

## Christina Huynh: The Charisma of Nature in Street Art

Text: [Christina Huynh](#) and [Anna-Sophie Jürgens](#) | Series: [Street art, Science and Engagement](#)

*Abstract: Reflecting on environmental awareness, in this article Christina Huynh (STYNA), who has an educational background in Visual Communication, illuminates and unpacks the representation, dynamics and beauty of nature in her street art murals. She explores the personal experiences with nature that inspired her art and how her environmental enthusiasm informs and shapes her portfolio. Touching on issues of fragility and the loss of biodiversity, this article revolves around the beauty, the joy, the wonder, and the fascination that nature offers.*

**Christina Huynh (STYNA), I am delighted to welcome you to our online journal w/k! You are an award-winning illustrator and muralist from Sydney who has been involved in a variety of public art projects (including one of Australia's most extensive public art programs - the Canal to Creek Public Art Program in 2020). You have also done works in communities and schools, focusing on art-for-purpose, place-based projects and collaborations. You graduated with a Bachelor of Design degree from Western Sydney University in 2011, specialising in Visual Communication, and are passionate about visual storytelling and emotion in relation to our natural world. All of this is extremely interesting for w/k, and in this article, we invite you to share your thoughts on your relationship with nature, sustainability and environmental protection, as well as the communicative role of public art - with the goal of better understanding the power of street art to convey knowledge and, in particular, environmental messages and awareness.**

Lovely to be here.

**On the 2020 [Brisbane Street Art Festival](#) website, your work is described as follows:**

**"Storytelling and the heritage of a place are some elements that influence and inspire her work. There are also recurring themes of curiosity, adventure and the imagination that dance in each piece."**

**On your own website you write that you have an enthusiasm for "all things fragile in our natural world". It would be fantastic if you could explain all of this a little more - what do you mean by fragile and where does this enthusiasm come from?**

The statement "all things fragile in our natural world" comes from the characters I like to create in my work, mainly in the form of a curious goldfish or bulbous finch. For me, goldfish are universal symbols that represent abundance, good luck and curiosity; the characters are fragile, singular souls that roam around the different worlds created for them.

The enthusiasm comes from childhood memories; I've always loved animals and nature. When I was small, I remember saving fish that jumped out of their tanks in aquariums, or I used to have a pet goldfish that would swim into the palm of my hands. I am fascinated by the patterns of a bird's wings or how a school of fish swim in synchronisation, which I've recently learnt occurs from the theory of emergence: the spontaneous creation of sophisticated behaviours and functions from large groups of simple elements. How a school of fish swim together functions similarly when chaos comes to order; the

collective efforts of small individuals who work together can make a grand, complex entity.



Christina Huynh: *Metamorphosis* (2021). Photo: Christina Huynh.

## Street Art and/as Visual Communication

**Based on your studies in Visual Communication, how would you define the communicative functions of street art and muralism?**

Street art, muralism or graffiti have the power to capture the attention of the passer-by. Street art can be informative and controversial, move the hardest of hearts, tell a story, or be aesthetic – it can be a secret language for anybody who looks at the work long enough to notice something new or different each time.

**How would you describe the role of street art and muralism in our cities and society today?**

The role of street art, for me, is to capture everyday people as they travel through their day-to-day routines. Street art and muralism bring local residents and the overall community of a place together. Street art can also act as wayfaring, placemaking and identifying the location of a site based on what subject matter or theme is being expressed in the works; they contribute and act as extensions to the city and landscapes in which they reside long after the artist has installed their piece.

**What exactly makes street art and muralism an attractive means of improving the city experience?**

Street art can invoke joy, curiosity, wonder or deep emotions within the viewer. The appeal of street art and muralism within the city experience is that it adds character, quirk and identity to a place. For me, the beauty of street art and muralism is that it won't last forever. Street art is often hidden but accessible to everyone. Like an open-air art gallery, the art can be directly and unexpectedly digested by those who seek it. Against the amount of advertising in our cityscapes and beyond, seeing a large-scale mural spring up or painted live in public generally attracts positive engagement and interest from

all walks of people.



