

Artist Interview: Shirley Wu

Transcript

00:00

[gentle music]

Steph 00:15

Hello and welcome to the SALA podcast. My name is Steph and today I'm catching up with artist Shirley Wu in her studio, sort of... are we underground in [Nexus Arts](#)?

Shirley 00:26

Yes, I think we're in the basement

Steph 00:28

Anyway, it's very cool. I've never been in this room before and yeah, so that's where we're catching up. We are meeting on the traditional lands of the Kaurna People and we pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. Alright, Shirley, thank you for making time today. I know you're very busy. I'm excited to hear about your practice and where you draw inspiration for the work that you make and what you've got on the go. But for those who might not have seen your past work before, can you share what kind of materials you like to work with?

Shirley 01:02

Sure. Thank you, Steph, for having me today. So although I'm more recognized as a glass artist now, but I have been working in a wide range of materials such as found riverstones, silicone, ceramic, metal, slime form

Steph 01:25

Did you say slime?

Shirley 01:26

Yeah.

Steph 01:28

My gosh, you've got everything. And do you consider yourself like a...? Because I know you're a jeweller, you're... is it sculpture? Or do you... I don't know. I guess you've got many hats, I guess.

Shirley 01:39

Yeah, I would like to explore more and more, you know, art form, medium materials as well, because I don't take that as

Steph 01:49

not sort of limited to one identity of [medium]?

Shirley 01:52

no, they're my tools to express or interact. Although glass has been a dominant medium for me in the last two, three years. So I've literally been have been mainly making with glass and also with clay. But even in my glass sculptures, I work with other mediums such as sola wood, essential oil, I like to you know, get to know the characteristics of each material.

Steph 02:27

And how do you sort of simply describe or sum up your artwork to somebody new?

Shirley 02:34

So the key words in my works are like sensory experience in body to experience healing, they can be involved in the process of making or creating, or the expressive or interactive physical works. Some of my earlier works encouraged people to touch to feel the temperature, the tactility, to smell. My practice is also about personal development and exploration of identity, a healing journey, and meditation.

03:19

[gentle music]

Steph 03:19

I can't wait to get into the use of the oils. But first, let's just quiz you about the progression of your education. So you've got three qualifications from three different countries, a Bachelor of Arts in jewelry and accessories from Middlesex University in London, Master of Design and Contemporary Art from UniSA, but the sandwiched in between those you studied deployment of aromatherapy and bodywork in Hong Kong. And you mentioned that this particular area of study, holistic therapy, that's a source of inspiration for your work. And I do get that very strongly looking at your work and the use of you know, oils and things like that. Can you I mean, maybe explain what holistic therapy entails so that we can understand how it connects to your work?

Shirley 04:06

Sure. It's interesting that you mention the aromatherapy diploma I did in Hong Kong. It brings me back to the last project I did before I left London to China. It was about massage. I made a series of hand-held body objects that can be used as massage tools. Yeah. I think that was a seed planted in me.

Steph 04:36

Yeah, that was an early work, wasn't it?

Shirley 04:39

Yeah. And that was healing. I think that was a big theme and becoming like continuously a big theme in my work as well. And that's what brought me into doing art therapy later.

Steph 04:56

Cool. Amazing.

Shirley 04:58

And to answer your question: the idea of holistic therapy was coming from the training in Hong Kong, aromatherapy and bodywork training in Hong Kong. It encouraged me to see myself as a whole.

Steph 05:18

as a whole?

Shirley 05:19

Yes. Yeah, like as a whole experience.

Steph 05:22

Yeah. This I guess that's in the word holistic, isn't it?

Shirley 05:27

Yeah, literally. So this body and mind are connected to the wider world in many ways.

Steph 05:36

That's a great entry point for a practice, actually. Because, yeah, you're not just thinking materially, you're thinking on many levels of connection.

Shirley 05:45

Yeah, thanks to the great tutor I had in Hong Kong. And like, that literally brought me back to the memory when I was traveling intensively between Mainland China, where home is/was, to Hong Kong across the border every weeks for a year.

Steph 06:09

To do the training? Yeah wow.

Shirley 06:11

Yeah. Yeah. It was like I was between different transportations from car, to high speed train, to Metro, to train again, to bus, literally, you know, you have to go through four, five different kind of transportation.

