

Ping Zhu

Illustrator

Los Angeles native, Ping Zhu, is an illustrator currently based in Brooklyn, New York.

She is a graduate of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. Her clients include the New York Times, Pentagram, New Yorker, Coach, GOOD Magazine,

The Independent, Sunday Times, Pushkin Press, Hèlium, and Nobrow Press. She received the ADC Young Gun in 2013 and her work has been recognized by American Illustration and Communication Arts.

Describe your path to what you're doing now.

I studied illustration at Art Center in Pasadena, which is one city away from where I grew up. I came to that decision in high school, when I felt rebellious against how people were defining success. It sounded like academia was the only way to find your way in the world, but I rejected that idea. I wanted a chance to be really good at something, and drawing was one thing I thought I had a chance at. So I drew a lot and started attending portfolio days, which introduced me to the world of illustration. I applied to three art schools, chose Art Center, went there for four years, moved to London for a few years after graduating, and then came back to New York to continue my illustration life.

Let's talk in more detail. When you were growing up, was creativity part of your life, and how did you decide to focus on illustration?

I wish I could say I drew a lot as a kid, but I never found it to be any more interesting than other things that kids liked. I actually fell into it because I had friends who took an art class on Saturdays, and I wanted to hang out with them. My mom sent me to the class, but my friends stopped taking the class a year later. I just stayed with it and kept going every Saturday until I was 18. The biggest benefit was that it sharpened my drawing abilities more so than a high school art class would have. It felt good to pretend I had some secret power since I was so average at most things.

Was that in middle school?

I started taking classes near the end of elementary school and continued throughout high school. I also took figure drawing classes in high school when I became more serious about drawing.

Did you consider, or were you encouraged, to study anything else?

Honestly I think it was the latter. I grew up in a Chinese family, and I'm the oldest child. My parents come from a conventional background where, if you can't do what you're given well, then it's hard to convince them that you can do what you want well. It's a way of showing responsibility, and it was how they were brought up. I disagreed with it because I didn't like the idea of doing something I didn't enjoy or feel passionate about when I had all these feelings for something else. My parents wanted me to consider other occupations and have a backup plan, but I wanted to follow my instincts and see if that would lead to something good. I know my parents wanted me to sustain myself in what I pursued; they were worried. In the end, I won the argument: I told them I felt like I had a better chance at making a bigger wave in the arts than in academics. I didn't apply to any academic schools, and I got into all three art schools I applied to. That felt like my first breakthrough on this alternative career path.

What has been your path from graduating college until now?

When I was still in college, I came to New York to visit a few art directors and see if I could really hustle like an illustrator. One of the places I visited was the New York Times when Leanne Shapton was still there. The day before I left, she asked me to do the Letters¹ piece, and that was my first encounter with the real illustration world. Someone gave me money to do what I wanted to do, and it was amazing.

And while you were still in school!

Yeah. It was thrilling, even though the piece was the size of a postage stamp. I called my mom and asked her to buy the paper. I had brought all my painting materials with me to New York in case I got a job, but I didn't actually think it would happen. I remember running to find a Kinko's to use a scanner and send the

file because I was staying with a friend who didn't have anything except a laptop. It's fun looking back over the past four or five years because I'm still working with the Times; it's been a nice relationship to have.

Have you always freelanced?

Yes, I have.

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And you moved to London after school. Why there?

It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I didn’t want to miss. I had been out of college for a few months, and moving to London was like starting from square one again. During school, I had built up so many experiences that helped me feel confident. I was comfortable with my friends and my surroundings. In moving, I wanted to test and push myself so that I didn’t plateau or lose momentum. It was a big reality check. I realized that maybe moving away from all of my friends and family wasn’t the easiest, but I kept treading water while I was away. I didn’t do it alone, either; I have Otto Boreson to thank for helping me through a lot of the rough patches.

That’s a big move.

It was. I grew up east of Pasadena, but went to school in Pasadena. It was very familiar to me. I lived at home when I was in college, too, so I was used to being around my family. The perk was being able to come home to a cooked meal. I miss that now. (laughing)

I wish that still happened. So, how long were you in London?

Three years.

And then you came here, to New York?