Christina Huynh: *A Conversation Amongst Friends* (2018). Photo: Christina Huynh.

**In an interview (*Close Up*) you said that your art is inspired by the animated films of Hayao Miyasaki (the director of Studio Ghibli), whose award-winning work is known for its environmental themes. What visual ties do you see between the medium of animated film and your murals?**

The visual ties between animated films and the murals I've created would be the creation of characters and the worlds/environments that reside in them. Although I don't believe the murals I paint could ever emulate a Studio Ghibli animation, I am forever moved by the amount of detail and vitality in the backgrounds of each scene. Another visual tie that acts as a foundation for each of the murals I create is the shared belief that so much beauty can be found in the ordinance of one's day to day.

**Why does it matter to use street art as a means of environmental communication?**

Street art is an essential way of sharing stories, knowledge and information on a grand scale. Using street art as a means of environmental communication is a crucial tool to share messages with our generation and the generations that will follow us. We are all a part of this earth, and we all have the shared responsibility not to diminish our natural landscapes – the natural world is an extensive, sacred community to which we all belong. I always loved this quote by Henry Miller:

"We clutter the earth with our inventions, never dreaming that possibly they are unnecessary ... or disadvantageous. We devise astounding means of communication, but do we communicate with one another? We move our bodies to and fro at incredible speeds, but do we really leave the spot we started from? Mentally, morally, spiritually, we are fettered. What have we achieved in mowing down mountain ranges, harnessing the energy of mighty rivers, or moving whole populations about like chess pieces, if we ourselves remain the same restless, miserable, frustrated creatures we were before?"



This quote is from the book *The World of Sex* (1940), but it really applies to many things, including *nature*, or in the words of Miller:

“To call such activity progress is utter delusion. We may succeed in altering the face of the earth until it is unrecognizable even to the Creator, but if we are unaffected wherein lies the meaning?”

I use street art to *affect* people – to create meaning in our fettered society.



Christina Huynh: *Birds in Our Backyard* (2021). Photo: Christina Huynh.

## On Concrete Nature – Street Art in the City

**Nature plays an important role in your work. How has your engagement with environmental and science themes developed? What artistic results have these explorations led to?**

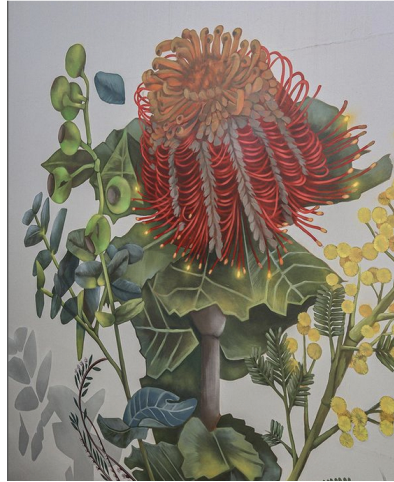
Over the years, I've become interested in science-based and science-inspired documentaries about our world and different biologies of various wildlife and ecosystems, which are influencing my work. Some of my favourites include *David Attenborough: Life on our Planet* by Alastair Fothergill, Jonathan Hughes, Keith Scholey, *The Biggest Little Farm* by John Chester, *More than Honey* by Markus Imhoof and *Fantastic Fungi* by Louie Schwartzberg. While pointing to deeply concerning catastrophes – like the loss of biodiversity, deforestation and overfishing, the decline of bee populations (among other crises unfolding in our ecosystems) – they also explore the beauty of our non-human environment in light of (more or less explicit) insights from science, and how we can re-connect with nature's intelligence. I also go for weekly bushwalks accompanied by two rambunctious Labradors, where I can observe different flora and fauna that grow over the seasons. Our favourite spots are through bushlands like Lake Parramatta and sometimes surrounding parklands in the Greater Parramatta region (around Sydney,



Australia). Walking and observing is essential for my public art. What I feel and perceive from being in nature filters throughout my entire art process, from mark-making to final pieces. I am guided by the wonders of our natural world.



Christina Huynh: *Lorikeets* (2015). Photo: Christina Huynh.



Christina Huynh: *Scarlett Banksia* (2023). Photo: Christina Huynh.

