

KEN LUM

Ken Lum (b. 1956 in Vancouver, Canada) is an artist best known for his conceptual and representational art in a number of media, including painting, sculpture and photography. His art is concerned with how meanings are assigned to images, texts, and objects based on cultural, racial and social codes. A longtime professor, he currently is the Chair of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania's Weitzman School of Design in Philadelphia.

He has published extensively, including a book of his collected writings issued by Concordia University Press in 2020. He has given keynote speeches for the Sydney Biennale, World Museums Conference in Shanghai, and the Universities Art Association of Canada.

He has an extensive art exhibition record that includes Documenta 11, the Venice Biennale, Sao Paulo Bienal, Shanghai Biennale, Carnegie Triennial, Sydney Biennale, Liverpool Biennial, Gwangju Biennale and the Whitney Biennial. Solo exhibitions include the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, Kunstmuseum Luzern in Lucerne, Switzerland, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Lum has also served as a curator for several large-scale exhibitions, including Shanghai Modern: 1919 – 1945, Sharjah Biennial 7, and Monument Lab: Creative Speculations for Philadelphia. He is Co-Founder and Chief Curatorial Advisor for Monument Lab. He was a project manager for the exhibition The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa: 1945 to 1994. Lum lives and works in Philadelphia, PA.

Hyperallergic

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HYPERALLERGIC

Ken Lum Holds Up a Mirror to the World

With their sophisticated interplay between image, text, materials, color and driving ideas, Lum's works often have a pronounced emotional impact.

by Gregory Volk
October 18, 2022



Ken Lum, "Anna May Wong" (2021), Canon LED curable inks, mirror, aluminum, 54 x 54 inches (all photography courtesy Matt Grubb, Object Studies)

This is the first solo show in New York in some 10 years for acclaimed Canadian artist, writer, curator, and educator Ken Lum, whose iconic 1989 photo and text work, “Melly Shum Hates Her Job” (not exhibited here), achieved cult status in The Netherlands (and elsewhere) and ultimately inspired a major Rotterdam museum to change its name. The former Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, named after a local street — which itself is named for a virulently colonialist 17th-century Dutch naval offer — is now Kunstinstituut Melly.

With their sophisticated interplay between image, text, materials, color, and driving ideas, Lum’s works often have a pronounced emotional impact. That’s certainly what has happened in Rotterdam. Spanning photography, sculpture, text, and photo-text pieces, his new exhibition features nine works from four series, making this an impressive survey show in miniature. In one room, two digital prints from the series *Time. And Again* employ a similar strategy as “Melly,” but updated for this raw pandemic era.

As a Black woman gently pushes a small child on a swing, she turns her face toward something in the distance — a commonplace image. The text on the right is jarring: “They have no idea how much I work. They have no idea how hard I work. They have no idea what I do.”



Installation view of Ken Lum at Magenta Plains, New York. Left: “I Lost My Job” (2021), digital print on archival paper, 60 5/16 x 85 1/16 x 3 inches; right: “The Most Unfortunate Case of Lucy Chona Santos” (2017), archival ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Ultra Smooth paper, adhered to dibond, framed in powder coated aluminum, 85 1/4 x 61 x 2 1/2 inches, edition of 2 plus 1 artist’s proof (#1/2)

The word “they” is ambiguous; maybe other unseen people near this urban playground, neighbors or passing strangers, insensitive or hostile management at her place of employment, maybe a whole white-dominated culture that consistently denigrates or ignores Black labor and achievements. Lum typically leaves much room for viewers to make their own insights and connections.

“I Lost My Job” (2021) is an unremarkable image of a middle-aged white man standing with his dog in an urban park. The rhythmic, repetitive, vividly colored text — “I lost my job. What am I going to do? “I lost my job. What am I going to do?? What am I going to do?” — succinctly encapsulates the despair and vulnerability of joblessness and economic upheaval. Both works exude palpable empathy.

Also here are two fictive yet plausible large obituaries from the *Necrology* series. In the typographical style and cadences of 18th- and 19th-century frontispieces, they announce the life and death of an otherwise obscure Camden, New Jersey, clerk-typist/keypunch operator and a woman from the Manila slums who was lured into drug smuggling by a “phony employment recruiter” and ultimately executed in Indonesia by firing squad. Lum invests them with historical drama and grandeur.



Installation view of *Ken Lum* at Magenta Plains, New York. Center: “Purple Square” (2022), sectional furniture; left: “America at Night” (2021), Canon LED curable inks, mirror, aluminum 72 x 72 inches; right: “Little Big Horn” (2021), Canon LED curable inks, mirror, aluminum, 54 x 54 inches

In the center of the other exhibition space is a square sculpture formed from inward-facing plush purple sectional furniture (“Purple Square,” 2021); it’s from Lum’s *Furniture Series* (1978-ongoing). This minimalist sculpture consists of mass-produced items. It could easily seem a wry indictment of consumerist culture, until one considers that for many people in poverty (including Lum’s family when he was young) this is aspirational furniture signals the likely unattainable good life: the seats cannot be accessed without climbing over their tops.

