

# BELLA Magazine

LIFE IS BELLA!

**By Jessica Licciardello**

**A** powerhouse of mural art and a wide presence in the gallery world, Risa Tochigi, aka Riisa Boogie(<https://www.instagram.com/riisaboogie/>), has been showing up, working her magic, and showing the world how it's done one piece at a time. I had the pleasure of discovering her amazing art while visiting the Hudson Valley earlier this year, where I was introduced to her collaborative work with her partner Rezones(<https://www.instagram.com/rezones/>) while visiting exhibits at the Clinton Street Studio Gallery(<https://www.instagram.com/clintonstreetstudio/>) and Cryptic Gallery(<https://www.instagram.com/crypticgallery/>) in Poughkeepsie. Since then I have been mesmerized, inspired, and awe-struck at not only her talent, but her presence in the art world of NYC and beyond—I even inadvertently came across a piece while waiting in traffic in Brooklyn one day. I had the pleasure of interviewing her to explore the mind and creative process of this vibrant and beautiful soul.

**When did your art journey start?**

Mentally my art journey started at age 4 when I received an art award for my drawing in Pre-K in Japan. My career as an artist journey didn't start until my early 30's.

**You created a magnificent work for the World Trade Center site in Manhattan, how did you get involved with that project and how do you feel about creating for that space?**

First of all, thank you so much! I get so geeked out and can't wipe my cheesy smile off my face each time I think of the WTC project. I am blown away and truly grateful to have had the opportunity of a lifetime to create and be part of their regrowth and history.

Where do I even start? I get all scatter-minded thinking all the incredibleness of the project. We were invited by our dear friend, artist and curator Savior Elmundo for the ART WTC on the 69th floor of Building 4, two years before the mural project on Building 2. Last year, we were invited to submit a couple of designs for their outdoor mural project and we were accepted! I was in the middle of two projects when I heard the news. I didn't have time to marinate in the news but knew to get my bootie ready to rock and roll soon as I receive the ok to start!!!

Once I stepped foot on the sight, I realized where I was! I got a bit overwhelmed by the location and the dimensions of the wall, (20' X 65') but mainly the size of the corrugate. It was the largest wall I would have worked on at that time. This project took a total of 10 days to complete, approximately 12 hours a day in the hot scorching sun. Boy did I get a nice tan that week. My audience was the world for those 10 incredible days and my creative space. This girl was on cloud 9. I felt so right and I knew I was supposed to be there at that time, creating and crossing paths with the people we did. Putting on my harness, climbing into the scissor lift, putting on my mask, looking at the corrugated canvas, feeling LIVE and badass and damn proud! I got busy. I put all my passion and LOVE into that wall and how liberating it was moving my mind body and soul to paint my heart out for WTC and the neighborhood. My wall was right in front of the Oculus and to my left side stands the proud and strong building 1. The encouragement, gratitude and cheering audience was so powerful I was overwhelmed with such joy, I would choke-up in tears at times while painting. The energy was pure, genuine love, kindness, strength, determination, unity and hope.

My piece is about being curious, optimistic, imaginative, doing what makes you happy and live free and full!!! That is what I was able to truly experience though this epic unforgettable project.

And to have my mother there witnessing, looking up at me smiling so proud and happy. I started to tear up and I couldn't contain myself again from tears of joy. She asked me why I incorporated tulips into my piece? There was no particular reasoning but it felt really strong and made so much sense when I was designing the piece. She then told me that in Japanese writings and poetries she read, Tulips bring happiness and joy. It made so much sense.

This project gave me courage, a voice, a set of wings to be free from my flaws and to keep focusing on my passion, and keep going harder than ever. To make sure to reach more people as I can through our work to Inspire, Impact and Empower. Such an honor to be the visual voice for WTC. To bring joy, hope, love and to keep our imagination, curiosity live and strong!!!

We were so lucky enough to work with such an incredible WTC team and the other artists. We were a super team. We as a team created something very magical and special!!! Thank you to Silver Stein Property, Mr. Larry Silverstein, NY/NJ Port Authority and to each and everyone who was involved in making this all possible!!!

