



The slow truth behind overnight success

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The fairy tale of a big break is usually only half the story. Years of preparation is often behind an 'overnight success'.



As an artist, in the beginning you pay to exhibit. Then you get paid to exhibit. How you get from one situation to the other is the million-dollar question. While there is no predefined path, there are still some common patterns. In the majority of artists' careers you either observe a slow transition towards more profitable opportunities, or you see a single defining moment.

A sudden breakthrough is definitely rarer, but it does happen. In this case, you have to be careful what you wish for. The overnight success stories in the contemporary art world are usually tied to

market dynamics. We have seen too many meteoric rises, driven by an art market which hasn't hesitated to extinguish them at a moment's notice.

The success of Filipino art superstar Jigger Cruz represents the virtuous side of this phenomenon. Before hitting 30, he had already held shows in European galleries, including the Louvre, a solo feature in the Armory Show and representation in the US. According to ArtPrice, Jigger Cruz sold works to the tune of €258,000 in 2014, putting him amongst the top artists ranked by auction turnover.

Dealing with rising auction prices and international shows has forced him to confront the problem of protecting himself as an artist. "I am not versed in the business of art, and, starting out, I didn't know the kind of people I should have avoided. I learned eventually that there are dos and don'ts. And that exhausted me," he recently told Mara Santillan Miano.

As Jigger's case illustrates, if they are to maintain instant success, artists have to be producing strong work which will stand the test of time - even faced with the lures of the market. If you don't have the requisite experience or a team of trusted people around you, success can bring down your career fast and ruin your art.

In the Asian art market, very young artists can sell at auctions. In this respect the dynamics of the Australian art world are much more structured. The temptation to search for "overnight success" stories, however, is always present.

Melbourne artist Alasdair McLuckie knows how misleading this narrative is. He got his big break right out of art school, at the VCA Grad Show. "I sold my work and kept the money to focus on just making art. I had the time to continue to consciously develop my work in a way that wasn't disrupted by searching for other sources of income elsewhere."

It didn't take long for Alasdair to find gallery representation. "I was being offered one show after another. Eventually the gallery Murray White Room saw my work and offered to represent me." Along with the shows and the gallery representation came the grants. "It is a momentum that feeds itself," he observes. "Nothing is guaranteed, but I have been able to keep my head above water in doing that."

From the outside, Alasdair's success might appear to have happened overnight. In reality, his "luck" was built on years of hard work and experimenting behind the scenes. Before graduating at the VCA, Alasdair studied design. He then attended TAFE courses at Rmit, where he learned the fundamentals of sculpture and drawing. At the same time his father taught him how to weave and how to approach ancient cultures – both parts of the artist's work today.

It wasn't until his third year at VCA that Alasdair was happy with the work he was working. "I felt I had a really clear direction. It was only then that I got enough tension for the Grad Show. It's almost like stepping stones."

The narrative of overnight success may keep artists from truly understanding what it takes to build a solid career. A defining moment happens when a set of abilities cultivated over time encounters the right conditions. That's why we should pay more attention to the years of struggle and failure shared by all artists. We can call this model "slow transition".

In the first stages of this model, sometimes paying for exhibition space, the reward is simply having a venue to show your work and get it out to the public. It is the period dedicated to a largely self-directed apprenticeship. Artist run spaces are fundamental in this sense.

Most of the artist-run initiatives have a board of trustees that look through the artists' applications. "There are always new ARIs starting up," points out painter Jake Walker, "so very young artists who can't get a show at the more established ARIs can access new artist-run spaces which are particularly keen to try out new people."

Thomas Jeppe finds ARIs particularly important in testing the waters as an artist. "There are a lot of well visited artist-run spaces that have been going for a long time. They get attention, so young artists exhibiting there access a strong audience and critical feedback. And things develop quite quickly from there"

It is thanks to ARIs that Thomas Jeppe had his first taste of the art world. He then further explored it by getting commercial representation in three different countries - Australia, Germany and Mexico. This is a similar path to that of Jake Walker, who started off showing in artist run spaces in Sydney and then gained gallery representation.

Making the switch from ARIs to commercial spaces is not so straightforward though. "The most difficult thing for artists is trying to get exhibitions without forcing the issue," explains Jake. "As soon as you start pressuring the galleries, they run a mile. They want to feel they can sneak up on you from behind without you knowing it."

But then how do the worlds of ARIs and commercial galleries interact with each other? It depends on how established the gallery is. Fledgling gallerists looking for artists to represent are more likely to go to exhibitions at artist-run spaces. On the contrary, more established galleries seldom have a presence at ARIs. "But there are always the exceptions of very established gallerists visiting independent spaces. Which is really cool," notes Jake.

A further stage for artists is exhibiting at major art institutions, thus getting access to their resources and respectability. Kay Campbell, administrative director of ACCA, sees her space as the next step for artists who are in for the long haul. ACCA is no stranger to what's going on at the ARIs. "Our curators are looking at all those spaces. It's not a formal relationship, but a lot of artists exhibiting in ACCA come from that environment," says Kay Campbell.

It's the guest curators at ACCA who tend to select younger artists. "We give artists an opportunity to do their dream work - to work in a supportive professional way with much more financial support." For Kay Campbell, the art institutions, the public spaces and the ARIs are all part of an art ecosystem. "It's all connected. Each layer in that ecosystem is built so that artists can move fluidly from one to another."

Once artists gain gallery representation, regular exhibitions in major spaces, participation in art fairs and biennials and a base of trusted collectors, they might finally feel they have made it there. But of course, there is no "there", neither in terms of glory nor financial stability. Often established artists continue to exhibit in ARIs, to allow them to experiment more freely.

To navigate the early transitional phases of an artist's career, the key factor is showing up over and over again. Money is not always the best reward when it comes to building or consolidating a career in the arts. At the same time artists have to be aware that resources and time are limited. They should use them wisely, balancing pro and cons.

Keep in mind that there is no endpoint to an artist's journey, nor one definition of success. Breaking free from the overnight success myth helps you enjoy every step on the way. It helps you endure the inevitable boring parts, while appreciating the joy of making art. After all, the sheer joy of it is probably the reason you choose this path in the first place.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naima Morelli is an arts writer and curator who specialized in Italian contemporary art and art from the Asia-Pacific area.