHILITAN). The exhibition, which featured Choong’s art piece Bulan, showed Malaysia’s commitment to addressing the extinction of the Malayan Tiger.

During the Movement Control Order (MCO), Choong was approached by restaurant De Wan 1958 by Chef Wan. “It was to illustrate for the ‘My Unity Tiffin’ carrier for Merdeka and Malaysia Day celebration, a collaboration between Chef Wan and Hugo Boss to support local restaurants and the Lost

Food Project. They wanted illustrations of Malaysian wildlife including the Malayan Tiger and so Bulan the tiger was able to shine once more for a good cause.”

Another project she participated in during the MCO was “Portraits For NHS Heroes”. The project was initiated by British artist Tom Croft as a way to celebrate and thank front liners, medics and nurses for their work during the pandemic. Artists were invited to offer portraits of front liners on Instagram using the hashtag #PortraitsforNHSHeroes. This project has since been curated as a permanent virtual art exhibition on Google Arts and Culture website.

During the MCO, social media connected Choong and her art to the world. “It has been a lifesaver! During the lockdown, I completed a series of paintings on birds which I observed from my balcony. I made them available to download online for free for people who were keen to start birdwatching,” explains Choong.

“I also started a series of pet portrait commissions, which I collaborated with singer-songwriter Chelsia Ng who provided the music to my art videos. It was a way to generate some income but the joy of reading my clients’ feedback on social media exceeded any monetary reward.”

Thus far, Choong has participated in various group exhibitions such as Chairity (organised by National Cancer

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Society at The Edge Gallery, Kuala Lumpur in 2014), Femmes Plurielles (by Alliance Francaise at The Star Pitt, Penang in 2015) and 8 (all-women exhibition at China House Gallery in 2017).

In 2018, Choong held her very first exhibition as a solo artist; it was held at G Art Gallery in G Hotel, Penang. Titled Treasures Of A Straits Chinese, it featured 30 paintings inspired by Choong’s Peranakan ancestry; more than half of the collection were sold within the first week.

Most of the works were painted in gold and black, using acrylic and oil on canvas. They revolved around elements of nature, including flowers and insects. From the crest feathers of the cockatoo in the Garden Of Eden to the dragonfly’s flight in Flutter Your Wings And Fly, the pieces are exquisitely detailed.”

According to Choong, her art has its roots in the Peranakan culture. Somewhere during the process of creating this collection, it dawned on her that she is the legacy of her ancestors. “It brought back memories of my childhood, of being surrounded by black-and-gold furnishings and colourful porcelain vases,” says Choong, who is the third of four siblings; she is the only girl.

“I wanted to bring this heritage back which many people may have forgotten. In my imagination, if the Peranakan culture evolves, what will the next phase look like?” She did inject a couple of modern elements here and there; one of her most favourite paintings (You Make My Heart Smile) featured a pair of flamingos.

Away from art, her passions include travelling and sports. “I am a bit of a sponge, I like a lot of things. By travelling, I meet people from different cultures and backgrounds which broadens the mind. And if I am in Penang, I hike up Penang Hill every other day.”

What’s her advice to aspiring artists? “Know the reality of the industry, and the hard work that goes into it. One must also be able to stand the course of time, as you might not be making money for the first few years. Anyone can follow their passion and become an artist but to make a living from it, one has to treat it as a business and become an artpreneur.”

For more on Choong’s works, visit www.BulanLifestyle.com