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“I’m a role model to young Indigenous people and I want to keep that going to show them if you put your mind to it, you can achieve your dreams.”

Jackie Saunders, NDIS participant

Something magical happened for contemporary First Nations artist Jackie Saunders when the global pandemic forced her indoors.

“During COVID I was just doodling in my journal and I liked it, so I thought I would try it on canvas and I developed a new style,” Jackie says.

“I really like it, it’s different from what I was doing before and it’s just relaxing.”

Jackie’s doodlings turned into some of her most creative and powerful works yet.

The proud Ngarrindjeri and Wirangu woman won the 2020 Dawn Slade-Faull Award which supported first solo exhibition, showcasing her new ‘big, bright and bold’ large-scale works.

The solo exhibition in Adelaide’s city centre was a dream come true for Jackie.

“I was really shocked and happy and excited, I felt really proud and really good,” she says.

Since then, Jackie has been busy taking part in group exhibitions and collaborating with other emerging and established South Australian artists.

“Other people love my art, I’ve had a lot of compliments. A lot of people look up to me and I want to be a role model because I do good things in my life,” she says.

Jackie, 32, of Christie Downs, lives with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

Her disability impacts her in many ways, including learning, communication and memory difficulties, anxiety, social problems, and distressing mood swings.

Jackie is supported in her career as an artist by the NDIS.

She attends a funded Visual Arts program with registered NDIS provider Tutti Arts, an inclusive arts organisation, which helps her with professional career development.

“It makes me feel good, it’s helpful,” Jackie said. “Life has improved because I’m getting the supports I need through the NDIS.”
A successful singer-songwriter with acclaimed pop group The Sisters of Invention, Jackie pivoted her focus from performing to painting in 2020.

Within hours of opening her first solo exhibition, Salt & Sand, she'd sold several of her new pieces.

Her career has been on a roll ever since.

Drawing inspiration from her Ngarrindjeri and Wirangu roots, Jackie does a lot of art 'around family, my culture and my country where my Mum and Dad are from'.

Last year, she showcased her work in a group Art Gallery of South Australia exhibition, Mirdilyayanthi, at Adelaide's Women's and Children's Hospital.

She also collaborated with celebrated established First Nations artist Elizabeth Yanyi Close.

Together, they created a mural for the western wall of the Tutti Arts Centre.

The design is based on Jackie's work Laying Under the Stars and reflects the artists' shared themes of 'connection to community, country and family'.

This year, Jackie partnered with local artist Laura Wills to create a joint exhibition called Mineral Lines which was presented at the South Australian Museum.

Jackie says she's enjoying working with other artists and showing her large works publicly.

"I've enjoyed it. I think it's been really good," she said.

"It's been fun working alongside Laura and Elizabeth and it's good to see our work together. I've enjoyed working with them."

Jackie says despite her recent success, her disability continues to present her with challenges.

"Being invisible, I think it makes it hard for people to understand my disability, people think I know things straight away, but it takes my brain longer to get things, it takes time to process," she says.

But with support from the NDIS and Tutti Arts, Jackie is staying focussed on the positives.

"My art relaxes my mind, it just takes me to another world really, it gets me out of these bad thoughts," she says.

"One of my big dreams is to become a famous Indigenous artist and to teach Aboriginal kids art, so I just want to focus on my art for now and see where it leads me."

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