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En Tze: Alternative in a Conventional Place

Fatimah Zainal · Wednesday, July 16th, 2014

Young Malaysian artist and tattooist En Tze tells us what it means to be an alternative artist in a conventional country.

In a predominantly conventional Malaysia, [En Tze](#) is among the few post-millennial young artists rising up to meet the challenges posited by the 21st century. Yet in a time and place where survival as an artist is a difficult feat to perform, salvaging the arts is no easy task, especially when you're on the alternative side.

En Tze is nobody's idea of ordinary, having launched her tattoo artist career fresh out of high school at just 18, then opening her own tattoo parlour at 20. The Malaysian-born multi-talented artist started venturing into art at the age of three, but her journey thus far has not been a seamless one.

"I did want to be an artist as a kid, but influence from the media and others told me that I wasn't going to survive," said En Tze, owner of Penang-based [HAVOC Tattoo](#). "So I wanted to be a bunch of other things like a medical detective and an engineer and ignored art for a while."

Later on as she faced adversities in her adolescent life, she knew that she had to find an avenue to express her feelings so she started drawing again and knew that it was her vocation all along.



Her art is a bold marriage between traditional and alternative, urging the audience to reimagine the construct of beauty in art. -Photo by Matrika Sasha Nehru

Now here in Southeast Asia, En Tze is one of the very few laying down inroads into alternative arts, something which is not usual nor completely socially palatable in this part of the world.

"Most of my original works have a dark/Gothic theme to it and often incorporate Asian influences," said En Tze. "For my drawings of girls, the inspiration behind those are my own feelings. Nearly all of them have meanings behind them, and are each a part of myself. As for my tattoos I mostly do watercolor tattoos, taking inspiration from my traditional art roots."

Being an impassioned artist is a tough job, especially when you're on the alternative side in a conventional place.



En Tze's signature watercolor tattoos. -Photo by En Tze

"My art is often deemed either too dark or too weird for people one way or another. Also the support for the art scene here in Malaysia isn't very great, making it very hard for most artists to survive in general," she added. "Due to my genre/style of art that is often more towards the dark/Gothic side, it's very hard for the locals here to accept my art as there is still a large taboo surrounding dark imagery in this country and people here are very conservative."

Despite all that, En Tze never feared the rigid one-dimensional paradigm that most locals have towards art. At the local level, she has beat the odds and emerged with numerous achievements, such as contributing murals for the George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site, becoming founder of Malaysia Dark Alternative Movement, and organizing her own local-based international art show, *De Rosis Nascentibus*.

En Tze once started off drawing realistic portraits and since then has had her elbows deep in many other trades of art, such as hand-painting shoes and shirts then selling them online on [Etsy](#). At 18, despite scoring excellently in the high school certificate exams, she refused to further her studies into any field other than art and chose to stay true to her passion. Thus she began to learn the trade of tattooing.

Currently, she is venturing into doing original art in traditional media and digital art which mostly consists of fan art. Her recent fan art for sci-fi TV show *Orphan Black* will be featured at the *Orphan Black* booth for the 2014 San Diego Comic-Con.



Fan art of *Orphan Black*. On her left arm is a DNA double helix tattoo, a tribute to the sci-fi TV show. -Photo by Matrika Sasha

The 20 year old artist has long started paving her way towards international acclaim. Over the years, her work has been exhibited internationally at exhibitions such as Beautiful Junk, Hot One Inch Action New York, and 50th Anniversary of Icograda's World Communication Design Day.

En Tze is also musically talented and was among the top 5 participants for the music video competition by Australia-based alternative group, Angelspit, and top 7 for the band's Black Kingdom Red Kingdom art remix competition. Her digital fan arts had also been recognized by Tatiana Maslany, star of *Orphan Black*.

Despite her accomplishments, En Tze said that she hopes the art scene in Malaysia will be better developed and more supporting one day.

"I'm hoping to get into an art university in London next year and continue to live and work there as a tattooist. I also plan to start travelling around guest tattooing in multiple countries soon," said the talented artist when asked about her future plans.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, July 16th, 2014 at 11:48 am and is filed under [Lifestyle](#), [Visual Art](#)

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