

Heed the call of the arts

Finding a job in the creative industry can be daunting, but some are unfazed and continue to persevere, fuelled by passion



Malavika Menon

A career in the creative industry may be a daunting prospect without guarantee of full-time work, especially given the current coronavirus pandemic.

In recent years, though, local universities and arts institutions have revamped their fine arts curriculum and introduced new courses to better prepare fine arts graduates for real-life work.

Nanyang Technological University's School of Art, Design and Media launched two new bachelor of fine arts programmes in 2017 - Design Art and Media Art.

The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) revamped its diploma courses between 2016 and 2017, putting renewed emphasis on industry-based learning. Students complete a semester-long simulation of a commission-based project as well as an internship.

The Straits Times speaks to four fine arts graduates to find out what life is like after a fine arts education.

mmla@sph.com.sg



Visual artist Lis Tamara Ahmad Razib traded an air stewardess job, which offered financial security, for her passion in art. PHOTO COURTESY OF KEMP AW

From air stewardess to artist

On an open house visit to an art school in 2014, Lis Tamara Ahmad Razib found herself torn between becoming an air stewardess and pursuing her passion in art.

Lis, 26, took up the air stewardess job thinking she would stick to it for five years and save up for art school.

However, she quit after one year to take up a diploma in Fine Art (Painting), Traditional and Contemporary Oil and Chinese Ink Painting

at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa). "At first, I felt it would be wiser to have a financial safety net to support an unpredictable career path as an artist. But later, I realised any path could be unpredictable," she says.

Her father, who works in the food and beverage industry, and her mother, who is a Ministry of Education teacher, supported her decision. Lis says her parents' support allowed her three sisters and her to

pursue their desired careers.

Her eldest sister works in the field of biomedical technology, her second sister works as a pastry chef and her youngest sister is pursuing accountancy.

While pursuing her studies, Lis interned at local art consultancy and online gallery firm, The Artling, between August and November last year.

"Although the internship was on the other end of the art spectrum

for me - the business aspect which I was not directly exposed to prior to my course - I felt it to be a necessary paradigm shift. I benefited from learning how to source for art and artists," says Lis, who hopes to set up her own studio with another artist in the future.

While she is aware a career in the arts may not be as lucrative as being an air stewardess, she is confident her commitment and passion will ensure a stable income.

Making a sound career choice

As a Primary 6 pupil, Ms Guo Ningru watched a screening of *Joséphine*. And *The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* at school and wished she was one of the chorists.

She and her sister were encouraged from a young age to take an interest in the arts.

"My parents had always believed that children should have some arts education alongside our science- and mathematics-heavy curriculum. Exposure to the arts from a young age might have helped to open our minds to what is out there in the world," says Ms Guo, 32.

After finishing her A levels, she read a guidebook listing Lasalle College of the Arts' degree courses and decided to embark on the technical arts programme.

She worked as a sound designer af

ter getting a bachelor of arts degree in technical theatre arts majoring in sound design from Lasalle in 2009.

Over the next seven years, she gained experience in theatre-making and sound design with arts companies such as Pandemonium, Singapore Repertory Theatre and Singapore Lyric Opera.

Two memorable plays she worked on were *Pandemonium's Tribes* (2015) and *Falling* (2016), which she says left a deep impact on her.

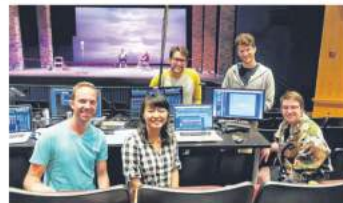
On her experience on Tribes, which looked at the world of the deaf, she says: "To support a deep and moving piece such as this, the sound design will need to not overpower the action in most of the scenes, but when given the opportunity, help the audience experience what the deaf world sounds like."

In 2016, she decided to further her studies overseas and secured a scholarship from the National Arts Council to pursue a master's degree in sound design from the University of California Irvine.