**You have many pieces that are created as murals and for public**

**display, What got you involved with creating art for public spaces?**

I came to the US with my family from Japan at the age of 7. I had a hard time adjusting, feeling a bit alienated. Language and culture differences made it pretty difficult to adjust. Unable to vocalize my feeling and thoughts got me trapped in my own mind feeling isolated. Creating unnecessary negative ideas of being unworthy.

But that was not the case when it came to the art curriculum at school. I was free from self-doubt, I was free to express, run wild with my imagination and thoughts. I had a passion for it, it kept me happy, I was proud of myself and most importantly I was able to communicate to others through my work.

I craved this feeling all the time, I wanted to connect and impact others through my work. But my insecurity with my grammar and spelling pushed me back from reaching that goal. I suppressed my creative happiness aside to work on my grammar and spelling. I waited so long to give myself permission to focus on what I was good at. That I didn't have to be perfect with my grammar and spelling to reach my dreams and goals. We all have a different way of speaking and connecting to others and my way is through my visual creation. Whether it's design, installation, mural, sketch idea and anything I can get my hands on to make. As I created more and shared more, I was bettering my flaws. Visual art is another form of speaking, connecting and a very important learning tool. I want to reach out to others and express the importance of visual language and all art forms. By creating art in public spaces, it allows me to share my experience and hoping I can shed some light and plant a seed in others. And on top of that, I get to connect with phenomenal humans all around the world and beautify the community together. It a win-win situation.

**What is the largest project to date, and what would your dream project be for the future?**

My largest project to date is the Poughkeepsie Gateway Project which is a total of 16,000 square feet. This project was commissioned by Arts Mid Hudson and Poughkeepsie Alliance and sponsored by Golden Paints, O+ Festival, Baxter and Rider Painting. Took about 1 month to complete and used both spray paint and bucket paint.

Once a dark and eerie place to walk through now 16,000 square feet filled with fun curious fun creatures filled with vibrant colors and inviting youthful energy. The place became a connecting hub, a playground. At times you will see kids running up the 45-degree wall and come down sliding on their booties. Skaters and bikers riding, doing tricks while some people come to shoot videos there. Being the catalyst for the creativity of others feels so rewarding, educating others through art and tell a story. Working outdoors through rainstorms and heat waves on the 45-degree wall—It was hard at times but so freeing, alive and rewarding. Being able to create in that capacity was the ultimate high. I was that kid on that

playground up and down the hill making and creating. All the support and love we received through the project was phenomenal. We had a curious audience coming by asking about the process. Some people came by and shared their life experiences, some brought over their sketchbook to share with us. People brought water and food at times and some people would sit there for hours watching us work. My family came by to help at times. That was the best part, creating as a family. My mother would bring her garden tools and go to town. She would chop and trim down the weaves around the perimeter of the wall while my papa would broom the dirt away of the areas I was painting. My sister and nephew helped me mix and prep the paint and we all painted together. It was the best feeling.

This project was made very possible because of a very special person Corene Concepcion- Rivera. She believes in our passion and talents and our mission to Impact, Inspire and Empower others through our arts.

My dream project is to travel around the world with my partner painting murals, collaborating with companies, creating interactive pop-up stations and teaching creative workshops.

**Do you approach creating art for public spaces differently than when you create for galleries?**

The energy is always the same, the difference is the materials, supplies, tools, and scale. I always start off with paper and pen to create a bunch of doodles. Then depending on the project I may cut the doodle and place them in different directions or recreate the images in digital form.

For example, the mural I created at the WTC, I used spray paint and large equipment like the boom and scissor lift to move around to cover the space. For my smaller works, like my layered woodcut pieces. I use a jigsaw, scroll saw, paintbrush, spray paint, masking tape, Exacto knife, PL glue, chalk, and pencils.

For my plush characters, fabric, beads, paint, scissors, thread and sewing machine. My digital works are of course done on my computer and my paintings are done on canvas and wood panels. For this, I use acrylic paint, marker, chalk, and pastels.

