

An Interview with Ms Jean Loo

Co-founder of Superhero Me



Jean Loo

Image Credit: Jean Loo

Culture Academy	Would you introduce yourself and tell us about Superhero Me?
Jean Loo	I'm Jean Loo, co-founder of Superhero Me . Superhero Me is an inclusive arts movement that arms children from special needs communities with creative confidence through collaboration and mentorship opportunities. It focuses on inclusive programming and training, creative advocacy, and strategic partnerships to serve as a social mixing platform for children of all abilities. It started out as a costume-crafting programme for 15 pre-schoolers from a rental flat community in 2004. We've since expanded and aligned our mission to advocate for inclusion.
Culture Academy	Superhero Me aims to create a supportive community, where everyone participates, achieve and belong together. How did you continue to pursue inclusion during social distancing measures?
Jean Loo	This question has been driving our work since COVID hit our shores and has pushed us to new ways of creative engagement. In a nutshell, we have significantly scaled down our programmes and refocused to capability building through talks, digital training — and also being targeted about artist-child collaborations that we take on.

	<p>Bouncing back from the cancellation of our annual inclusive arts festival in March 2020, we had to quickly learn new tools of the trade like Zoom and pivot our efforts towards digital content creation and programming.</p> <p>In response to COVID-19, we embarked on a project “Let’s Fight COVID-19!” to help the children and adults with special needs understand COVID-19. The project includes a series of videos in 3 languages, slideshow with social stories tailored for those with autism and intentionally simplified to match their cognitive levels which has been viewed more than 50,000 times and used by schools and some libraries across Singapore.</p> <p>After the circuit breaker was announced, we put together HOLIYAY AT HOME, a weekly programme of storytelling and exercise on Tuesdays, craft to promote positive social-emotional skills on Wednesdays and a performance series to nurture art appreciation on Friday. Each session was done over Zoom, led by an artist and facilitated by up to three facilitators. We got busy designing animated Google slides along activities possible with the simplest of materials, selecting suitable music to set the mood and rehearsing artist-captain interaction to bring up energy. Children got so excited when we “spotlighted” their video. While they may not have been directly physically interacting with each other, co-creating in a shared digital space, and acknowledging the presence of others and self was enough.</p>
<p>Culture Academy</p>	<p>Could you tell us more about <i>Homerun</i>, which intended to use a housing estate to exhibit the work of young artists and its digital exhibition complement?</p>
<p>Jean Loo</p>	<p><i>Homerun</i> is a community arts exhibition by Superhero Me, featuring the work of five children – Alfred Goh, Brandvan Yang, Maryangelly Jayabahan, Nur Shahanis Binte Johar and Raden Rauf Bin Radin Padli – who have spent nine months on a project to mark the end of their six-year journey with Superhero Me. These children were from our pilot batch of superheroes and pretty much grew up with us over the last 6 years.</p> <p>We rented 2 HDB units in Blk 55 Lengkok Bahru, where the kids live and over a year – based ourselves out of it to create work with the children, study for PSLE and eventually open it up as an immersive arts experience led by the children.</p> <p>The exhibition was extremely well received — we had a successful sold out arts show, guiding more than 330 people over 9 weekends with close to 30 group bookings from organisations like GovTech, MOE, NLB, Yishun Health, AWWA etc. I enjoyed the conversations with the audience, mostly professionals from social service, education, healthcare, and the arts.</p>
<p>Culture Academy</p>	<p>In the post-pandemic world, digitalisation would continue to play a big role for arts-based communities, and it is likely that phygital – a blend of physical and digital experiences would become the norm. In this phygital context, what are</p>

	<p>some challenges and opportunities for Superhero Me and its collaborations with artists?</p>
<p>Jean Loo</p>	<p>I think there has been a rush for artists and creatives to build their skills, understand and apply it to digital contexts. In the case of Superhero Me, we managed to pivot relatively quickly because of the nature of our set up – we’re a network of creatives, producers and artists – and didn’t have recurring overheads like rent to worry about. Focussing our attention on ‘phygital projects’ meant going back to be clear about our mission: To use the arts to advocate for inclusion. It also involved being very clear about how our projects or programmes were going to meet a need – whether it was to advocate, support caregivers and the children etc – and make it not just about the art.</p> <p>Social mixing (of kids of different abilities) was obviously going against the grain of social distancing. As school programming was also a primary channel for us to train facilitators, this means we had to drastically change the way we work.</p> <p>Our team needed time to grow in our own capabilities, and decided scaling down and being project focussed is the best way forward for us. This means we wouldn’t actively pursue grants, which mostly had strict KPIs, but perhaps work differently with philanthropic partners or explore social entrepreneurship routes.</p> <p>We’re taking the time to be selective about partnerships, and also to have conversations on how the team wants to amplify and codify our community’s method to inclusion.</p>
<p>Culture Academy</p>	<p>How will Superhero Me continue to support the development of friendships through art among children in this phygital context?</p>
<p>Jean Loo</p>	<p>We’re still in touch with the core community of children who have followed us through the years and we create opportunities for them to check-in and meet their friends through mini projects. For the public, creating content on inclusion will be our key area of focus in the future, e.g. books, films etc. It has been a rich learning experience to focus on developing other aspects of our work while the COVID situation is still raging on.</p>