"Being able to be in a completely different environment with a programme entirely made up of sound designers was very stimulating," says Ms Guo, who returned to Singapore last year and now works as a freelance theatre sound designer. She also teaches an audio production class at her alma mater Lasalle.

As a woman in a male-dominated field, she believes there are plenty of challenges to overcome.

As the job requires setting up heavy equipment such as large loudspeakers, Ms Guo says production team heads may prefer men, whom



Theatre sound designer Guo Ningru (second from left) with her classmates from the University of California Irvine. PHOTO COURTESY OF GUO NINGRU

they think will execute the manual labour well.

"There was a supervisor who told me if they were to pay the same amount of money for someone to come and set up a system, they would rather hire a young man for his muscles rather than a woman, even

without needing to find out if the woman is capable, strong or smart," she recounts an encounter as a rookie.

"The only way for a woman to enter this industry and succeed is through an education, a willingness to learn and lots of hard work."

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Post-excavation technician Fazleen Karlan's work involves cleaning up artefacts as well as sorting, weighing and packing them. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL NG

Finding joy in preserving the past

Malavika Menon

Ms Fazleen Karlan has lost count of the number of times she was told she would not be able to find a job just because she studied art.

But she did find a job, and an interesting and unusual one too. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Lasalle College of the Arts last year, she got a job as a post-excavation technician with the archaeology unit at the Temasek History Research Centre, (SEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute).

She says her work involves cleaning artefacts as well as sorting, weighing and packing them. The 27-year-old, who usually handles ceramic shards, has come

across earthenware and stoneware recovered from dig sites in her work.

On a typical day, she would work with two colleagues to sort through a small portion of the 2,500kg of materials collected from a dig site between the Asian Civilisations Museum and Victoria Concert Hall in 2005.

Describing her foray into archaeology as a "pleasant detour" from her studies, Ms Fazleen says: "Having a fine arts degree goes beyond the ability to paint and draw. It is years of building up observational skills and processing visual information."

"Studying fine arts has equipped me with the capability of analysing images or objects and linking them to larger contexts," she adds.

After her A levels, Ms Fazleen decided on a diploma in fine arts in 2013, intent on pursuing a career in the arts. After she got her degree, she was considering becoming an arts teacher or working in an arts studio, but decided on the archaeological job as she is also interested in history.

Her mother, a housewife, and her father, a technician at an oil company, were initially apprehensive about her decision, but supported her nonetheless, as did her two older siblings.

She says: "People have a perception that art school is easy because 'I love art'. But that is the thing about going after what you love - the challenges feel like they are bigger because it is more personal."

Helping the community

Mr Muhammad Nhwafal Juma'at, 28, who holds a fine arts degree from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa), hopes to make a difference with his skills.

And he is doing so as a part-time art instructor at Club Heal, a society with branches in Bukit Barok, Marsiling, Buangkok and Pasir Ris, which provides classes and counselling to people with mental illnesses to help them reintegrate into the community.

Mr Nhwafal teaches painting, drawing and pottery at Club Heal.

He is also an adjunct lecturer at both Nafa and Lasalle College of the Arts, teaching courses such as watercolour, oil and acrylic painting and also overseeing final-year projects for students at Nafa.

He admits that he had previously feared he would find it hard to be an

artist or a lecturer.

"I had preconceived notions that getting a job as a lecturer or even being an artist would be difficult or nearly impossible.

"Eventually, I built up my experience as an artist on the ground, exhibiting and curating for art exhibitions while building a network I could rely on," says Mr Nhwafal, who creates mainly visual artwork using various mediums.

He says his father, a retired boatswain; his mother, a programme coordinator at Club Heal; as well as his three older siblings support his career choice.

"In my family, we constantly support each other's endeavours. It's that receptive and liberal environment that has particularly influenced my perspectives in life," he says.



Visual artist and art instructor Muhammad Nhwafal Juma'at (above right) at a group exhibition show called Ruang in Joo Chiat that he co-curated in September 2017. PHOTO: BEN WAP