Four works from Lum’s *Photo-Mirrors II* series are arrayed around the room, each on its own wall and featuring a photograph printed on a glass mirror mounted on aluminum. These works extend the artist’s *Photo-Mirrors* series, which he began in 1997, and which include viewers and inspire them to question their own identities and biases.

An undulating, grassy plain, with a few protruding shrubs, fills the bottom quarter of “Little Big Horn” (2021); it’s an image straight from the American heartland. In the distance is a small copse atop a modest hill, along with a barely visible building. Colors are subtle, yet pronounced: dark and light green, tawny yellow, the gray-black of elongated shadows. Materiality is also pronounced: grass, tufts, the land’s slopes and protrusions, the stalwart yet vulnerable trees.

Little Bighorn, in southern Montana, is where in 1876 Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne warriors, led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, warred with and annihilated the invading US Army. It’s not their (brief) triumph that has been celebrated in the United States, but instead the “heroic” defeat of the colonizing US troops, led by General George Armstrong Custer.

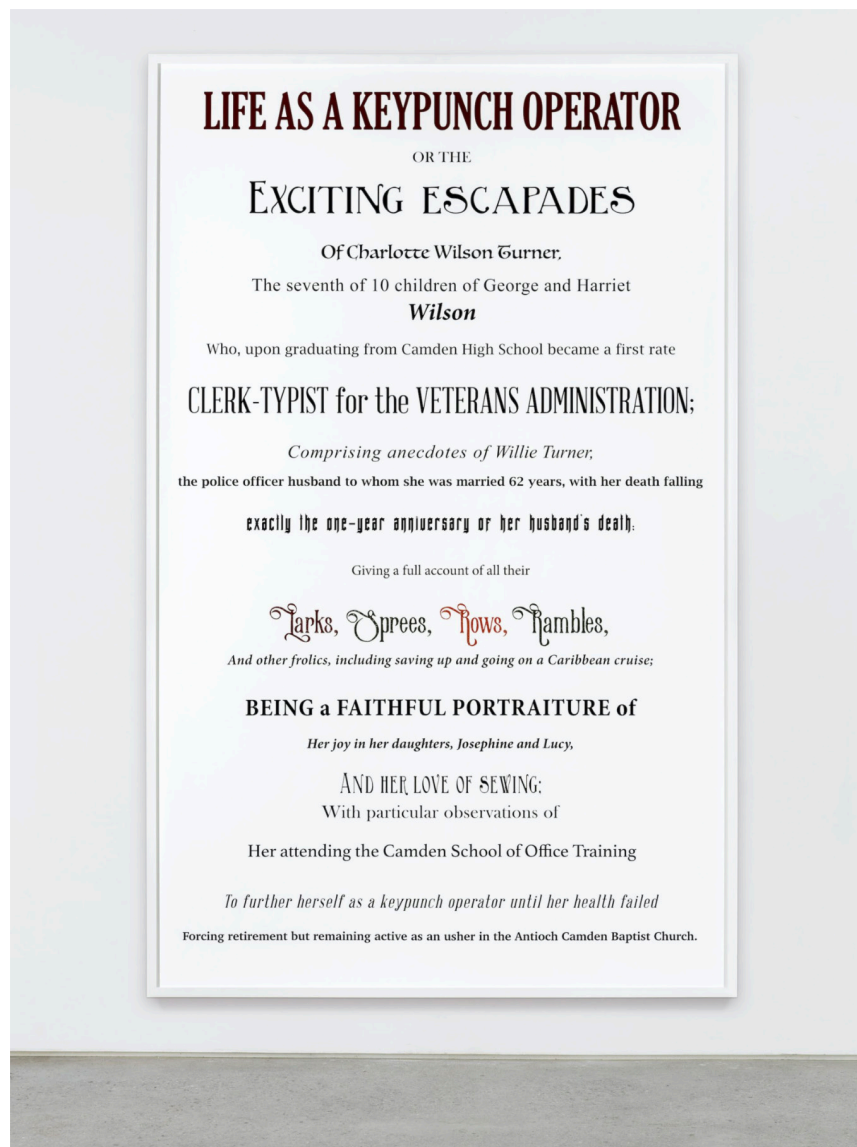


Ken Lum, "Main Street, USA" (2021), Canon LED curable inks, mirror, aluminum, 72 x 72 inches

The mirror seems, from some vantage points, like a huge, gray sky filling the top three quarters of the work, but from others reflects the surrounding architecture, other artworks, and — importantly — viewers. On an adjacent wall is the startling and, for me, mesmerizing "Main Street, USA" (2021). Costumed Disney characters — Goofy, Pinocchio, Mickey, Donald — along with a marching band member in a splendid white suit, and others, decontextualized, form an enthusiastic, but unnerving and bereft troupe in a void.

