

By utilising the free standing frame I have moved away from the standard medium of Western art, of stretching the material (canvas) tightly across a restrictive surface, and I instead fold and loop the fabric loosely over the frame I designed. This gives me freedom in the display process. My intention is to bring in different perspectives and have multiple ways of looking, in order to appreciate things differently. You feel like you are constantly being told to choose one way to do things and think about things - but at the end of the day you can only be true to yourself and I think it's important to embrace different ideas, cultures, and ways of making art. There is no right or wrong in art, only different sensibilities.

**5. Has the recent global challenge of the pandemic changed your perception about freedom, belonging and cultural fluidity?**

Not really, though I think these issues have become even more heightened or relevant. The global pandemic forced us to pause and look inwards. As we are confined at home, whether you want to or not you are going to think about your freedom, your identity, your friendships or relationships, and reflect on what is important to you. Some of us were locked out of Aotearoa for a while for various reasons, feeling exiled or alienated, an experience shared by refugees and many immigrants. The pandemic has brought these issues closer to home for everyone, not just for the people that have first-hand experience of being a refugee. It has placed us all on a more similar footing, I think. We are also constantly reminded of our physical vulnerability and mortality. To me, art can't be disengaged from the world.

**6. You often include moving image or video works alongside your work in fabric, what different elements does this contrast of mediums allow you to explore?**

As mentioned earlier, I am abandoning the idea of having to choose a specific media, moving away from classification and division. I want to create an immersive experience, a contemplative space with a sense of abundance and generosity - very much Southeast Asian aesthetics. It is also a play on or contrast between materiality and non-materiality: fabric is tactile, something you can and want to touch, whereas moving image appeals to other senses.

The video work *Summer Rain* is a contemplation on our internal world through the lens of our external or natural world. It records a period of seven days of summer rain in my neighbourhood in mid-December 2021, soon after we came out of our long lockdown in Tāmaki Makaurau. During this time the Pōhutukawa flowers bloomed and then withered within a fortnight, all their red flowers carpeted the floor, huddled in puddles of rain, lingering. All were past their lives and yet still shone so brightly, sharing everything that they were, giving their life to others. This speaks to a different kind of freedom and belonging. *Summer Rain* reflects on the notion of temporality, the vulnerability of every living being, and how we can continue to exist after the end of our lives through the memories of the people we left behind. All my videos are simple in construction, often composed of naturally occurring events that are poetic and time constrained.

In the video, there is one sentence that particularly reflects on these issues surrounding our mobility and freedom: 'How do you journey without travelling much?' This speaks about our confinement and feelings of isolation. Here, imagination is the key, I think. Through imagination we can attain freedom despite our physical restrictions and boundaries. This need for imagination extends to the making and of viewing art, too.



***A Way of Being Free*  
Rozana Lee in conversation with Mirabelle Field**

*Mirabelle Field, Northart's Gallery Assistant and PhD student in Art History at the University of Auckland, interviews artist Rozana Lee on her artistic influences and references in advance of her exhibition A Way of Being Free at Northart.*

## 1. What is the significance of the title of this exhibition and what does freedom mean here?

The title of this exhibition, *A Way of Being Free*, is borrowed from the title of a small book of essays (1997) by Ben Okri, a Nigerian poet and author on the theme of 'Freedom' in post-colonial and post-modern traditions. There is one segment of his essay that speaks deeply to me:

*"Nations and peoples are largely the stories that they feed themselves.  
If they tell themselves stories that are lies,  
they will suffer the future consequences of those lies.  
If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths,  
they will free their histories for future flowering."*

We all know the saying: *the truth will set us free*, but Okri goes deeper into the past history of each nation or culture to declare that only by acknowledging or honouring our past, can we fully embrace the future. In a macro sense, we can also apply this to ourselves - if I accept myself then I can embrace the future. That is a dream for everyone. We can make amends, we can try harder, we can look at ourselves and realise that we are doing better now than we were before. Everyone has their own way of being free, this is just one.

Freedom in this exhibition context means:

Freedom to carve out our cultural identity. Freedom to adopt and change based on our affiliations and not just based upon filiation that is inherited or physical attributes assigned at birth such as race, gender, and nationality. There are times when you realise that you can't be identified solely by these inherent characteristics. If you've moved around, or if your country of birth has alienated or forced you out, you no longer take these things for granted. I like the idea of forming my identity based on my affiliations - based on places I've lived and travelled to, people that have moved me and people I have relationships with, values I have adopted and cultures I feel connected or belonged to, and so on. I think this idea is reflective of our contemporary understanding of identity, which is fluid and subject to change - what I am today is not necessarily what I will be tomorrow or in a few years to come.

