

ILLUSTRATING WHAT WE

Brooklyn-based illustrator, Jing Wei, has been drawing her whole life and found her way into illustration during her college years, after which she moved to New York to forge a career. Here she reflects on her experience of immigrating to the US as a child, how the support of her parents influenced her trajectory, the struggle to find her style and why she avoided drawing people for so long and why she's playing the long game versus seeking out short-term notoriety and fame.

TELL ME ABOUT WHERE YOU GREW UP AND HOW IT INFLUENCED YOUR CHILDHOOD.

I was born in China and lived there for the first seven years of my life. In 1993, we immigrated to the States. My dad came first to set up a foundation and my mom followed with me a couple years later. Then we started our life in America. I guess I always drew, but all kids grow up drawing so I didn't think there was anything special about it. When I moved to the US, I felt a complete loss of identity and culture. I didn't have anything to grab onto. I felt behind and I tried to catch up by learning the language and learning what American kids liked and did. Drawing was the thing that was consistent the entire time. It was a way to connect with people and keep myself happy and entertained. That's when it started to click for me.

Fast forward to high school. I was a decent student, but I never gravitated toward any topic as passionately as I did drawing. When it came time for college, it made sense for me to apply to art school, so I put all my eggs in one basket and only applied to art schools. Then my dad and I did a tour of a few of the schools across the country, which is still one of my favorite trips that we've taken together.

When he and I went to the East Coast, I fell in love with Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). It also worked out because RISD is a well-known school. My parents thought that if I was going to do this, I should be doing it at the best school and giving it 110%. So I went to RISD and after graduation I moved to New York where I fell into a really amazing community of people.

I don't have a common story for immigrant children. My parents didn't put pressure on me. They let me discover what I like, which was incredible. I never got any resistance

from them. They've always supported me in this decision. I think this is partially because they didn't grow up with the luxury of choice, so it must be nice to see me in a situation where I can really craft an ideal life for myself.

“THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS TO BE CONFIDENT IN YOUR WORTH AND NOT UNDER-SELL YOURSELF OR UNDERESTIMATE YOUR VALUE.”

DID YOU KNOW THAT YOU WANTED TO MOVE TO NEW YORK AFTER COLLEGE?

Yeah, it seemed like the logical next step because I wasn't going to move back to California and everything I was interested in was in New York. I wanted to go freelance and I didn't exactly know how I was going to do that, but I met so many talented and inspiring people at RISD, which is a huge part of going to a college like that. You build a community that stays with you throughout your career. So I moved to New York in 2008 with a bunch of friends and we shared this crazy loft in Bushwick back when it was more affordable. (laughing) Our bedrooms didn't even have walls, which you're down for when you're 22. We were somewhat living that artist's dream that we had envisioned for ourselves.

TELL ME ABOUT THE FIRST FEW YEARS OUT OF COLLEGE WHEN YOU WERE FREELANCING. I WANT TO KNOW HOW YOU GOT CLIENTS, WHAT THE BIGGEST FINANCIAL CHALLENGES WERE, AND IF YOU WERE YOU DOING OTHER WORK TO PAY THE BILLS WHILE BUILDING YOUR PRACTICE?

Everyone has their own path and I see some people who are superstars right out of the gate, but I was not one of those people. I am a practical person and I struggled to be confident in my work right out of school. I got to New York and

didn't want to burn through my savings in the first six months so I knew I had to get a job to support myself. Once you move to New York, it's like this timer is set off and there's a sense of urgency to create stability for yourself.

I had an internship working on an Adult Swim pilot. That taught me how to work with other people, how crazy people can be in New York, and how little they can care about you as a person. I was just a set of hands. After that I got a steady part-time job teaching Mandarin to babies on the Upper West Side, which was fun, but very bizarre. At the same time, I tried to pick up freelance work. I sent out promos and really hustled, but sometimes it just takes time. And it takes longer for some people. I think that my portfolio wasn't ready and I needed time to develop my technical skills and become confident in my ability to execute strong concepts. I owe a lot to some of my earlier clients, like the New York Times and Bloomberg—people who had fast turnaround jobs to test me out on. That helped me build my portfolio and before I knew it, I had solid editorial work. Once that foundation was established, I was able to gain more momentum.

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CONSIDERING THAT YOU'RE THE ONLY PERSON IN YOUR FAMILY WHO HAS PURSUED A CREATIVE PATH, EVEN THOUGH YOUR PARENTS WERE SUPPORTIVE, DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE TO SOMEONE WHO'S MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT THEIR FUTURE?

One trait that I think is important to have is persistence. Endurance is a huge part of what makes a lot of people stay in the game. It's important to be aware of the long game. A lot of people want to get famous quickly or have a ton of Instagram followers as an end goal. That doesn't matter if you burn out and become irrelevant in five or ten years because you're doing the same thing. People should not satisfy trends. You want to get to your true voice and spend your time figuring out who you really are so you make work that's truthful and honest, and I think that will resonate more than anything else.

YOU GREW UP ON THE WEST COAST, WENT TO SCHOOL ON THE EAST COAST, AND THEN STAYED HERE. HOW DOES NEW YORK INFLUENCE YOUR CREATIVITY AND WORK?

I think that there's such a crazy pace to the city that drives my work and the way I work, for better or worse. New York instills this sense of urgency that encourages you to take on a lot, all at once. If I have a dull moment, I can start to panic and wonder what's next, which is probably not a good

thing, but that's also wrapped up in this compulsion to constantly be making things. But I think it's ultimately worth it because when I sit down at my computer to work, I feel satisfied. This is a city that is equally challenging and inspiring, a balance that feels appropriate for this profession.

OVER THE LAST EIGHT YEARS OF RUNNING A BUSINESS, HAVE YOU GAINED ANY PRACTICAL ADVICE YOU CAN GIVE TO READERS WHO ARE FREELANCING OR THINKING ABOUT IT?

You definitely have to stay on top of the business part of it. Some people have an easier time with that. I'm more neurotic about keeping everything in check and I enjoy the business side of things. But some people like the support of an agent for that. The most important thing is to be confident in your worth and not undersell yourself or underestimate your value. Starting out, a lot of my own personal insecurities affected how I ran my business, which was bad. I was undercharging. I wasn't standing up for myself. There's also the greater responsibility to maintain a standard for your peers and the industry.

“I want to find more time for experimentation. Once you get in the cycle of doing job after job, you lose that sense of play. I want to stretch myself. In order to do that I need to stop, make time, and take risks to do things I haven't done before.”

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