

# What can you do after studying art? Plenty



Graduates and educators say there is a wide array of jobs open to those with fine arts diplomas or degrees



Venessa Lee  
Senior Correspondent

As a child, Ms Lauryn Beth Fernandez was quiet and reserved. Art became a way for her to express herself.

"It was such a constant in my life. I took art as a CCA (co-curricular activity) from primary to secondary school," recalls the 22-year-old, who has an affinity for abstract art. In May, she completed her Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree in fine art at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa).

She initially had doubts about pursuing art full-time for her studies. "I was questioning whether art was a hobby for me or whether I

could make a living from it. In fact, I was more apprehensive than my parents," she says.

Aware of clichés where "people think you can only become an artist", she embarked on a diploma in fine art that she felt would not confine her to any one job.

About two years ago, she used her eyelashes to paint an artwork for her diploma course's graduation project.

Mixing facial cleansing balm and hypoallergenic eyeshadow, she made pigments that she applied on her lashes, which she used to paint abstract marks on a 50kg panel of paraffin wax.

"It stemmed from the idea of not being able to express thoughts and emotions. I was using blinking as a representation of restlessness," she explains.

At the time, she had been exploring asemic writing, which uses lines and symbols that look like writing, but do not have any meaning.

The artwork, titled *Catharsis Calligraphy*, won her a cash award from the Woon Brothers Foundation, which recognises the work of promising fine art diploma students at Nafa.

Ms Fernandez also won a Nafa scholarship for the degree course she took after her diploma. In recent years, she won other awards and took on internships at places like the National Arts Council.

These achievements helped her

gain more independence as she wanted to fund her own education, says Ms Fernandez.

Her parents, who are in their 50s, are a commercial negotiation coach and housewife, and she has a 25-year-old sister who works as a civil servant.

Ms Fernandez says: "I worked very hard. I wanted to prove that this path was something my parents and I can be proud of."

She is now applying for jobs involving curation or project management for art exhibitions and shows.

## CAREER CONCERNS DESPITE DIVERSE JOB OPTIONS

Amid increasing participation in the fine arts, a new university called the University of the Arts Singapore (UAS) will be accepting applications from October.

Announced in 2022, the university, the first in Singapore to focus on the arts, involves an alliance between Lasalle College of the Arts and Nafa. It will open its doors in August 2024.

Traditionally, "fine art" referred to art forms practised mainly for their aesthetic value and beauty, such as painting, printmaking and sculpture. Over time, this definition has widened greatly.

"Fine arts" is a broadly used term today, which includes a diverse range of art forms such as traditional fine art, music, dance,

installation, design, fashion studies and theatre.

Arts institutions in Singapore stress that their graduates are employed in a vast array of jobs.

In spite of this, many parents – as well as their children pursuing tertiary qualifications in the fine arts – remain cautious about career prospects in a society where "starving artist" stereotypes linger.

"Taking a fine art course does not necessarily point towards just being an artist," says Ms Sabrina Long, Nafa's dean of the faculty of art and design, and principal of the

Nafa School of Young Talents.

"In recent years, Nafa has seen fine art graduates furthering their studies in fields of design, psychology, sociology, literature, law and art therapy, among other options.

"Career-wise, new roles have emerged, such as digital/media content producers and consultants, social media management executives, publishing and events management executives."

Nafa had an average of 86 graduates a year from its full-time fine art programmes for the graduation years 2018 to 2022.

Over at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Professor Wong Chen-Hsi, acting chair of the university's School of Art, Design and Media, says its graduates work in varied fields, including as graphic designers, visual effects artists, directors, UX/UI designers and curators.

UX design refers to user experience design, while UI denotes user interface design.

Ms Wong adds: "Demand for the school's programmes has been stable since 2019, with visual communications, animation, film-making and game design among the more popular courses."

NTU's School of Art, Design and Media offers Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees in media arts and design arts.