Freedom to abandon conventional hierarchies and categories that still apply in contemporary art and society: the low and the high, the marginalised and the mainstream, the East and the West. This is why I have expanded my artistic practice to multi-media; it allows me to explore ideas through different media as I see fit, and not being confined to one thing. I am interested in creating an interplay between artistic expressions and the experience of the everyday world. For me there is no separation between art and life - art is life.

## 2. When did you start working with this combination of mediums?

I grew up in a fabric shop-house in Aceh, Indonesia owned by my grand-parents and my parents, so I have always had a keen interest in fabric. In this context, everything was vibrant, colourful and full of patterns, and I used to fall asleep and nap on rolls of fabric in the shop. Indonesia is a country with over three hundreds ethnic groups and dialects, and more than 17,000 islands big and small, situated between the Pacific and Indian oceans. My lived experience has inspired my belief that people can be different and still be united in their common goals. I continue to believe this, despite the fact I experienced many racial and religious tensions, and at times violence, while living in Indonesia. This experience has translated into my way of working freely across different mediums, allowing cross-fertilisation, reflecting the complexity of our globalised world and contemporary identities.

I trained as a painter when I was studying for my BVA at AUT (2013-2015), during this time I incorporated batik collages I collected from my parental home into paintings. In my PGDipFA and MFA years at Elam (2017-2018), I continued to work with fabrics and started making my own batiks which extended to video work and site-specific installations. Working with fabric allows me to invoke my relationship with my family, and my extended and complicated relationship with my country of birth. Being a fourth generation migrant of Chinese descent in Indonesia, I was always positioned on the outside, often told I didn't belong, feeling miserable and always questioning my identity. Through my art practice, I want to honour my mixed-cultural heritage and the freedom of not having to choose one or the other, remembering this complicated past and cherishing a more encompassing identity.

## 3. What are the challenges and advantages of working with fabric, and on such a large scale?

The fabrics I work with, like silk, cotton, or calico, are fragile in nature, they are not as sturdy or enduring as thick canvas. Fabric, interestingly, is often thought to be a cheap or ordinary material, associated with craft, female work, and decorative art, and consequentially considered to be of lower value. The fact is, canvas is a type of fabric as well, the only difference is the way it is displayed - stretched over a wooden frame - and the decision of Western art history to call works on canvas 'high art'. I want to challenge this perception with textile works. Fabric is our second skin - we are almost constantly draped in fabric from birth to death - I think this is so beautiful.

The Batik making process is labour intensive, using a small ancient pen-like tool called tjanting for applying hot wax onto the surface of the fabric. The fabric is then hand-dyed, one colour at a time, until the desired result is achieved. The applied wax resists the dyes and therefore produces patterns. When using this ancient method of mark making, there is not much control over the outcome or room for error.

## 4. How does your artistic process reflect these themes of identity, freedom, and migration?

Batik acts as signifier for Indonesian cultural identity, having been made and used in Indonesia since the twelfth century. My batik incorporate the diverse cultural patterns I am affiliated with; they tell a story of my navigations across and between cultures. They bear symbolic, philosophical, and mythical significance and meaning: Islamic or Oriental floral scroll patterning signifies infinity and progression of time, waves and bird patterns symbolise movement and migration, ferns and Pohutukawa for Aotearoa - my adopted home country, the dragon and phoenix for my Chinese heritage representing power or strength, and birth and renewal. I am interested in how patterns tell a story, of where they originated, have been lost, or adapted by another country. Patterns not only bear historical and aesthetic knowledge of a specific culture, but also acts as a connecting thread between generations, diverse cultures, and countries through the transmission of religions, international trades, colonial imperialism, early migrations, and cross-cultural exchanges.

I have altered the end process by leaving the wax on the fabric for its sculptural quality as well as to signify an incompleteness, as a reflection of the fluidity of our identity. This points to a temporality of the 'in-between' experienced by migrants, allowing 'newness or change' to come into the world. It also speaks to the idea of an origin that is transformed as a result of exchange, migration, and globalisation. The fabric can be draped within a wooden frame and hung on the wall like a painting, placed on a free-standing frame and stood upright on the floor like a sculpture, or hung from the ceiling like a scroll or banner. This speaks to a constant shift in perspectives, reflecting the sense of uprootedness that follows mobility and migration. At the end of the day, no matter how you position it, the work is the same thing but depending on how you display it, it can take on multiple meanings or readings.