

Art jam a stroke of genius

SMALL WORLD
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A chance assignment to shoot photographic portraits kindled a dynamic idea – and a new business – for architect Betty Cheung Yee-wan.

Now as director of Meli-Melo she brings the joy of painting to hundreds of clients in weekend “art jam” sessions.

Previously an architect in Toronto, Ms Cheung was a freelance photographer when the photo assignment came along. It made her realise how deeply she missed the creative pursuits of her past.

“I enjoyed that photo assignment so much that afterwards I felt withdrawal symptoms,” recalls Ms Cheung, in her office on the top floor of Meli-Melo’s three-storey premises near Central. “The year before I came to Hong Kong, I’d been laid off from an architect firm as projects were drying up, and I worked as a freelance photographer and graphic designer and painted a lot.”

Putting her creative impulses to the fore, Ms Cheung rented a small space in Sheung Wan in 1999 to hold exhibitions and offer studio space to people. She called it the Meli-Melo Artists’ Alliance.

Meli melo means ‘a little bit of everything’ in French.

Then came her Eureka moment: she thought of the concept of an “art jam” – or informal improvisation, as in musical jam sessions.

People with an interest in having a go at painting within a small group could simply go to the studio and apply their inspiration to a canvas. The sessions would last three to four hours, often involving free-flowing wine and jazz.

“Part of the purpose was to create an environment that was accessible for anyone to try painting,” she says. “I think that art should be about communication.”

Meli-Melo grew through word of mouth and positive media coverage, attracting more people than her 200 sq ft space could cope with. “After two years, I started to think about its structure more seriously,” Ms Cheung says. “I wrote a

business plan; it was a bit sketchy but I took it to a number of investors who, fortunately, were very receptive to the idea.

“The start-up investment was originally \$600,000 for the first year, but nearly all of that was spent on renovating the building, which needed more work than anticipated.

“I didn’t want to try getting a second round of investments so all was run on a shoestring. I had two full-time staff, and part-time help as it was needed; and I designed much of our interiors and the company website. A local carpenter was hired to make canvases on wooden stretchers, and paints, brushes and the like were bought from art shops.”

Art jams cost \$500 per person and include canvas, paints, utensils, and even the use of an apron. The events have become increasingly popular among corporations, which are turning onto the sessions as a forum that works for “team building” exercises.

Social organisations, including the American Club, also took an interest in adult and family sessions.

“One of the best events we had was the launch of Veuve Clicquot’s Paintbox, last September,” she explains. “Mini champagne bottles are presented in what appeared to be a tin of paint. We were given a wide-reaching task, to create specially lit easels, to design souvenir bodysuit overalls, as well as to conduct an outdoor event on a restaurant terrace. Participants got through 50 canvases that night.”

Despite the fact that several copycat operations have sprung up – some also in the Central area – the future looks bright for Meli-Melo. “I think it’s great that these other studios have set up,” Ms Cheung declares. “That gives us validation. We are obviously doing something right.”

About 400 people attend art jams every month, up from 50 when the concept was introduced in 2001. The annual turnover for the business is roughly \$2 million.

Ms Cheung has taken steps to develop “Artjamming” into an trademark brand, and is planning to distribute her own line of paints, brushes, T-shirts and related art accessories.



Betty Cheung Yee-wan says companies began to book “team building” sessions at Meli-Melo as her largely professional clientele spread the word. Photo: David Wong