A few months before I officially moved, I had gone back to Los Angeles to visit family. On the way back to London, I stopped in New York for a week. I wasn’t completely sure if I wanted to stay in London or move on to something new, so I wanted to see if New York was a feasible plan. While I was visiting, I met other illustrators and designers, including some of the people I now share a studio with. Everything slowly fell into place. It confirmed that this was where I wanted to be, and I moved here at the end of September.

Did you have an “Aha!” moment when you knew that illustration was what you wanted to do?

I don't know if there was one moment, but I started learning about the subtle differences between fine art and illustration in college and finding out that maybe my skills were better suited for an audience rather than expressing myself and my ideas as a fine artist would. I think both are incredibly hard, but I think that I would do poorly in the fine art world because, at this point, it feels like a foreign language to me.

Not too long ago, I went back into my LiveJournal account and found an entry that I wrote when I was about 15 or 16 that said, “I'm going to be an illustrator.” I stated it that day. It was funny to read it now, so many years later. I decided that, but I don't remember why or what brought me to that conclusion. I'm not sure if it was me realizing it or if others were recognizing it in me and telling me.

Have you had any mentors along the way?

I think a few of my instructors from school helped a lot. In my second or third year, I took an illustration course taught by Paul Rogers. The course applied graphic design elements to illustration, so it wasn't just narrative drawing and painting. His attitude was more relaxed and hands-off. If you didn't care about the class, he wasn't going to push you to make you care more. I liked that because you got what you wanted out of it.

I also took an op-ed class taught by Brian Rea and Paul Rogers. Brian used to be an art director at the Times before he moved to Los Angeles. The class was based around the op-ed page in the Times, and that helped a lot in terms of work ethic and concepting on the fly. It's a layered type of assignment where you have to come up with an idea in two hours, draw it, explain it, and not lose your head in the process. That class was good and accurate

“I did have a lot of resistance from my parents, which I understand. I don't think they were unsupportive, but they wanted to make sure that I was sure.”

“It's not about finding ideal situations to put myself in, but being able to jump over obstacles, become more flexible, and learn...”

practice in preparing me for assignments with short turnarounds. When I finally got my first op-ed assignment, I felt like I was in somewhat familiar territory.

And what about once you were out working in the real world? Did you have anyone help you regarding the business side of things since you went straight into freelance work?

I had an agent shortly after I graduated, so I had someone to help me with the things I was unfamiliar with: spreading the word about myself as an illustrator, budgets, contracts. Those things were hard for me to sort out in the beginning because I didn't have a way to measure the right price for a job, et cetera. It's uncomfortable to ask others what they charge, and not everyone is open to talking about it.

Did you seek out an agent?

She approached me and also represented my instructor and mentor, Paul. I had expressed interest in having help, but never directly asked for an agent. No one in college offered that as a solution or even an option. I met her at ICON in 2010 and we talked briefly and had a nice connection, so I decided to try it and see if it worked for me. I worked with that agent for three years, which were some really important years. After that period, I decided to do things on my own. There were different reasons why, but it was mainly because I've never freelanced alone and I wanted to know what it was like. It's like tasting anything for the first time, and hearing someone's description of it isn't the same as actually doing it yourself.

[speaking of tasting things, a tasty cheese board arrives and we dig in]

I love cheese, but my parents don't like it. They didn't grow up eating dairy in China, so there was a lot of soy milk and tofu in the house when I was growing up. I guess it would have been pretty easy for me to become vegan.

Both of your parents grew up in China?

Yeah. My dad came to the US for college at the University of Washington in Seattle, where I was born. Then we moved to Rhode Island, where my dad earned his PhD; and my brother was born there. Then we zig-zagged across the country to California for my dad's job at JPL in Pasadena—that's the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Both of my parents studied meteorology, which is also why it probably didn't make sense that I wanted to do art.

Is there anyone in your family who has worked in a creative field?

I don't think so. Most of my extended family is in China and has always been. Unfortunately, I'm not close enough to them to know exactly what they're involved with. The culture there is about working and surviving and providing; it's not as focused on encouraging your passions. To me, illustration is a way of communicating to make the world more connected and cultured, and it colors the world. But as far as survival and priorities, it seems impossible to think that illustration would be accepted as a way to support your family in China in the 1970s when my parents were growing up.

"...painting with gouache means I'm taking tiny risks every time the paint touches the paper. It's pretty permanent, so if it's not what I want, I have to work around it or start over. The nature of my work is gestural and the effect of dry brushing is unpredictable, even if I try to control it."

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