**What do you find most fulfilling about creating art, both personally and professionally?**

Personally, surprising myself feeling badass each time I finish a piece. Knowing I manifested the idea and physically produced them with my own hands.

Learning something new with each project. Sharing my process from the beginning to the end—sharing on social media hoping to inspire others

along the way.

Professionally, when working on a project with a client. We are solving problems, having ideas and thoughts and guiding them through different directions, and creating them into visual language. Seeing our clients face light up it's a phenomenal feeling. And always an extra plus when they recommend you to other friends and business.

**Where do you draw your inspiration from?**

Right after I get my first sip of coffee in the morning...everything is magnified by 1000X....lol

My inspiration is in pretty wide range... fun, silly shapes, vibrant colors, nature, fruit, toys, sneakers, textile, soup cans, snack wrappers, folds of fabric, culture, faces, dance movements, people I cross paths with every day. I draw my inspiration from everything around me.

Especially to my dearest and badass friends and family.

Jo-Ellen Smith, I look up to her dearly. She has been rocking with me since age 19. Her encouragement, guidance, love and countless support molded me into who I am today. She makes the world go around!!! I hear her voice and know everything is going to be OK and DAMN WELL! She gives me clarity. Above all else, she brings out my courage, confidence and all my best. She has taught me the meaning of hustle, self-worth and to GO AT IT and LIVE!!! She makes the impossible, so possible with her strength, confidence, elegance, genius and fierce aura. She is the modern-day 007 with way more attitude!!!

To my dear Power House Llanos family. Maya, Mama T, Julian, and Mr. Joe. They are dancers, choreographers, producers, educators, beat-makers, and martial artists. You name it, they've got all the skills. The way they work together as a family to guide and educate the community is incredible. They bring light to the dark, insecurity to compassion and neglect to care and support. They fiercely promote and educate about the importance of self-love and self-worth. They empower people to work together in support of one another while using our individual talents and skills. They taught me the value of hard work and to share and educate others by using my unique creative gifts. This family is pure passion and inspiration. They are graceful, loving, strong and truly compassionate. They always want the best for the community and believe in the power everyone possesses.

Riley Johndonnell, the man behind INTO Yellow, Turn Optimism into Action. He is not only a fierce and genuine person but the kindest soul. He manages to make each, and every person feel their importance in

positively building their community. The care and compassion he has for others and their well-being is endless. He magically brings everybody together to raise awareness for a cause as one cohesive group. His selflessness and passion are overwhelming and runs deep. He is forever putting others first. All in all, he is an incredible artist, activist, director, and educator.

TC Weaver aka REZONES, my partner in crime and my other half. Incredible dancer, photographer, educator, mentor, graphic designer, MC, and phenomenal human. He has been the root of my success. He can keep me balanced and focused, which allows me to be my ultimate best. With him by my side, I can always give 100% to each project and craft that I create. Everything I imagined and thought was untouchable in my life, he guided and showed me all is possible through my talent. His unconditional support is endless. The compassion he has for others and the continuous guidance that he provides empowers people to achieve success in all they desire. His willingness and patience are relentless. Many times, I must remind him to take care of himself. That being said, I believe all the love, support and the mentoring he does for others becomes his self-care. He is the weaver, healer, brother, and mentor to many people. I am so lucky to have him as my life partner.

