

SPOTLIGHT



Sonia Payes... is represented by Scott Livesey Gallery in Melbourne. Her new photography and sculpture exhibit *Alchemy* opens on January 27 as part of the Fringe World Festival, Perth

Adam Thomas

INTERVIEW BY JACK KELLY

Your parents were pre and post-war immigrants. How did this affect your career choice?

My maternal grandmother had a tiny studio in the back of her house, she used to create replica Kandinsky art with oil paint and my mother painted constantly at our house in Melbourne too, so I grew up on the smell of turpentine. I didn't go down that path as I fell in love with the camera, but it had a heavy influence.

However, because my parents were immigrants I wasn't allowed to do art in school; children of that generation needed to have an education so becoming an artist was not a career option – I was told to do something proper with my life. So I got a job in a private primary school and became a teacher and took over all of the arts and creatives like musicals and photography. It was only after I was 32 and my kids were born that I decided to go back to uni, do all my courses and become a master photographer.

You have a clear interest between the earth's environment and the human form and life

cycle. What made you want to connect them in your art?

The two can't operate without each other, humanity needs to interact, transform and regenerate as does the environment. For my upcoming *Alchemy* exhibit, I used a program to manipulate an image of my daughter's face, put layers of landscape photos I took of Iceland symmetrically over the top and then mirrored it so it looks like a kaleidoscope of ice crystals. And on one of those trips in 2015, I managed to shoot a picture of a skeleton frozen in the ice which I also included in the portrait. So you've got the landscape and humanity on top of each other with something from the past. It represents a harmonious relationship and regeneration all morphed into one.

In 2012 you took a two months' art residency in rural China at the studio of Shen Shaomin. How did this affect your art?

It ended up being much more challenging than I originally anticipated. There was no heating in winter because the government controls when it gets distributed, inedible food and as far as in-

ternet and phone goes they were pretty non-existent, but the upside of that was it allowed me to have two months with just me and my camera. I went walking and saw first-hand what was really happening in China's countryside. There were beautiful cornfields that were just being ripped up for concrete apartment buildings, and quarries and destroyed mountain-scapes for materials to cater to those building projects. It was such an eye-opener and got my imagination running wild which inspired so much of my dystopian works.

Your art contains a series of photographs, 3D animations and sculptures. Why the diversity of medium?

When I was doing my residency I was taken to a few studios where internationally renowned Chinese artists actually dabbled in multiple mediums. They were doing 3D animation, sculptures, painting and photography. I came back and I went full hog and applied for the 2014 McClelland Sculpture Survey. I decided to follow my computerised face medium and used a file of my daughter I created in 2007 called *Regener-*

ation but slept on the final design for two months until I broke my wrist in Thailand. The fibreglass cast and the squishy hand-exercise ball they gave me provided the perfect inspiration for my sculpture, a 5m-long, fibreglass, elongated head with four morphed faces. It won me a three-month solo exhibition at McClelland Gallery.

How do you relax outside the art scene?

I just love scuba diving. It takes you to another planet, like where no man has been before. But admittedly it has inspired me inside the art scene. I have this entire underwater body of work that I haven't even moved on yet but it's starting to creep out a little bit with *Alchemy*. There are two sculptures called Phoenix one and Phoenix two, they're like oxidised antiquities that look to have been sitting in the ocean for thousands of years.

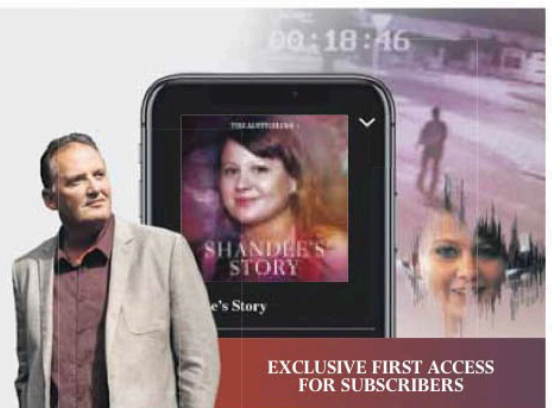
Alchemy by Sonia Payes opens at There-Is, Perth, Western Australia, on January 27. Fringe World runs at various locations around Perth until February 13.

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