From Vancouver, the child and grandchild of working-class Chinese immigrants, Lum relocated to Philadelphia, where he now chairs the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania Stuart Weitzman School of Design. His adopted, hugely conflicted country is approached thoughtfully and obliquely, with hints and suggestions.

Witness the Chinese American woman in a hat, wearing a floral blouse, her expression pensive, her face slightly covered by a gossamer veil (“Anna May Wong,” 2021). She exudes smart, sultry movie star glamour and for good reason. Anna May Wong (1905-1961), whose birth name was Wong Liu Tsong, was Hollywood’s first Chinese American movie star. Appearing in more than 60 films, she was (unsurprisingly) pigeonholed into stereotypical Asian female roles and moved to Europe, where she could be freer and flourish as an artist.



Ken Lum, "Life as a Keypunch Operator" (2016), archival ink on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Ultra Smooth paper, adhered to dibond, framed in powder coated aluminum, 96 1/4 x 60 1/4 x 3 inches, edition of 2 plus 1 artist's proof (#1/2)

The mirror works wonders, evoking the silver screen, returning Wong to star status in a fresh context, while her portrait evokes the escalating anti-Asian racism and violence (especially against women) in the United States. Both Wong and Lum are from West Coast Chinese immigrant families, both knew privation and faced racial discrimination, both gravitated to the arts.

“America at Night” (2021), likely a satellite shot of the nocturnal country, shows the familiar shape of the continental US, but isolated on a mirror and without neighbors — no Canada to the north, no Mexico to the south. Populous areas (the East, parts of coastal California, large cities) are ablaze with lights; less populated areas are largely dark. This gorgeous work evinces a profoundly divided country and by extension its skewed, increasingly dangerous political system, which favors white voters and rural states.

A remarkable thing about this exhibition space is how these static works are in constant visual flux, always interacting with one another, because of the mirrors and reflections. As one moves about, Anna May Wong appears in Little Bighorn — a fleeting, visual connection between racism, oppression and violence. The Disney characters loom in front of the nocturnal United States. The US appears to balance — precariously — on the sculpture. Lum includes, and directly challenges, viewers in this welcome, and welcoming, show.



Then and Again: The Perennial Present and Deep Reflection of Ken Lum

By STEPHEN WOZNIAK, September 2022



Ken Lum, Anna May Wong, 2021. Canon LED curable inks, mirror, aluminum 54 x 54 in.

Ken Lum

Magenta Plains

149 Canal Street

September 17 through October 15, 2022

&

Ken Lum: Death and Furniture

Art Gallery of Ontario

June 25, 2022 through January 2, 2023

&

Ken Lum

Art Toronto

October 27 through 30, 2022

“Learning to live ought to mean learning to die - to acknowledge, to accept an absolute mortality.”

“I speak only one language, and it is not my own.”

“We are all mediators, translators.”

“Peace is only possible when one of the warring sides takes the first step, the hazardous initiative, the risk of opening up dialogue, and decides to make the gesture that will lead not or to an armistice, but to peace.”

– Jacques Derrida

One too many Derrida quotes? Perhaps, but postmodern French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s influence on artist Ken Lum is unmistakable. And these blunt passages make plain what Lum’s art often shows his audiences. It’s all – or at least often – about the critical deconstruction and phenomenology. If you see the work, you’ll know what I mean. You can, if you step into the three new Ken Lum exhibitions now on view.

Lum’s new solo art exhibition at Magenta Plains gallery in New York City presents nine recent works that address perennial, present-tense concerns of the artist — from racist, pop cultural identity to the despair of unemployment and to our eventual death, of course. Unlike some work of other notable conceptual and minimal artists over the decades that present austere, unitary, patterned text and objects that test viewer attention about space, time and sense perception, Lum’s work helps us additionally focus on our cultural, social and personal perceptions, which is a dire need in light of recently renewed international unrest.

I interviewed Lum in May for his Remai Modern Museum *Death and Furniture* solo retrospective in Canada ([Ken Lum Interview Podcast](#)) and talked with him again in late August about the intersection between life and the artifacts we create to mark our path, stake our claim and essentially brace ourselves for this oblique world.

Clearly, Lum wants us to pay attention: to look, to review our gaze and check ourselves. The large-scale, mirrored works included in his new exhibition perform just this task with some help from the viewer. “Anna May Wong,” featuring a still image of the often-stereotyped, eponymous silent film actress, depicts her squarely facing us, though looking just off to the side to avert our stare. When we see ourselves in this very mirror, we’re reminded of our regard for, and contribution to, her identity and our acceptance of a movie character, but denial of the actual person who played her. Like the famous feminist Carol Hanisch’s rallying slogan, “The Personal is the Political,” this and other works here start with seemingly smaller, single-character personal (re)views that point to larger problems of systemic racism, widespread economic failure, endemic warfare and the preponderance of institutional power.