Steph 06:28

ironically, you would have needed a massage after all that.

Shirley 06:31

And it was crowded as well.

Steph 06:35

Yeah, wow. What an interesting time of your life that would have been.

Shirley 06:38

Yeah. And then like when I sit and in the class or lay on a massage table, it was all of a sudden a different world. Very relaxed, very therapeutic, self paced. And it was surreal experience.

Steph 06:56

Yeah. What a contrast. Yeah.

Shirley 06:58

And this was a mirror of my life as well. Traveling in between places, different cultures. And that's, like, to me, that was a constant loss of stability. And also the sense of belonging, the displacement. And I needed something to anchor me. And so jewellery making, aromatherapy, now glass and Chinese calligraphy, they were, that's, I think that's how it come.

Steph 07:34

Yeah. So that sort of intentional mindfulness of making and being present. Is that sort of clawing back a bit of that, you know, time and control?

Shirley 07:43

Yeah, literally. So when it comes into my practice, the idea of holistic therapy helps me to integrate my separated mind and body; to meditate through making. My body is like, also become the material as well. My breath become part of the process. Yeah.

Steph 08:15

So it's so actually the as much as we can look at the objects that you've produced, the process is significant and very important in the making. And you know, it comes from a place of this process benefiting you first, and then you know, expression of that. So that's, that's really cool.

08:45

[gentle music]

Steph 08:45

Did you end up becoming a practitioner of aromatherapy and bodywork as well? Or do you continue to do that alongside? Or is it blurred with your practice?

Shirley 08:56

That's an interesting question. Yes, I did actually go on to practice as a massage therapist for six years.

Steph 09:03

Oh, wow.

Shirley 09:05

And that wasn't the plan after I finished the training. Until I moved to Australia. I didn't know it would become my survival skill to support my living and art practice. But it was great. The massage practice also kept me doing repetitive movements, and build up rhythm as well of my body. I get to know my hands really well. It requires me to focus on the sensation of my hand, how to handle my hand. And these, were essentials in healing of touching,

Steph 09:49

Yeah, no hearing you talk about massage. It just sounds like you're talking about your practice. So yeah, that is a very clear connection. That's really cool. And I do really like those early works. The sort of forms that... yeah I get that impression. It's like, yeah, I can almost feel the hands on my back, you know, looking at those objects. Now you were the winner of the 2021 [City Rural](#) Emerging Artist Award as part of SALA Festival with [a glass sculpture](#) that kind of like undulated and was filled with a yellow liquid, I'm assuming that it was an oil. And I've seen similar ones from you with blue, green, orange

liquid inside. Some of them are full, some of them are partially full. And they usually have these rather sweet little corks holding the liquid in. This is probably one of the types of works that people would have seen of yours. Can you tell me about this series?

Shirley 10:44

Yeah, sure. Um, I think this body of work that organic hollow glass forms were made of test tubing where like laboratory used tubing.

Steph 11:01

Really it's made out of test tubes?

Shirley 11:03

Yeah. Well, that's where it comes from

Steph 11:07

Oh, yeah.

Shirley 11:08

Also people call them borosilicate glass or hard glass. They have their very specific property. Compared to other glass, like window glass, soft glass, optical glass. Um, the starting point, for me was a process of trying to find a solution for scent, and to storage and diffuse the scent. And then that led me to start learning lamp working, which is a technique that in glass I'm using today. And so during this process, I was taught to make regular shapes to bend glass to join glass together, like in scientific glassblowing. But for some reason, my character just didn't like that. I like make mistakes. So I did, I started making the glass into very organic shapes. And I really just resonate with it with my heart. So I started develop the glass or the glass has their own mind

Steph 12:26

mind of its own. Yeah.

Shirley 12:28

And then they developed into quite quirky shapes.

Steph 12:34

Yeah, it's hard to describe them almost. They just kind of go in their own direction.

Shirley 12:38

Yeah, that's literally how I would describe it as well. They have their own mind, they go wherever they want. And I often don't have physical imagination of what it comes out and

Steph 12:53

you just have to see

Shirley 12:54

I just have to see and follow its mind.

Steph 12:57

Wow, that's so cool.

Shirley 12:59

And also, later on, it became a process for me to meditate, to rethinking, restructure. And it's also a space for me to be able to rethink, restructure my thinking, like, my

Steph 13:16

like, the way you think about your practice the way I think about my practice?