### How would you describe the environmental message or approach of your art?

I like to tackle environmental topics through storytelling with layers of symbolism. The subject matter included in each piece is representational and gently informative. Like an easter egg hunt, I'd want viewers to really look at environmental themes in the artwork, not only the vulnerable subject matter highlighted but the way the overall work is composed and then ask themselves, "*How does this make me feel?*". I want to think of my murals as jumbo-sized pages from a children's picture book. I use a combination of exterior water-based acrylic paint and aerosol. Depending on the nature of the work, my design process usually starts with a few sketch studies (once an initial idea is formed). Sometimes, I will use tracing paper to overlay additional details. Other times, I might compose the overall piece in Photoshop, especially if the design is super long or in an unusual shape, and then most of the colour render work will take place in Procreate.



Christina Huynh: *Look!* (2023). Photo: Christina Huynh.



Christina Huynh: *Gathering of the Finches* (2020). Photo: Christina Huynh.

## Celebrating Biodiversity Through Art in Public Spaces

A fascinating example of your work being a visual narrative is the mural of the endangered flora and fauna native to the Macleay Valley Coast. The mural is entitled *BIG LALA*. On your website, you describe this work as “a celebration of the beauty of Australia’s rich biodiversity and beauty discovered in the day-to-day.” Please tell us a bit more about this project, its ecological background and its message.

*BIG LALA* is a light-hearted and playful mural highlighting historical images, scenery and the vulnerable flora and fauna endemic to the Macleay region. Pictured here are a Common Kingfisher, a White-Flowered Wax Plant, a Green and Golden Bell Frog, a Native Guava (Tucker Bush) and our favourite



recently endangered Koala. Set along the Macleay River landscapes and riverbank, the far left side of the design celebrates the Old Kempsey Bridge. The work aims to celebrate the beauty of our rich biodiversity and beauty in the day-to-day along with the heritage of Kempsey. It ties viewers to their environment, hopefully causing them to stop and reflect on their responsibilities to the wider non-human world. I love the project's central component of the simple intent of making one smile – and my hope for the overall work is to evoke feelings of connection, optimism and wonder for our natural landscapes and the fauna that inhabit them.



Christina Huynh: *BIG LALA* (2023). Photo: Christina Huynh.

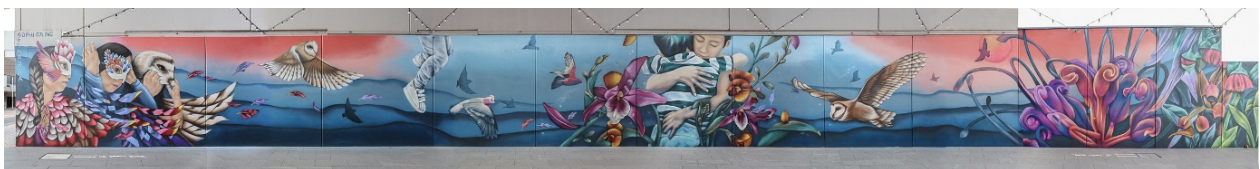
**How have your environmentally themed artworks been received by the public, researchers and other artists?**

Generally positive. I think many people who look at my murals resonate with the contents of the work, from a cultural point of view because a lot of the work celebrates diversity – cultural and environmental/non-human diversity – and the coming together of different peoples as well as the beauty of day-to-day happenings.

**If someone were to ask you to invent a science, what would it be?**

The science of how to retain good memories.

**Thank you, Christina, for this extraordinary conversation!**



Christina Huynh and Sophi Odling: *The Night Symphony* (2021). Photo: Christina Huynh.

Details of the cover photo: Christina Huynh: *BIG LALA* (2023). Photo: Christina Huynh.

**References**

Christina Huynh, artist's website, <https://christinahuynh.com.au/>.

*Close Up with Artist Christina Huynh*, Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture, Western

Sydney University, 17 December 2021. Online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L\\_ij4mdZNXs&t=17s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_ij4mdZNXs&t=17s).

### **Tags**

1. Anna-Sophie Jürgens
2. Christina Huynh
3. Interviews
4. Street Art