In another mirror piece, “Little Big Horn,” which alludes to the triumphant 19th century Sioux and Cheyenne battle against Colonel Custer’s army, a remarkably peaceful, grass-covered plain peppered with a few ramshackle homes in the distance is shown. With our reflection in the sky above the field image, we might ask “what happened, when and what’s left,” but certainly not without reviewing our complicity or understanding of the events and space in which it unfolded.

While Lum recognizes that the medium sends the message, he’s also interested in the *space* his individual art objects occupy.

“I’m always interested in *multiple* spaces, how works of art are sited and how they are expected to perform, which is somewhat different, according to different spaces. The three I’m interested in are: the private space of an individual, which could be a private art collector; the spaces of museums, which are private spaces, even though they function as semi-public spaces; and public spaces,” Lum explained. “Museums seem private and often look denatured; they don’t have sociality, in a sense. Just clean white walls. They’ve been scrubbed of any interference.”

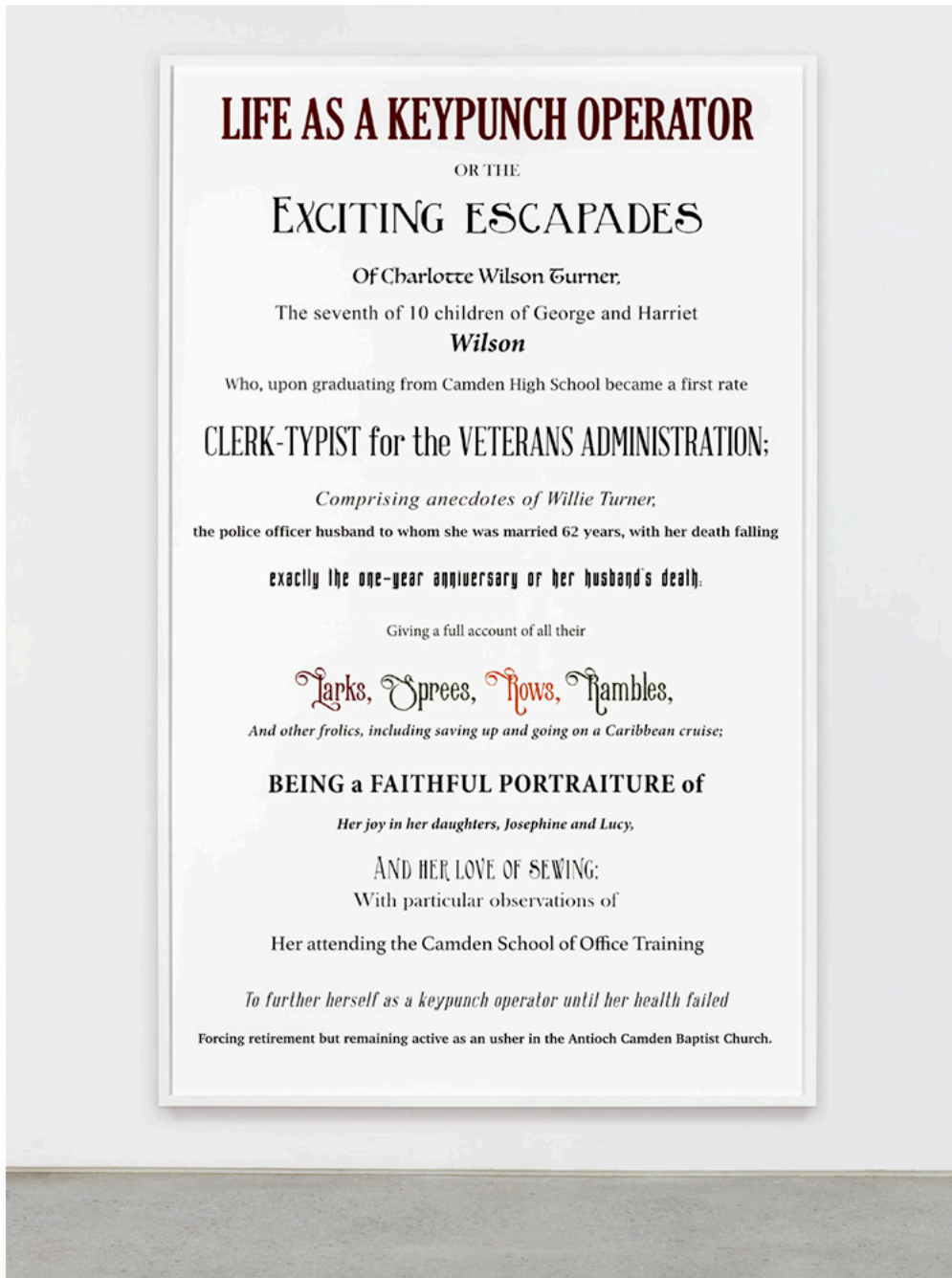
I asked if he wanted to change that convention – since his art regularly exhibits in museums and large commercial galleries – and does he think about his work as discrete objects or grouped installations.

