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PORTRAIT

A chat with Australian Writers' Centre founder, visual artist and curator of the 2019 City of Sydney Lunar Festival Valerie Khoo. By *Sarah Price*.

Sydney Lunar Festival's Valerie Khoo



She chose Alfonso's Cafe for its quietness, but when I arrive there's a group of old men singing opera. Their voices sound beyond the large serving window into a residential street tucked at the bottom of a lush hill in Sydney's Avalon. The cafe is narrow, lodged between a small strip of suburban shops. Next door are a hairdresser, a dog groomer and a local grocer, complete with bait and tackle for the bay fisherman. Everything feels close: tightly packed palms and angophoras covering the steep hillside, low-hanging clouds, enveloping humidity. Beyond the main road that twists and turns on the spine of Barrenjoey Peninsula, the ocean is flat and blue all the way to the horizon.

We sit under paperbark trees at the door to the cafe and listen as the opera notes fade inside. A teen, bare-chested with bronzed skin and a surfboard under his arm, walks past our table. Sitting on a stool inside, a man wearing a singlet begins to play a guitar as the child beside him bobs and spins and claps her hands. Three years ago Valerie Khoo traded full-time corporate life in the city to move here with her partner and focus on her art. There is something about Sydney's northern beaches environment that nurtures your creativity, she tells me. "It might be the space ... but I think it's the water. Being so near the water all the time – there is something very calming about that; it gives your brain the space to work out where it is meant to go. There's a particular energy about the water: it is meditative to watch. Every day there is a different mood, every day there is a different emotion ... I see that in my artwork."

Khoo has had a varied career: accountant, public relations executive, picture editor, writer for glossy magazines, freelance journalist. She even ran her own fashion label. She loves "all sorts of creativity", yet art came slowly. After leaving school she had "a misguided notion that to be a true creative you had to be poor. I didn't want to be poor!" she says, laughing. "I had bills to pay. I didn't want to be an artist starving in the garage. That's just what stories tell us, that's even what artists and writers and reports and studies on those industries tell us – it was always reinforced."

At the centre of every one of her artworks is a story, she says. Early on in her process, she knows the intention or emotion behind the work. "Sometimes it is a whole story, other times it is driven by an emotion. I guess I am just used to being a storyteller – I always have stories going on in my head – so I find this is a visual way to tell those stories. It's just part of what I do. I'm really passionate about creating imagery of positive intentions, so that when people see it they think of something positive. If I am angry or frustrated I might take that out on the canvas, but I am not going to sell it. I don't want to pass that energy on to someone else. I want someone to look at my art and go 'Ahhh', or have that calming feeling I have when I come back from the beach. Lately it has been about new beginnings or discovery, because that is what I have been doing all my life."

Thirteen years ago, when she realised she wanted to help people "achieve what they once thought impossible" Khoo started the Australian Writers' Centre. Beginning in Sydney, the centre has since expanded to Perth, Brisbane, Melbourne and online. Khoo is still involved as the chief executive officer but, she says, "I have a level of

flexibility. I have built a great team who have their areas of responsibility. It has taken a while to get the right people and structure – those things are important for me to be able to have that flexibility.” Khoo is the author of six books, a mentor to writers, and she publishes the weekly podcasts *So You Want to be a Writer* and *So You Want to be a Photographer*. Her life requires ruthless time management, she says. If she has 15 minutes spare, she works out how to fill it.

Khoo was appointed curator of the 2019 City of Sydney Lunar Festival, for the Year of the Pig. Running from February 1-10, the festival will feature dragon boat races in Darling Harbour and performances of traditional dance and Asian hip-hop. The animals of the zodiac will be represented as three-storey art installations, lining Circular Quay. Sculptures will be constructed in front of the Opera House and the Overseas Passenger Terminal. Different artists have designed the works, Khoo says. “It’s so exciting to see an artist’s vision go from the page to this giant thing. I love public art. It is something that Sydney is starting to do really well – lots of people get to appreciate it.”

Khoo’s own resolution for the new year is to sleep more. She is often up at 3am working but she says, “I’ve never considered work to be a chore. I have always loved learning and discovering new things. It isn’t a conscious decision – I just explore things I find interesting. I always follow my creative curiosity. I imagine I’ll just always be interested. If I always follow the things I am curious about, I will always be doing different things.”

We finish our coffee and talk about Khoo’s day: she plans to be in her studio, painting. A woman dressed in a Sea Shepherd T-shirt leaves the cafe with a loud goodbye to her friends. Inside, the man in a singlet stops playing the guitar and begins to whistle.

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on Jan 26, 2019 as “Riding the waves”. [Subscribe here](#).