Shirley 13:20

yeah, also rethink my way of thinking about my life and my culture, my identity. So there was a space there.

Steph 13:29

So that process of making allows you that time.

Shirley 13:32

Yeah

Steph 13:32

That's so cool. Yeah. And I guess you've got a, when you're in that unpredictable space of I don't know what this is going to turn out like, you do just kind of have to come back to basics and come back to yourself and just be in tune with the material. Yeah.

Shirley 13:47

Now that you said that, it literally brought me back to when I was making a, because the unknown of the result, I have to focus on the present moment; to focus on my breath; to focus on the state of the glass. Whether it's molten, what's the reference point? What's the reference color? I have to focus on my sensation, my hearing my smelling my eyesight, and how I feel the temperature as well. It's all of that. It's the weight of the glass, the gravity, the rhythm, the movement...

Steph 14:25

It's all connected isn't it. Well, yeah, I guess there would be nothing that makes you need to be more present than working with glass. Yeah, you can't be not paying attention.

Shirley 14:38

It is a very risky and dangerous process. If you take that, you know, the torch can go up to thousands of degree. It will burn anything, basically.

Steph 14:51

So you need to be in that zone

Shirley 14:53

super intense, super focused, but also very meditative in the time. In a way it's very weird.

Steph 15:01

That is weird because the results are so... and you know, what you get out of it is so meditative and the sort of risk and the danger is such a strange contrast. But yeah, I guess it's that's what balance is, isn't it? That's that's sort of one thing against another, so, very cool. I had not thought about the danger.

Shirley 15:23

I guess it will be the evidence of the processes as well, like glass as a material. The transparency, the honey-like consistency in molten state. In my previous mentor, [Peter Minson](#)'s words, he describes glass as a frozen fluid.

Steph 15:49

Yeah, yeah.

Shirley 15:51

So what you did to it, it literally has its own mark-making. Yeah, if you, you know, take that. And, of course, it developed itself in the process as well.

Steph 16:04

Yeah. That's so cool. Thanks Peter. Now, my first encounter of your work was at [FELTspace](#) during I think, Fringe Festival in 2021, and it was in the backroom gallery and you like walked in, and there were these really tall columns of, I think, parchment, -but I could be wrong- on the back wall. And some of those sheets of parchment were decorated with Chinese calligraphy and some of them were, like, decorated with the shadows of suspended glass sculptures, but they still evoked that mark-making on the paper. Can you please talk about [this work](#)?

Shirley 16:45

Of course, I remember those beautiful photos.

Steph 16:49

Oh, yes, I took photos of it

Shirley 16:51

of my work. That was great. The body of work was for the first time I bought elements from my traditional cultural heritage, which is Chinese. The series of work was part of [FELTspace award program](#), where I had the chance to be mentored by amazing glass artists [Ursula Halpin](#), and worked with the supportive FELTspace team. It was an incredible experience and also that connected to my next opportunity: the Graduates in residence in [Canberra Glassworks](#). And also later on I became part of the FELTspace Committee.

Steph 17:42

What a great springboard. I think FELTspace is like that; you sort of get in that circle and you just get absorbed - in a good way.

Shirley 17:51

Yeah, totally, totally. Um, so talking about the work, it was, it was a process for me to restructure my knowing about my traditional culture, and also to re-establish how I see my upbringings, my culture and

my surroundings. And also, it was a stage that I didn't focus on what the Chinese calligraphy content was about. And one of the reasons why I this structure of the of the calligraphy into parts and strokes, because at the time, I was trying to focus on the process of breathing on both practice either Chinese calligraphy and also lampworking. It was a focus of the movement, the breath, the lifting up the brush, and dropping down and holding the breath and also relief the breath along moving with my brush.

Steph 19:00

Wow. So it's almost like the breath work in mark making or you know, whatever practice it is, that is really cool. Did you slow like, did you do that then slower to time with your breath? Or did you just be mindful of it?

Shirley 19:16

I was more of be mindful of my breath. And that takes a lot of practice to do so and often I just get in and out in and out. It's like practicing meditation,

Steph 19:33

oh like losing the focus and then bringing yourself back?