“I like hovering somewhere in between. I like discrete objects in the sense that I think the autonomy of a work of art – an old modernist term – is important because that gives it a perimeter of the intended meaning. At the same time, that containment acts in the service of its relationship to the social world beyond the gallery,” Lum told me.

He’s not interested in the closure or the distance between what’s classed as non-art and art. He genuinely likes the distinction of each category, but also the momentary confusion viewers experience regarding the identity of what they see on a wall. So long as there is no default “this is art” category that registers with audiences, he’s happy. “I hope what I present is more interesting,” Lum said.

Two other works in the show, the large-scale text-and-photo “They Have No Idea How Much I Work” and “I Lost My Job,” unequivocally ask us to pay attention to the human subjects featured and their bare interior revelations that occupy equal space on the picture plane. Both the African American mother and elder European American man in the pieces are depicted in pleasant outdoor public park settings, each with a child and dog, respectively. This helps us to recognize them as whole humans who can and should deserve a break from the hard knocks of life, but who are also depended upon by others they care for and love, putting them in a quandary. In some circles, because of the early genesis of these works in the 1980s before the Internet, Lum is known affectionately as the “Godfather of Memes,” something he concedes today. While rich and complex, his work is also as direct as a poignant, witty scroll stop on Instagram.

Lum's *Necrology* series, works of which I had seen at Royal Projects in Los Angeles, and now showing in the Art Gallery of Ontario retrospective, sort of act as epitaphs or highlight obituaries for primarily tireless workaday world laborers. With Lum, who writes all the original text, we get more. In the piece "Life as a Key punch Operator," there's mention of essential family love, but also preparation of the subject for entry into a thankless lifetime employment role. It's funny that these pieces feature numerous, and wildly different, font styles, which remind me of Old West outlaw wanted posters. It's as if these humble servants have been elevated to a fleeting, desirable, but problematic "wanted" position preserved in an oversized recorded paper summary.



Ken Lum, *Life as a Key punch Operator*, 2016. Archival ink on Hanhemuhle Photo Rag Ultra Smooth paper mounted on 3mm dibond framed in powder coated aluminum, 76 x 44 in.

Lum, it turns out, was initially struck by a recent faithful reproduction of an April 15, 1865 President Lincoln assassination newspaper cover story featuring Lincoln's life highlights, in which each appear as their own competing "mini- headline" written in "florid language." To Lum, it piqued his interest in the flux between "pictorialism and textuality," but also the replacement of picture for text that he hopes will help reinvigorate how we actively see and imagine, since our brains are almost continuously overloaded with electronic imagery that we *don't* generate daily.

Lum and I talked ceaselessly about art, his work in **Monument Lab**, family and summer vacations, his fantastic New York gallery, his day job as a professor at University of Pennsylvania – and about history.

I asked him about his interest in the hidden history of the 1871 Los Angeles Chinese Massacre, which was led by both whites and Latinos for revenge of a death that resulted from Chinese gang conflict. The American massacre was marked as the single highest number of lynchings in one event. Lum has written a motion picture screenplay about it he hopes to get produced. Official notice of the tragedy has increased recently and Lum is going to submit a proposal to the city for a public memorial honoring the victims – offering a symbol of new beginnings to hopefully, and rightly, supplant the many statues of questionable leaders slowly being dismantled worldwide.

All of this shows Lum's interest in refocusing our perceptions, discovering our common experience and living in the present, even though much of his uncanny and sometimes ironic work draws on a deep and mired past and even though it's his sincere intent to contribute to what amounts to new history. He cares about what's right in front of him.

To wrap up our interview, I sent him a quick text message. "What is your ultimate goal as an artist: to present polemics, engage disenfranchised masses, reflect deception, and generate peace – or something else altogether? If you had your druthers, what do you want in the life you've chosen and manifested?"

In pure Ken Lum style, he quickly sent me this simple sincere text, "To leave the world with my voice through my art. For others to think about my complexities after taking in my art. I want to live as long as my children live, so that I can fully take in their lives."

While I'm sure we'll have Lum and his remarkable works around for years, hopefully, his children and the generations to come will live long past his stay on Earth and carry his fundamental present tense intent with them.

Ken Lum's work is on view at Magenta Plains from September 17 – October 15 and the Art Gallery of Ontario until January 2, 2023. His work will also be represented by Royale Projects at Art Toronto from October 27 – 30. **WM**

The Brooklyn Rail

July-August 2022

BROOKLYN RAIL**Critics Page** | In Conversation

Ken Lum with Lyko Day



Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989, c-print on on silkscreened plexiglas. Melly KunstInstitut.

I first encountered Ken Lum's work as a graduate student working at the early stages of what would become my book *Alien Capital*. Even though Ken and I are now based in the US Northeast, we are both from British Columbia and I still think of him as a Vancouver artist, whose multimedia works have profoundly shaped my own grappling with the contradictions of that city. I gravitated toward his art because it filled a gap that my previous interest in experimental poetry had left, particularly in terms of thinking about aesthetics and racial abstraction. Ken's work helped me generate new ideas about place, occupation, work, and migration that better captured the scale of argument that I was hoping for in my project. His art animates the vexed intersections of race, class, global capital, and the neoliberal state's production of multiculturalism. Our dialogue here delves into some of the push and pull of identity in Asian North America, and also more broadly in the US and Canada.

