

# Mai Nguyen-Long

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*Recently Mai Nguyen-Long - the face behind the Metamorphic Mongrels of Viva la Gong 2012, was kind enough to spend some time away from her busy lifestyle to chat with us. Based in Bulli, Mai has explored a number of mixed media throughout her art career including paper mache, collage, painting and drawing. Through art she gains thought, sight and stability, and confesses that her shy personality makes exhibiting the hardest part of being an artist. Mai's next big project **Beyogmos** opens at Wollongong Art Gallery in February 2014. Check out our interview with her below.*

## ***Who are you and what do you do?***

My name is Mai Nguyen-Long. I'm a visual artist.

## ***What is your creative process?***

It is mostly very intuitive. I follow something that stirs me. I question it, doubt myself, and try to learn as much as possible. Then I just do. I play around in the studio. The more play time the better. I could think for days on end, but essentially it is only working with materials in a very physical way that can provide me with some substance to move forward with. I call it 'doing time'. It is fun, but can also be stressful and lonely, which retrospectively ends up kind of okay as I have to remind myself it is all part of the journey. Exhibiting is the bit I dislike most: large open interiors unsettle me and I've always been really shy. But my life enjoyment factor is definitely on the rise. I think that comes with age – the more to look forward to.

## ***What kind of mediums do you use?***

I have always enjoyed drawing. I began with pen drawings, then went into oil painting. In 2006 I transitioned into making intensely decorated papier mache objects using acrylic paints. I am now working in a range of different mediums all at once and having fun with found and recycled objects. One of my newest challenges is working with charcoal animation.

## ***Why do you choose to use these mediums?***

I am trying to use everything I have found or have at hand as much as possible, and without spending any money. It is driven by a value principle as well as a very practical survival decision. It is a worthwhile creative challenge.

## ***Describe the space where you normally create.***

Until a few months ago when I moved into a formal studio space, for most of my art years I used the second bedroom of a 2 bedroom Sydney apartment as my studio. After more than a decade of the art overflowing into the lounge and every other room of the flat my partner finally took a stand and we moved to Bulli. Now I have an amazing studio space right in my backyard.

## ***Who or what inspires your work?***

Everything and everyone - too many artists, people, and events to mention. As a school kid I loved the German Expressionists especially Chaim Soutine and his animal carcasses. I loved Käthe

Kollwitz, especially her 1903 etching *Woman with Dead Child*. I guess in some ways those images never left me. I tried to get away and gravitate towards more whimsical work. But heading on in life I now feel that these works reveal to us what makes us so human, and it is in knowing our humanity that life becomes so much richer. There is incredible depth there and hence cause for hope. There is no 'perfect' in life. Truth is what is perfect. And there are many versions of truth. What drives my work is a search for meaning, understanding and learning. Making the art helps me think, helps me see, and keeps me stable. There have been a few very special mentors and colleagues in my life and I cannot ever discount the value of those relationships. I'm okay with not being able to find my way by myself. Currently I am grateful to be working with Gina Fairley. She is curating my **Beyogmos** show and I am learning an incredible amount from her. It is inspiring to have that kind of exchange and rapport and it is not something that is always available.

***How does where you grew up and where you live now affect your art?***

I cannot escape the influences of my upbringing, much as I tried to suppress it. It chases one through life. It shows up everywhere, and eventually you have to come to terms with these things. I was born in Hobart to a Vietnamese father who came to Australia when he was 17, and a 4th generation Australian mother of Anglo-Irish decent. We then lived in Papua New Guinea for 5 years and The Philippines for 10. Then I lived several years in Canberra, Brisbane and a year each in China and Vietnam, and shorter stays living in Taiwan and Fiji. It made me very keen to find a place I could call 'home'. Bulli is my home now. There is a lot of light and sky here. This will affect my work.

***Do you remember the first time you created something?***

Not really. But I cannot remember ever not doodling.

***If you were listening to someone describe your work, how would you like it to be described?***

The word 'interesting' is quite rubbery. That is a nice word. Words are difficult and I can get too hung up on words and their meaning. However, any kind of feedback is always welcome and necessary. I am working on developing a thicker skin.

***Do you think about the relationship between artist and viewer when creating?***

Yes. I do consider my audience. This is essential and a social responsibility. But it is only one factor in amongst a myriad of other considerations.

***What does community mean to you as an artist?***

I like the idea of many communities and sub-communities within those communities. I caution against the idea that a given 'ethnic' community can be representative of the views of all persons of that particular ethnic background in Australia. Just as an 'Australian community' abroad might be multifaceted and diverse within that label, so a 'Vietnamese community' can be extremely diverse. Never assume there is a homogenous experience of identity even though a person might fall under the same label. Labels can be very misleading and misrepresentative. My feeling is that

it is important to be able to move in and out of different communities and not be trapped by labels, and to be able to look in from the outside as well as to look outside from the inside.

***How are you supported as an artist in Wollongong?***

I would not be able to sustain my arts practise without a very understanding partner. Money is never a joke. It is a constant reality check. I am grateful to have had my practise supported by Wollongong City Council Cultural Services through my Metamorphic Mongrels project in 2012, funded by Festivals Australia. I was really happy to be included in the Wollongong Art Gallery 2011 Generations exhibition, and I am currently preparing for a 2014 solo show with them.

**Beyogmos** opens February 28 and I fully preoccupied by this project at the moment. I have also been able to exhibit my work with a couple of the International Women's Day shows curated by Sue Bessell, and the Matthew Gillett Gallery at The Scarborough Hotel included a selection of my work in their inaugural show earlier this year. All these opportunities have been really wonderful.

***Are there changes or improvements you would like to see?***

A critical need for me until recently was finding affordable studio space in the local area. I was feeling quite desperate for that. I do have a space now, but I know a lot of other artists who would appreciate finding solutions, too. It would be great if, for example, the vacated Vesuvius site at McCaughley's Beach could be converted into a massive arts / craft workshop and studio area. Coming to Wollongong for the first time it struck me as a very remote and deserted place. I could never imagine anyone wanting to live here. Now I can't ever imagine wanting to go back to Sydney. I don't now how to address Wollongong's image – there seems to be a fair degree of cultural cringe here - but addressing the issue may generate more job opportunities...it would be nice to find a part time job.

***What's the next step in your creative journey?***

My upcoming solo show, **Beyogmos**, curated by Gina Fairley, at Wollongong Art Gallery 25 Feb-25 May 2014 (see image). It's a steep and welcome challenge for me.



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***Where do you want to be?***

I want to be comfortable about being me. I want to own all my flaws and shortcomings. I want to de-clutter and be more spiritually at peace with the world. I want to be in a space where I can give myself more psychological and mental room to move, and give more room to others. I want to be able to know my own thoughts, own my own thoughts, and know what my boundaries are. I'm still discovering those details.

***At Papergirl, we are all about giving art. What is the greatest gift you have ever received?***

Gifting is good. But I don't believe in giving where a recipient is unprepared to receive. However, I also believe many gifts can arrive as blessings in disguise. In 2008 the Premier of NSW shut down all state owned corporations. It meant I lost my 11 year job. However, this enabled me to stop running away from the idea that I really wanted to devote more time on my art. Replying to your question in the immediacy of today, I have to say that definitely the greatest gift I have ever received is my Bulli Bunker – the studio Stuart just built me. It is better than I ever dared to dream.

***Interview by Brittany Carter***

For more information see [www.mai-long.com](http://www.mai-long.com) <http://www.papergirlwollongong.com/blog/>