Shirley 19:35

Yeah losing your focus and coming back to the focus coming back to the breath again. And I think that also brings my Chinese calligraphy practice into align[ment] between my how my hand moves, how my mind moves, how my body moves, at the same time. And then lamp-working takes that practice to another stage, which is slowing the whole process of making one stroke. So it will take me, I don't know, 10 times more or even longer, I don't know, to make one stroke in glass, than doing it in Chinese calligraphy.

Steph 20:22

Wow. Yeah, that's just when you think like you'd already slowed it down. You take it to another level, it's like, yeah, trying to make one stroke of a character, is it? Would you call it a character?

Shirley 20:33

A stroke

Steph 20:34

Yeah. And then you're glass forming it.

Shirley 20:39

So that slowness really helps me of thinking about the shape of the stroke, and how it starts, how it transformed, how it go down and up again, and then it ends sharply, or dully, or rounding shapes. So the shapes was very much about the process, the movement, the breath itself. So then, at that stage, I didn't want to bring any content. I remember at [the] exhibition when I was sitting at the gallery, there were quite a few visitors specifically asked me about 'what's the content',

Steph 21:26

Like what do what do they mean?

Shirley 21:27

Yeah. And then I was, I wasn't prepared for the answer at the time. But now when I think back, I really wasn't actually trying to focus on the content at all. I want you to see from either first perspective or second perspective, as in, it's a shape. It's just like someone who cross culture, doesn't understand the language, but see it as a beautiful mark making.

22:11

[gentle music]

Steph 22:11

Now, seeing as we are catching up within the Nexus building, I can only assume that there is a associated project or outcome that we can expect to follow. Can you please tell us what you've got coming up?

Shirley 22:26

Sure. I'm doing a three month studio residency at Nexus at the moment. And that would cumulate to an exhibition at [Fringe Festival](#) next month.

Steph 22:39

Wonderful! That's so soon.

Shirley 22:43

I know, it's only a month away. The opening is on the 16th of February, I think.

Steph 22:49

Wonderful. Yes, that is very soon, no pressure, no pressure. And what kind of work or practice have you been doing?

Shirley 22:57

In this project I'm doing a durational performance that focus...

Steph 23:03

Performance, that's new for you!

Shirley 23:04

Yeah. It's a totally new area, for me a first time experience outside of my comfort zone. Yeah. Never done performance before. Not sure later on. But I'm very much enjoying this process.

Steph 23:22

And it even though it's a new, medium, I guess for you, it still makes a lot of sense, given the goals of your practice, and you know, what you're focusing on. So yes, please, please tell me more, sorry I've interrupted.

Shirley 23:35

So in this project, I focus on the embodied experience, where I use my body as a tool for healing, through mindfulness, through connections, through self regulation. And that coming through my

walkings, and also my other meditative actions on the site, more specifically at Nexus courtyard on the disability ramp.

Steph 24:08

Oh ok yep the ramp that actually leads down into [Nexus]. Yeah, because if anyone hasn't been to Nexus before, you kind of got to go down to get to it. Yeah. Okay. So it's so you're actually moving around the site and drawing from that experience?

Shirley 24:23

Yeah. Actually, back to the question previously about material in my work. I think this time, my body is my material.

Steph 24:32

Wow.

Shirley 24:35

Because my project is site-focused. I have been doing walks, and a head-to-toe fully grounded ritual at the Nexus courtyard on the ramp, which led me to be curious about the history of the site.

Steph 24:51

Yeah, so like, head to toe, like you're connecting, you're lying sort of on the ground.

Shirley 24:55

I'm literally horizontal on the ground. On my belly, on my face, on my thigh. Being present and fully touching the ground.

Steph 25:09

Yeah. And what did you say that led you to after that?

Shirley 25:13

So it led me to be curious about what's behind this site, like, what's the history? So I started digging the what was before Nexus.

Steph 25:28

Right? Yeah, what was here before Nexus.

Shirley 25:29

yeah. Like what was it like in here like 100 years ago or even longer. And what I didn't expect was that I found there was Joss House at this corner of Hindley Street and Morphett Street, which is literally where Nexus, Jam Factory, and Mercury Cinema are today.

Steph 25:56

And what's a joss house?

Shirley 25:58

A joss house is, I think the term of joss house is from Portuguese language. It's a Chinese temple.

