Everything is Relevant

Lum, Ken, Scott, Kitty

Published by Concordia University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72168

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2474107
I have wanted to be an artist for as long as I can recall, even though the world of art museums was something I would discover only in adulthood. As a child, I enjoyed drawing and creating make-believe scenes. My model was the comic book—especially of the superhero variety—and, to this day, my drawings are inspired by this style. I was often unwell as a child and drawing was a source of comfort while being cared for by my grandparents at home. Sometimes my grandfather would return from nearby Chinatown with sheets of blank newsprint, used to wrap meats, for me to draw on. Occasionally I would get into trouble for drawing rather than doing Chinese homework. My mother had been a schoolteacher in China and wanted my brother and me to know Chinese; throughout her life she never knew more than a few English words. I felt a lot of expectations as a young child. There were also a lot of disruptions. We were evicted twice and had to move suddenly but we always stayed within the same small area of Strathcona in Vancouver, a heavily multi-ethnic and working-class neighbourhood just east of Chinatown. Making the rent was always a big worry. My family relied on me to translate instructions on packaging in spite of the fact that I could barely read, having entered directly into the first grade with nary a word of English. I did not do well in school initially and nearly failed grade one. If not for a kindly teacher who argued on my behalf with my homeroom teacher, I would not have been allowed to continue on to grade two. I did not fully understand what was going on, but I remember being quite scared about my family’s reaction to me being failed.

When I turned eight, my family moved to a house further east. The move felt like a new beginning. One of our neighbours was Pearl Gould. She was a cousin of the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould. She was a retired schoolteacher and her husband, Jack, was a retired longshoreman. My mother worked in a factory until very late most days so Pearl offered to
take in my brother and me after we walked home from school. She would feed us Lipton soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. I still recall being in awe after my first taste of cream of mushroom soup. In addition to feeding us, Pearl would teach us a variety of subjects, including English, history, and mathematics. Under her tutelage, I felt as though I was learning the ropes of the dominant world. After nearly a year of Pearl’s after-school lessons, my final two quarters of grades went from Cs to As. I remember how eager I was to run from school to Pearl’s home to show her my grades. My brother’s grades improved markedly as well. She gave us both long hugs.

In high school, I was asked to design the yearbook covers and banners for events such as “Gladiator Days.” I took art class from grades eight to nine but stopped when the art teacher admonished me for making what he called “weird” images. He strongly urged me to follow the example of another student who was creating inexpressive and tame images. I found his advice confusing because he was the first art teacher to introduce me to the world of contemporary art—namely pop art—and I was grateful to him for that. I remember being excited by the giant objects of Claes Oldenburg and the enlarged comic-book-style paintings of Roy Lichtenstein. Yet my teacher had very strong ideas about what art was and would criticize me harshly for not following his instructions to the letter. One of his assignments was to make a watercolour painting in the style of Lichtenstein. He taught us how to enlarge a comic book cell by pencilling in a grid on a larger sheet of paper. While others in the class started their Lichtenstein-inspired painting from actual comic books, I chose instead to work from a traumatic photograph in the Vancouver Sun newspaper and convert it into the comic-book style. The photograph showed a car-bombing victim in shredded clothing standing next to what remained of a car. My teacher thought this was a completely inappropriate image for artistic treatment. He told me not to take grade ten art, which was, at the time, an elective course that required his approval. As much as I wanted to continue taking art, I had no choice but to accede to the art teacher’s opinion. I was sorely disappointed. In hindsight, I can see how my disallowance was based on the art teacher’s sense that I had to be put in my place, punishment for my implicit belief—something that I could sense even as a student—that the power of art lies in its disruptive potential.

A school counsellor had me take an aptitude test to determine which elective to take and then suggested, based on the test results, that I take woodworking. I felt lost and a little frightened that an expert in career counselling would recommend woodworking as a viable future path for me. I had already sampled woodworking in grade eight and was terrible
at it. True to form, my year in the carpentry shop proved disastrous. The woodshop instructor kindly helped me finish every project. He advised me to take an extra science course since I did reasonably well in biology and chemistry. I decided to do just that and completed high school without any illusions of art—as I inchoately defined it then—being part of my life.

Next came university and a course load comprising mainly of classes in mathematics and sciences. By my second year, a day did not go by in which I did not don a white lab coat and attach a Texas Instruments calculator to the belt of my pants. I did decently enough in all my courses, but I had to really work at it. I struggled in all of my science courses to do reasonably well, while my colleagues seemed to just breeze through chemistry equations.

In my third year, I felt increasingly depressed. I never sought help for my feelings, but I could not sleep and I would experience frequent breakdowns. It was not uncommon for me to while away my nights driving around the city or sitting in a twenty-four-hour Denny’s restaurant until the sun came up. My grade point average plummeted and I barely passed several courses. One of my chemistry professors called me to his office after I flunked a fairly easy exam. He understood why I might have not done well on several problems on the test, but he noticed that I was failing even the early steps of algebra, which he knew I had already mastered. He told me that he could not in good conscience fail me because he believed I was better than the scores showed. I ended with one grade above pass.