Iyko Day: One of the things I love about your work is that it taps into a pop art irony and irreverence that is so effective at exposing political contradictions and leaning into indeterminacies. For example, I think your approach to the theme of “exclusion”—a central subject of Asian diasporic studies—has been so generative in moving viewers toward a more complex engagement with the interplay of national borders, settler colonialism, and neoliberal capitalism.

One of my favorite of your early works is “Authority Piece,” which you made as an alienated first year art student. In the work you took the keys of your art-class colleagues and boarded up the classroom door so they couldn’t get in. After getting drunk at a bar, you confronted your lock-ed out classmates and proceeded to yell and curse at them. The point of the piece was to both highlight and shift the authority of the space away from the university and privileged art students. You also shifted the terms of exclusion.

I wonder if this example feels relevant at all for you today? Whose keys would you steal to destabilize authority in the art world?

Ken Lum: Firstly, I don’t steal but I am sympathetic to Proudhon’s axiom that “property is theft”! Even better, another Proudhon saying, “The great are only great because we are on our knees.” People in general do not have the tools to question authority so they lead what Socrates famously called “the unexamined life.” That’s not entirely fair because I don’t think people accept things the way they are as somehow natural—they understand the rules of power—but that they feel helpless to do anything about it. As an ethnically Chinese person, I was often told to remember two things—one was that the world is cruel and full of injustices and the second was to accept the world for what it is. I was instilled with the importance of passivity and an extreme idea of yin-yang, that competing impulses must be resolved in a harmonious balance. “Authority Piece” was my first ever student work. I was new to art and excited by the unexpected media that could be deployed for art. So perhaps at the time and without knowing, I was challenging my own formation as an Asian person.

Day: The theme of exclusion is also captured so cleverly in your furniture series, in which you arranged furniture in ways that made it impossible to sit down—the furniture is reduced to form without function. In addition to offering a commentary on minimalism, the furniture at once evokes and denies hospitality. The way the series narrates exclusion through false hospitality and inclusion captures the hypocrisy of legislated multiculturalism and neoliberal immigration policy in Canada.

Do you think that the longstanding critique of legislated multiculturalism in Canada has enabled a more ironic artistic engagement with discourses of “minority inclusion”? Are politics in the US so rigidly Manichean that the broad-based critique of multiculturalist inclusion remains on the distant horizon? It often feels like there is little room for irony or a critique of what Dylan Rodriguez calls “compulsory liberalism.” Does this characterization resonate with you, or am I way off?



Ken Lum, *Orange Sculpture in Figure 8*, part of "Furniture Sculptures" series, 1998

Lum: With respect, I don't agree. For one thing, identity politics takes up a lot more space in art in Canada than it does in the U.S. but much of it is and has been quite sentimental, often taking the form of a cri de coeur of “I exist!” Such a form disallows critical challenges and dialogue in return because challenges could be misconstrued as ad hominem criticism. As for Canadian work with a more ironic artistic bent, the irony is often announced rather than disguised, a sign of unsophistication, and dare I say, artlessness. I am generalizing. Of course, there are good artists in Canada, as there are good artists in many other places. But look at the work of artists dealing with multi-culturalism in Cuba and India just to take two examples that come readily to mind. I am thinking of Carlos Garaicoa or Sandra Ceballos or Nalini Malani. These artists' works are visually stirring and deeply experiential. They open up a lot of questions and thoughts.

Day: The complex racial and colonial circuits of discovery, arrival, invasion, and exclusion animate your Four Boats Stranded public art installation on the roof of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Situated on each corner is a different ship: the HMS Discovery, a First Nations' Long Boat, the Komagata Maru, and the Fujian migrant boat that was turned away after arriving on the coast of British Columbia in 1999. Among the various themes, the work situates histories of settler colonialism, racialized migration, and First Nations' dispossession in dynamic relation. These are serious issues, yet there is something both absurd and humorous about looking up to see ships in the sky. How does humor come into play as you conceptualize these relational histories or relational politics?

Lum: The idea for Four Boats Stranded had its precursor in Liverpool, England, an important city in the slave trade. Liverpool was also important for maritime insurance companies or underwriters, including one for the Titanic. On the dockside of Liverpool, there are many buildings with representations of ships as well as slaves, often in bas relief. I did see for this work on the parapet of the Vancouver Art Gallery four directional markers, each one symbolizing an epochal turn in the history of the Vancouver area. Collectively, they functioned more like a grand montage with huge gaps full of significations between them.



Ken Lum, *Bindy Sanjeet. Employee of the Month*, 1990, c-print on powder coated aluminum, 6 by 8 feet. Private Collection.