Steph 26:09

Oh, wow.

Shirley 26:09

Specifically, it was a Kuan Ti Temple, which is more of a local Chinese belief.

Steph 26:18

Yeah. Here! Amazing.

Shirley 26:21

Yeah. And it was used by the local Chinese community here who lives and works and obviously, you know, around this area, and where Hindley Street today, it used to be a center of Chinatown.

Steph 26:41

Wow I had no idea.

Shirley 26:45

I had no idea until I went to one day I went to the [Architecture Museum at UniSA](#). And there was a staff there and she has worked in UniSA for more than 20 years.

Steph 27:00

Oh, wow, what a wealth of knowledge.

Shirley 27:01

That's the Yeah. She had the rich knowledge and memory about an exhibition [that] acknowledged this history

Steph 27:11

Oh, wow. Yeah.

Shirley 27:13

But otherwise, I can't see any recognition and any road signs, anything about this vanished history?

Steph 27:22

Yeah nothing to indicate what was there?

Shirley 27:25

No. And that joss house was sitting there for almost, it was 94 years.

Steph 27:32

Wow

Shirley 27:32

Yeah, almost 100 years unto 84. That was when it was demolished.

Steph 27:38

Wow. And so how then, like, knowing that, how is that feeding back into this project?

Shirley 27:46

I think like as the very important meaning of it, as a new generation Chinese immigrant artist as well. This bonds me to the place, to the site, to the land, even further. Apart from the physical bond, which I've been doing, I developed a sense of belonging. Also the emotional bond as well, the cultural bond that more than 100 years ago, there was a group of people who were who were like me,

Steph 28:26

yeah, and they were here.

Shirley 28:28

Yeah, here, travelled all this way. It was even longer, harder traveling then, and try to survive here; try to make a living, try to you know, develop their family here, their life here. So this was a fantastic discovery for me.

Steph 28:28

Yeah gosh, I almost have chills. Oh, wow. And so what kind of... like to picture the outcome... like you'll have the exhibition, will you be doing regular performance? Or will there be remnants of performance? What will be in the space?

Shirley 29:10

The space will be focused on bringing that performance practice into the gallery space. There it will be shown as installation work. Where outlining more of a focus on internal experience of the performance that I have been doing at the courtyard. So I have things like I have been wearing white, specifically using my body as a canvas and trying to pick up whatever it's on the ground with the experience.

Steph 29:59

Oh right, so I'm looking at it behind you, so that I can see a white t shirts, some white pants and gloves, some socks. So that's the sort of debris of what you've been, of those performances and that wow, okay.

Shirley 30:13

Yeah. So for me, that's my process, but also it's documentation, as well as it's a work by itself.

Steph 30:23

Yeah. Yeah.

Shirley 30:25

That capsulated the time, the environment, my body as well as in the skeleton. And also the land.

Steph 30:40

Yeah. Wow. Very different to what you've done in the past. It's so exciting. Oh good.

Shirley 30:47

Yeah. As I said, this is totally new. it's totally out of my comfort zone. Very exciting. Very scary. But I think this is a turning point. It's a great turning point for me, that I have been using my body -my hands more specifically.

Steph 31:06

Yeah, you always have been.

Shirley 31:07

Yeah. But yeah, now I wanted to extend it to my whole body. I want to, you know... this, this body with memory, with trauma, with all this tracks, marks of time; How do I release it? How do I open it up? How do I get embodied experience and use this body to heal me.

Steph 31:36

I don't think we can top that. We might have to end there. Well, we're very, very excited to see so yeah, 16th of February is when it opens. Oh, and you mentioned before that there'll be some workshops? So tell me about those just quickly.

Shirley 31:55

The workshop will be open to public, having people over to join me to do the performance experience what I experienced. So that will be a group workshop or group performance. If you take that. The audience will be able to pick up the whole experience.

Steph 32:20

Wow, that's fantastic. And they'll just, there'll be booking information, actually, we'll put it in the show notes. Perfect. Oh, what an opportunity. Oh, well, on that note, I think we've tickled our brains plenty. So maybe we'll leave it at that. I think I've worn you out. Thank you so much.

Shirley 32:38

Thank you Steph.

Steph 32:39

And yeah, put all that information in there and we'll have to get to [that exhibition](#).

32:39

[gentle music]