**I was questioning whether art was a hobby for me or whether I could make a living from it. In fact, I was more apprehensive than my parents.**



**MS LAURYN BETH FERNANDEZ**, on pursuing her art passion. She started with a diploma course in fine art at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and went on to complete a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree in the subject

Ms Lauryn Beth Fernandez, who recently completed a fine art degree from Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, used her eyelashes to paint this artwork, a technique she once used for an award-winning work. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

CONTINUED ON C2

### How one mother changed her mind about her child's pursuit of art

Ms Nurul Hanis Moksan, 23, took a diploma course in interior design because she felt it was a good career choice, although her interest lay elsewhere.

After completing her studies at Temasek Polytechnic a few years ago, she wanted to pursue a degree in fine arts at Lasalle College of the Arts, something her mother was unsure about.

Ms Hanis says: "We learn from a young age that it's difficult to find a job in Singapore in this field, but I still wanted to do fine arts. I wouldn't have the opportunity to choose again, so I just went for it. It was now or never."

Her mother, Ms Nooriele Hashim, a 58-year-old relief teacher at a childcare centre, was worried. She said: "As a single mother, I want my children to be financially independent."

Ms Hanis is the youngest of her four children.

Ms Nooriele came round to the idea when she realised that Ms Hanis had expressed herself artistically since she was a child. She would bake colourful macarons and cookies, design wedding cards for relatives or make earrings for sale.

Ms Nooriele says: "In the end, I know that she can venture into other fields before she establishes herself in the fine arts."

Arts school representatives say



Ms Nooriele Hashim and her daughter Nurul Hanis Moksan, with woodblocks from the Lasalle alumna's artworks. ST PHOTO: EUGENE TAN

that more parents seem open to their children pursuing their passion for the fine arts.

Ms Sabrina Long, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts' dean of the faculty of art and design, and principal of its School of Young Talents, says: "Parents are more supportive

of their children's artistic pursuits these days, and they are more informed about the multitude of arts events and platforms available."

Dr Venka Purushothaman, deputy president and provost at Lasalle, says that parents of its students show their strong support

when they turn up at more than 70 performances, exhibitions and events at the school each year.

Now working part-time at an art supplies store after completing her degree earlier this year, Ms Hanis says: "Not many people can do or appreciate art. It's my way of

expressing myself truthfully."

Her mother adds: "As parents, we have to see our children's perspective and listen more to them. I'm very proud of her. She is pursuing what she really wants."

Venessa Lee



Lasalle College of the Arts graduate Benedict Yeo, seen here with his artwork, is a multidisciplinary artist who likes working with wood and steel. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts alumnus and multidisciplinary artist Arrvinraj Balasubramaniam in his performance artwork, which he put on in Taiwan. Titled A Song For A Blank Decade, the work is a response to the history of performance art in Singapore. PHOTO: COURTESY OF LAI PEI JUAN

## Soft skills useful across different jobs

### FROM CI

As the local and global arts sector has evolved tremendously, creativity is now highly desirable in many non-arts sectors," says Dr Venka Purushothaman, deputy president and provost at Lasalle.

Fine arts graduates have a variety of soft skills that are transferable across different jobs, such as analytical skills in tandem with good verbal and written communication, he says.

"Parents have told us they are surprised by the demands of arts education at Lasalle," he adds.

"Many of our students work in galleries, museums, design firms, and community and event spaces, and as arts educators and trainers," he says, adding that graduates also land jobs in administration, programming, journalism and logistics.

### RIISING INTEREST IN THE FINE ARTS

Both Nafa and Lasalle have seen growing interest in fine arts programmes and events.

Dr Purushothaman says: "Over the years, we have seen a steady increase in applications to full-time fine arts programmes at Lasalle."

However, he adds that this growing demand does not necessarily translate to higher enrolment or graduate numbers. Lasalle has about 100 graduates in the fine arts annually, across its diploma, Bachelor of Arts (Honours) and Master of Arts courses.

"We take in smaller numbers to ensure a good student-teacher ratio and that each student has ample

learning resources and opportunities to flourish to build a sustainable career as an artist," he says.

Nonetheless, Lasalle has seen a "pronounced" increase in interest for its short courses in fine arts studies and art history, which are open to the public, says Dr Purushothaman.

It has more than 100 over-subscribed short courses covering topics like travel sketching, water-colour or acrylic painting, and ceramics.

Nafa has similarly seen a spike in interest in its short courses relating to fine art offered at its Centre for Lifelong Education, with an increase of about 14 per cent in enrolment between 2018 and 2022, says Ms Long.