And the best for last.....my SUPER BADASS phenomenal family! Mama-san/Sugako Aka Sabrina, and Papa-San /Tsuneo Aka Tony, my sister Maya, her son / my nephew, super-boy Masaki and Kenzo (family dog). Mama-san is hard-working, super crafty, silly, full of life and clumsy. She loves her garden. In fact, she calls herself the flower fairy. She creates amazing masterpieces from her garden. If you are in her garden, she will craft you up a vibrant bouquet of beautiful flowers to take home with you. You can enjoy the sweet and divine happy energy the flowers have to offer. My sweet papa san. The way this man works and cares for his family puts happy tears in my eyes. I never have seen anyone work harder for his family. His true joy and passion are to make sure the family is OK and well cared for. His care, love, and work ethic are his art form. I am truly grateful to have all of them in my practice every day. Don't get me wrong...there are times I do want to strangle him because he worries a bit too much. My sister is one hella strong, brilliant, loving and hard-working woman. She keeps the balance in the house. She is rational, collective, and pragmatic. She is always my voice of reason and has my back. My nephew, Super rad Masaki! He is the meaning of LIFE. His curious, ambitious spark of energy is so life-giving. Just his like mama, he is loving, caring and damn smart. He will keep ya on your toes for sure. He never fails to make me smile and feel great about life. My family is my backbone, the root to all of me. They are the main reason I am here right now doing everything I have dreamed of. They have allowed me to be stronger, wiser and confident. This will only enable me to propel forward in living my dreams. I am so proud to be a Japanese American female artist.

My creativity thrives off everyone's caring and passion!!! The way they empower me and affect my life is everlasting. I want to bring this energy to as many people as I can. I strive to connect and positively inspire people through my art for eternity!

**You work with your partner and co-artist Rezones. How did you find each other in your art journey?**

I met my partner Rez at Vassar college where he held dance classes in conjunction with the organization he co-founded called HIP HOP 101.

A silly corny fact to share, when I was 16 I dream up a person with dreads, who made art and danced. Then nine years later he appeared.

Been almost 13 years rocking together as BoogieREZ.

**Who are some of your favorite artists and what inspires you about their work?**

That's a hard question, so many incredibly talented artists out there, so much inspiration. But to name a couple, Truly inspired and in LOVE with Okuda San Miguel, a painter and sculptor, his use of vibrant colors, geometric shapes combined with nature and human forms, skulls and religious iconography. The wide range of scales and platforms he creates is phenomenal. LOVE LOVE LOVE, so much energy, and power!!!

Mad C, she is a powerhouse!!! A graffiti writer and muralist born in Bautzen, Germany. Inspired by her massive scale sized work. Her movement of lettering and use of vivid colors and her transparent layers technique. Many of her works specialize in her lettering but she is also phenomenal with character and portraits.

Osgemeos, Brazilia, graffiti and street artists who are identical twin brothers Otavio Pandolfo and Gustavo Pandolfo. I am attracted to the use of colors, organic playful movements, body gestures, textile, influence on music culture, intricate details and their iconic yellow humans. It's full of excitement, it's adventurous, full of imagination, I enjoy getting lost in their work placing myself into their world.

But mainly inspired by my peers and all the talent around me. Their hustle and drive gets me motivated to keep hungry aiming to keep working harder and bettering my craft.

**From your experience working as a professional artist, Is there anything you would wish to change or improve in the art world?**

For people to have more compassion and be more human.

**What do you enjoy doing when you are not creating art?**

Hanging with my amazing family, taking African dance and yoga classes.

**What are some of the struggles you face in your journey?**

Writing proposals, I lack in the art of writing. I wish words would flow naturally as I do when it comes to creating visual art. Knowing all my legal agreements and terms of licensing. Balancing my time between creating, running the business and maintaining my fitness routine. I get very wound up and my mood is not stable when I do not physically let go. All is a balance.

**What advice would you give to yourself 10 years ago?**

Follow my instinct and go at it. To be more confident with my knowledge and talent to explore and adventure out and ask for help.

**What would you ask yourself 10 years from now?**

Are you doing what makes you happy and pursuing all your goals and dreams?

**What is your favorite part about the present moment?**

Everything, being able to create every day. Becoming the confident artist I had been waiting for. Giving myself permission that I can do this and it's OK. Creating my own path learning from my mistakes/lack of knowledge and becoming wiser and stronger. Enjoying my growth as an artist and continue aiming at all my goals, making, connecting, exploring and sharing. I am finally feeling ALIVE and FREE to fly from my unnecessary fears of what-ifs, and DO WHAT MAKES ME HAPPY AND GOING at IT FULL!!!

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Be sure follow her art and adventures on instagram at

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