Day: As a last question, do you think part of the problem Susette and Amy are raising about Asian American art (being stuck in an identity frame), rooted in a kind of museum industrial complex; narrow interpretive frameworks, or other issues?

Lum: I think the identity frame to which they refer is a strait-jacketing frame that has long existed in America, due to the logic of racial triangulation meant to maintain the status-quo of white normativity. Asian-Americans represent a third wheel that is at times lauded as model citizens and at other times attacked as a foreign threat on domestic soil. Asian-Americans have always been looked upon warily by official society. The somersaults that Asian-Americans have to perform just to survive is a contradictory testament to both Asian-American weakness and strength. The identity frame is so strongly entrenched and in a preconceived way that every Asian-American artist has little choice but to negotiate their artistic positions from within and through that frame. This creates the museum industrial complex to which you refer.

Contributors

Iyko Day

Iyko Day is Elizabeth C. Small Professor and Chair of English and Critical Social Thought at Mount Holyoke College and Faculty Member in the Five College Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program.

Ken Lum

Ken Lum is an artist and M.J.Taylor Penn Presidential Professor and Chair of Fine Arts, Stuart Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania.

Ocula

July 2022

OCULA

Ken Lum: 'I think there is a huge disconnect in the art world'

In Conversation with
Neil Price
Toronto, 20 July 2022

Ken Lum. Courtesy the artist.



With an illustrious career spanning over 40 years, Canadian artist Ken Lum's first solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, *Death and Furniture* (25 June–2 January 2023), brings together image and text, sculpture, and installations that probe the contours of everyday experience.



Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* (1989). Photo-text work. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin/Cologne/Munich.

The recipient of AGO's 2019 Gershon Iskowitz Prize, Lum is particularly known for biting and satirical image-and-text works that challenge viewers to grapple with what is seen and unseen, while wryly surfacing political and economic impositions that shape the human condition.

Melly Shum Hates Her Job (1989), for instance, is a billboard showing the work's title printed in bold typeface alongside a young woman at her desk.

Melly Shum Hates Her Job is a permanent fixture on the facade of the contemporary art centre formerly known as Witte de With in Rotterdam, where Lum's solo exhibition marked the institution's inaugural show in 1990.

The work was installed as billboards at various locations throughout the city, and when the exhibition ended these billboards were taken down, only for the one at Witte de With to be re-installed due to its popularity with the public. Speaking to the work's place within the fabric of Rotterdam, it was announced in 2020 that Witte de With would hence be known as Kunstinstituut Melly.

The interplay between image and text is on full view in *Death and Furniture*, which travelled to Toronto from Remai Modern in Saskatoon, where it was curated by Michelle Jacques and Johan Lundh. At Art Gallery of Ontario, it has been curated by Xiaoyu Weng, Carol and Morton Rapp Curator of the Gallery's Modern and Contemporary Art department.

The exhibition includes Lum's 'Time. And Again.' series (2021): photographic portraits of people on the street shown alongside their testimonies printed in bold text, which take the pandemic as a jumping-off point to investigate the vagaries and hardships of modern-day work life.

'I'm interested in the textuality of images,' and 'the pictorialism of text', Lum says. But it's not just about how the font looks; it's about the pictures the language produces and engenders in viewers.

Death and Furniture also includes Lum's famed 'Furniture Sculptures' series (1978–ongoing), comprised of commercial sofas turned into minimalist works that upend and transform the utilitarian function of furniture, causing viewers to reckon with narrow perceptions of their surroundings.

Likewise, the 'Photo-Mirrors' series (1997) wedges found photographs into the corners of framed mirrors, inviting viewers to become part of the work's composition and reflect—both literally and metaphorically—on what it means to live in relation with others.

Born and raised in a Chinese working-class family in Vancouver, Canada, Lum's roots have formed a worldview that makes him somewhat hesitant about the art world's excesses, having lost his mother at an early age due to her exposure to toxins while working under harsh sweatshop conditions.

Lum uses these experiences to mine the purpose and meaning of objects marking his family history. In *Untitled Furniture Sculpture* (1978–ongoing), a pink velvet sofa is inspired by those considered luxurious in Lum's childhood—the kind his mother would have both liked and protected from actual use.

Lum has contemplated death throughout his practice. In his 'Necrology' series (2016–ongoing), represented here by five works including *Life as a Keypunch Operator* (2017) and *A Recounting of the Events and Experiences in the Life of Yasir Khorshed* (2017), sensational obituaries are derived from amalgams of real and fictional lives.

These obituaries are re-composed and designed using 18th and 19th-century fonts inspired by *The Philadelphia Inquirer* newspaper's front-page reprint announcing U.S. President Abraham Lincoln's assassination.

Now living in Philadelphia, where he is the chair of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania's Stuart Weitzman School of Design, Lum discusses the many roles he holds in this interview, and there are many to reflect on.