### CHOOSING TO BE A FULL-TIME ARTIST

Covid-19 restrictions made it challenging for some fresh graduates to find work.

Mr Arrvinraj Balasubramaniam, 27, finished his Diploma in Fine Art at Nafa a few months after the pandemic erupted in 2020.

He says: "We didn't have our graduation show, which was an important opportunity to show one's work to industry representatives. I thought, why don't we do an online show for ourselves?"

He co-founded the Buwan Art Collective, focusing on multimedia and performance art, with two friends to showcase their work online.

For more than a year, Mr Arrvinraj did a variety of jobs, including working at a government agency, assisting visitors at the Singapore

Art Museum, conducting photography workshops and managing projects at an art collective and an art studio.

Since the end of 2021, he has been a full-time multidisciplinary artist.

In June, he travelled to Taiwan to put on an hour-long work as a performance artist, titled A Song For A Blank Decade. It was a response to the history of performance art in Singapore, including the Government's one-time ban on funding for performance art.

He is now home-grown artist residency programme 'PietArts' first artist-in-residence.

He wants to focus on his practice, rather than being, for example, an art teacher who would be able to devote himself to art only in the evenings.

"The challenge is self-discipline if you want to do art full-time," he says.

He has kept the promise he made to his parents. "It's common among Asian parents to worry about careers in art. Mine did not know what my future would be like. I don't take money from them. They see that even though I'm not earning a lot, I can support myself."

### EMPLOYMENT RATES

Not all graduates from arts institutions find full-time work quickly.

More than 600 diploma graduates from Nafa were surveyed from November 2022 to January 2023 in its Graduate Employment Survey.

It showed that the overall employment rate was 76 per cent, but the full-time permanent employment rate was 45 per cent.

At Lasalle, the Graduate Employment Survey for 2022 showed that the proportion of diploma graduates in the labour force who were employed made up 73 per cent, but the full-time permanent employment rate was 26.3 per cent.

Among Lasalle's BA (Hons) degree graduates, the overall employment rate was 81.4 per cent in 2022, while the full-time permanent employment rate was 45.6 per cent.

More than 800 Lasalle graduates were surveyed from November 2022 to January 2023.

The data for both schools did not single out graduates in the fine arts.

Lasalle's Dr Purushothaman says there is a noticeable entrepreneurial energy among fine arts graduates who may have to take on different roles.

"Due to their innate resourcefulness, graduates may also embark on more enterprising and entrepreneurial ventures, juggling art practices with other types of businesses, such as running their own art education, mural painting and art consultancy companies."

Ms Long from Nafa adds: "We have noticed that more fine art graduates are pursuing a portfolio career as they forge independent projects and undertake work with the community, in addition to holding jobs which may or may not be related to their artistic practice."

### SUPPORT FROM ART TEACHERS

Mr Benedict Yeo, 25, remembers his art teachers fondly.

In secondary school, he and his friends hung out at the art room, where his teacher got him thinking

about a possible future in art.

At Lasalle, he had a teacher who once worked six part-time jobs when he was a full-time artist.

Mr Yeo says: "I'm thankful to my lecturers who were quite candid. They shared both the ups and downs with us, for us to decide what path to take."

Clear-eyed about the challenges of a career in art, he nonetheless needed to convince himself first.

His father runs a steel workshop while his mother works in the accounts department of a wood supplies firm.

As a child visiting their workplaces, Mr Yeo grew interested in working with wood and metal.

Mr Yeo, the youngest of three sons, recently completed his BA (Hons) Fine Arts degree at Lasalle, where he majored in sculpture.

In a project for his bachelor's degree, the multidisciplinary artist interviewed ex-offenders who had taken art classes.

"They talked about how doing art allowed them to feel liberated even during their incarceration," Mr Yeo recalls.

In recent years, he also encountered people around him who suffered from conditions such as depression or dementia.

He thought that art could be part of their rehabilitation process. "Over the years, I became convinced from my family and friends' experiences that an interest in art can be combined with helping others," he says.

He will be pursuing a master's degree in art therapy at Lasalle in August.

venessal@sph.com.sg