That summer, after the completion of my third year of undergraduate study, I landed a job as a lab assistant in a research station of the British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture. Once again, I spent my days in a white lab coat, with a calculator on my belt and a baseball cap emblazoned with the logo of an insecticide company. During this time, I also got a part-time job designing announcement posters for the Vancouver Public Library. And I worked, on occasion, under the guidance of a former neighbour who was a sign painter. I liked to keep busy, if only to avoid falling back into a funk. I especially enjoyed the assignments from the library to design posters for events such as children’s puppet shows. I enjoyed, too, the moment when jobs came in to make large paper banners announcing things such as “The Monarch Furniture Semi-annual Sale.”

I was happy to find what felt to be a good balance between my activities at the agricultural research station and my “artistic” work. I just did not think anything outside of a life in a laboratory was possible for me. The pay and benefits provided a sense of security. I knew my
weaknesses in science, but I also knew my one strength: I was able to think unconventionally. One biological control experiment devised by my lab superior went exceptionally well. As a result, my picture graced the cover of the British Columbia news section of the *Vancouver Sun*, the city’s largest daily broadsheet. With the lab where I worked as backdrop, I held in my hands a pile of dead fly pupae, which I was asked by the *Sun* photographer to gaze downward at. At some point afterward, my boss, Dr. Costello, took me aside and said to me that if I continued to work hard and study toward a PhD, the lab he headed could be mine in about ten years.

Rather than feel reassured by Dr. Costello’s message of encouragement, I felt an immediate sense of confusion and fear about what I really wanted to do. I was deeply afraid of the idea of spending my life working in a laboratory. I found life there isolating. I felt something missing in the rest of my life as well. I wanted to experience more of the world. It was clear to me that a drastic change of course was needed.

In my junior year, I enrolled in an evening art class offered by Simon Fraser University. I was curious about what such a class would entail. I suspected that I might enjoy it. The professors and students I met in art were completely different from what I was used to. Many of the students were older and possessed a lot of firsthand knowledge about many aspects of the world. There was a notable fluidity in terms of what was appropriate and inappropriate conversation in class. I felt an incredible excitement. But I also felt deeply anxious about disappointing my professors in science, especially the one who was counting on me to pursue graduate study under him.

By my final year as an undergraduate, I could not read enough about art. I could not read enough about everything else, too, because it seemed to me that artistic knowledge touched on many other bodies of knowledge. I would spend my evenings in the university library reading as many books about art as I could. I volunteered to write art reviews for the student newspaper. I soon discovered that the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) had a library with limited public hours, and I would plant myself at a table there as often as possible. At the time in the city, there were very few, if any, venues that showed the latest contemporary art. So it was through absorbing the latest *Artforum* and the like that I kept informed about developments in art, which I was still trying to make a map of in my head. The VAG library was also where I met the remarkable Marianna Schmidt. She was an artist who was well into her seventies (she passed away in 2005). Together we would pore over all the latest art magazines and catalogues that came into the library. We had amazing conversations. I discovered that she was a retired hospital lab technician.
who had decided to pursue art later in life. She told me that she had always wanted to be an artist but circumstances did not allow for it until her retirement. I identified with her. She told me that I had no choice but to make the full leap into art. She noted that the art world was starting to be much more open to artists of colour like me. She told me her life story. She had lost her entire family to war and lived in European refugee camps for many years before finally being able to immigrate to Vancouver. She claimed that her imagination and love of making art sustained her in the most difficult times of her life. She told me that she saw a bit of herself in me. I cannot adequately convey how touched I was to hear this. I felt compelled to immerse myself more fully into art.

It was at this time that I started to write as a way of putting my thoughts into words. I kept multiple notebooks and pens on hand to make notes, which would often end up looking like Joseph Beuys blackboard drawings. Writing helped me to map out what I was learning. At that time, there was a prominent way of thinking in the art world about the indispensable function of text as a disruptor of aesthetic pleasure. Text was considered political and real while representational systems were deemed distorting and suspect. Text, it was assumed, challenged the foundations of representation, foundations that generate so much of the world’s coherence. For politically engaged artists, the presence of text in a work of art signaled a refusal to submit to the pleasure principle of art. It was a way to move toward political agency. My image/text works owe something to this belief, as this was the climate in which I emerged as an artist. But I was never entirely comfortable with this view. I learned from my sign-painting days that text—especially in its graphic form—is imbued with its own aesthetic capacity. I am interested in the pictorial qualities of text as much as I am in the textuality of pictures. In my work, I use text not to negate images—even though I recognize that the presence of one component can destabilize the other—instead, I see text as having the power to complicate the aesthetic experience.

The practice of writing has provided me with a kind of reprieve from my tendency to turn inward. I have sought out projects that have brought me to West Africa, the Middle East, and the Far East, and then written about my experiences as a way to reinvigorate my love of art and the self. I hope the writings in this book offer the reader some sense of what I mean.