

# Making a face: Netherlander artist reflects on the immigration experience

by DONG YUE SU

Saskia Jetten likes to make faces. A celebrated Dutch artist who recently immigrated to Vancouver, Jetten's works are in the form of masks, clowns, comics, cartoons and puppets that dot the gallery space at the Burnaby Art Gallery (BAG) until June 22. Some faces are playfully recognizable, such as a clown, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck; other faces are more serious and elusive. Many of the faces suggest two different facets of the same person or conflicted emotions between playfulness and melancholy. As Jennifer Cane, the assistant curator of BAG points out, visitors who have immigration experience may recognize in Jetten's work the tension of negotiating a new identity in Canada.

"It is the bittersweet emotions of immigrating," Cane comments on the Saskia Jetten exhibition that she curated.

Jetten has won the most prestigious award of printmaking in Netherland. Over twenty years of her career as an artist, her works have been shown internationally. This exhibition is her first solo show in Vancouver that includes both her recent works produced in Vancouver and works from the Netherlands.

## Playing with faces and masks

"The immigration is very much connected to my recent

work," says Jetten. "When I approached people here and tried to make a joke, some did not get it. So I had to change a little bit. Part of my identity also changed a little bit. Since my experience has changed, I need to make some changes in my works too."

The negotiation of one's true self and its presentation can be seen in Jetten's pieces where she plays with faces and masks. In the work titled *Faces and Masks* for example, a portrait of a human face is printed on a piece of translucent paper and is layered with another translucent paper which displays a mask. These papers are hung from the ceiling so that viewers can walk around to see through both the face and the mask.

"When people are feeling insecure, they tend to put on a mask," Jetten says.

However, Jetten states that masking is more than hiding one's true face. For her, masking is also more complex.

"It is not hiding because it is expressing what life is about," she says.

This dynamic is woven into her works and provokes thoughts on the real and the surreal immigrating experience.

## Themes beyond immigration

While immigration can be challenging, Jetten offers a positive



▲ Still image from the stop motion animation *Departing Arriving*.

attitude. Clowns are another recurrent subject in her works. Jetten says that she dreamed of becoming a clown as a kid.

"A clown is laughing away our own difficulties," Jetten says.

The clown personality helps her to make light of difficult topics.

Although the foundation of her works is much broader than the theme of immigration,

Jetten says she is open to interpretation. She refers to her artistic process as the way she lives.

This is the experience many fellow Canadian immigrants can relate to, according to Cane. She sees her works as a story.

"It depicts a voyage from loss of identity, to a sense of conflicted personas, to newfound self."

Cane reflects her own experience of becoming someone new. "It is the feelings of loss, but also of growth," says Cane.

"It is an identity shift of who you were in your homeland, and who you are in your new chosen home." ✍

For more information, visit Things to Do at [www.burnaby.ca](http://www.burnaby.ca) or [saskiajetten.com](http://saskiajetten.com)



Present

## Sal Capone: The Lamentable Tragedy of

"the performances range from high-octane to explosive" – Montreal Gazette  
 "a must-see. No doubt about it...I implore you to go see Sal Capone" – Bloody Underrated  
 "balls-out performance" – Montreal Godzilla

April 7, 2014 urban ink productions in association with Black Theatre Workshop, presents the Vancouver premiere of *Sal Capone: The Lamentable Tragedy of* at the Roundhouse Performance Centre May 22 – 31 2014.

This hip-hop theatrical powerhouse, written by Montreal native and Vancouver resident Omari Newton and directed by urban ink Artistic Director Diane Roberts, was inspired by the loss of unarmed youth Fredy Villanueva in a police shooting six years ago in Montreal. Following the ensuing protest come riot, the playwright was compelled to investigate the complex relationship between socially and culturally marginalized youth and the police, and the pressures they face while trying to reconcile the violence that impacts their lives. *Sal Capone* adds an essential voice to this timely and relevant conversation.

The play follows a young hip-hop group caught in the aftermath of a violent police shooting. Struggling to cope with the death of one of their members, the group confronts issues of their own biases, racism and a distrust of authority. *Sal Capone* evokes the urgency of youth struggling to find their place in the world through an energetic mix of hip-hop, spoken word and experimental sound and video. For a taste of Sal Capone please go to <http://vimeo.com/90914002>.

This unique collaboration brings together a talented cast of actors and design team from across the country including Letitia Brookes and Tristan D. Lalla (Montreal), Billy Merasty (Toronto) and Kim Villagante and Jordan Waunch (Vancouver). Troy Slocum (original sound design); Ana Cappelluto (set/lighting design); Candelario Andrade (projection design); Sarah Hall-Khlifi (costume design)



urban ink is dedicated to developing, producing, touring and disseminating astonishing works of theatre sourced from Indigenous and intercultural processes. Our goal is to ultimately create, through every project and every event, a fertile meeting ground—creating and producing extraordinary theatre from diverse cultural perspectives.

Sal Capone : The Lamentable Tragedy of  
 May 22 – 31 2014, Roundhouse Performance Centre  
 Tickets \$12 - \$25

[salcapone.brownpapertickets.com](http://salcapone.brownpapertickets.com)

Also Featuring :

**BAMN! Youth Speak Truth to Power!** (youth hip-hop performance)  
 May 25 and 31, 1pm (before 2pm matinees)  
**Rue Surreal Art Installation** and spontaneous events  
 Roundhouse Exhibition Hall May 22 - 31

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I have none of these. My cultural roots were planted in the West long before my family left the East.

I was born at a metropolitan hospital in Taiwan, surrounded by my Chinese family and granted a traditional Mandarin birth name consisting of three characters. I grew up in an ordinary, Mandarin-speaking, suburban household in Taipei. Upon turning six, I began attending the local Chinese school. As a result of having two working parents, I was sent to an after-school learning centre that taught primarily in English. I was already traveling between the Eastern and Western culture – between English and Mandarin – long before I left Taiwan.

As a kid navigating between the divisions of these two languages, I soon came to the realization that I am a miscalculation in the construction of the universe's cultural formula.

I had an extraordinary difficult time learning Mandarin. The strokes of the Chinese characters felt unnatural, inorganic and strange. I even had trouble pronouncing some words – such as the word "bear," which is pronounced as "xióng" – but always came out of my mouth as "óng."

My failure to excel in Chinese would not have been so strange had it not been for my ability to pick up English. My tongue could smoothly vocalize the compounds of the English alphabet, my hands could confidently ma-

neuver through the syntax of the English language and my sense of belonging became imbedded in the Western culture of British literature, Hollywood movies and Broadway music. The willingness to give up my ethnic sovereignty of a culture that I never felt a connection to allowed me to assimilate into the ways of Western life.

Yet, the ethnically diverse landscape of Vancouver constantly reminds me that I have a past that expands beyond the Western cultural frontier and the borders of Canada.

Vancouver is neither this nor that – it is always the in-between, the maybe, the perhaps, the not quite this but not quite that either – it is neither extremely cold nor devastatingly hot, neither a big city nor a small town. It is a combination of the historical and the modern, the new and the old and the East and the West. These fragile borders between culture, time and space provide liberation from the need to choose sides. This freeing quality of being able to live on the margins is a characteristic of Vancouver that I am just beginning to recognize.

With my foot situated on Vancouver soil and roots firmly planted in Western traditions, I now begin to yearn for a revival of Chinese culture in my identity. Living in Vancouver allows me the opportunity to recover these Chinese roots from a long drought – without limitations, sans expectations and in the absence of declaring allegiance. ✍