Besides being an artist, writer, academic, and university administrator, Lum co-founded the influential *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, and also co-founded Monument Lab, a non-profit public art and history studio involved in recent discussions surrounding the removal of colonial statues.



Exhibition view: Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* (1989), Moritzplatz, Berlin (16 September 2019). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin/Cologne/Munich.

NP **Your exhibition *Death and Furniture* at the Art Gallery of Ontario brings together works spanning the last 40 years. What parts of your practice does the presentation focus on?**

KL The furniture works date back 40 years, to the 1970s, and the very start of my interest in art. The image-and-text works go back about 35 years. While I work in series, all the works are relatively new.

The relationship between image and text is endlessly rich, and both text and picture systems are fundamental to human communications. Furniture is also fundamental to social existence. Thus, I am always able to generate new works from the many series that intertwine in my overall practice.

NP Do your ideas in the series change drastically, or are you homing in on a consistent set of ideas?

KL My ideas within a series do change. It wasn't obvious at first, but I was able to see their sources more clearly over time. They had a lot to do with lived observations mixed with memories, including books I have read or movies I have seen.

I am interested in subject formation, or how an individual is conceived and produced as a subject; in community formation, and the difference and subjugation of difference by normativity. I am also interested in the relationship between form and content.

There are always new forms in the world and new ways of imagining, much of it encoded for an oppressively market-oriented world. Image and text are a huge system of representation today, especially with the internet and the role of graphics that dominate websites.

It's like a horizon line of possibilities. And, of course, when you're making each iteration, there's always a new context. As time passes, there are always new viewing circumstances that emerge and have bearing over the reading of the works.

NP In your recent series, 'Time. And Again.', you present images of people of various identities accompanied by text. In one image, we see a Black woman who is in a park and there is a child on a swing.

The text reads, in part: 'They have no idea how much I work.' Could you unpack 'they' in those statements? Is it an entry into considerations around race, class, and power?

KL Forty years ago, I was making a lot of work depicting people of different races and ages. I did quite a few image-and-text works with very young children, the elderly, and nearly completed a work involving a person in a wheelchair.

When I did that in the late 1970s and early 80s, I was often accused of being Disney-esque. It was crazy; the works didn't look anything like Disney. Plus, such accusations only undergirded the idea of whiteness as neutrality.

Back then, to try to express a fact of the world—one that is multicultural and multiracial, was considered Disney-esque, while to depict white subjects only was to be neutral. And it's still largely this way.

I'd say, does that make a difference? They would say, 'Of course not.' But later, as the conversation developed, there would be comments like, 'Of course you're interested in that—you're Asian.' Or the converse, if I'm veering into territory that is not—in their eyes—the purview of 'non-Asian', they would say, 'Well, you should be doing this; you're Asian.'

I used to get a lot of shit like that; it was not easy, and it's kind of an unspoken part of history. There are lots of artists of colour with very similar stories. I just happen to be lucky enough to have built a career despite the reasons just mentioned—for which many good artists of colour resigned from the art world.

NP Images like the one I just mentioned run through different possibilities of interpretation as people look at this woman and try to cast her as a particular trope or summarise her life. It seems to me they could represent a whole number of onlookers.

KL The meaning behind the images is not specific, or not specified, and it's partly imagined, too. It could also be a part of the woman's own imagination.

I'm really interested in speaking truth to power in terms of social differentiation, which is always seen as, 'You're just being political, you don't need to,' or, 'Why are you being like that? We're human beings. We're all equal.'

NP Text, which you use a lot, is always under pressure to be minimised or reduced in the digital age. How has technology affected how you think about the use of text, such as abbreviations and shortening?

I'm thinking of your works that take up flowery, antiquated language. There doesn't seem to be much patience for that kind of text these days.

KL I'm interested not just in the relationship between text and image, but the textuality of images, and the pictorialism of text. This isn't only the way the font looks, which I'm playing with as well, but the kind of pictures the language composition produces and engenders in viewers.

I was not only interested in paying homage to language, or the kind that doesn't exist anymore, because the works pay tribute to frontispieces and forms of description from the 18th and 19th centuries, too, as you've picked up.

With the passing of such a way of speaking is the demise of a way to conceive of time and space, as well. Language forms us, so if the language of a certain form or style disappears, that way of imagining disappears, too.

NP In your 'Necrology' series, it seems you're bringing old ways of speaking and writing into contact with contemporary happenings or incidents. It's jarring to be reading in this style something that could have happened last week.

KL When I started in art, I really believed that art should be something you just kind of get—that the artwork interpolates viewers, and that's it. But now I'm interested in the idea of duration, and text that is so compelling that it beholds viewers.

I like the idea that viewers take pleasure in the play of the text, in the kerning, and the illogic of the ordering. There are all kinds of rules in terms of good and bad design from today's perspective, in terms of spacing, and so on.

It's a paradox because these are scenarios of today, but I could read in any newspaper that a young woman was imprisoned by some authoritarian government and died. I wanted to really bring the figures to life and sustain viewers over time. I am telling viewers—I am demanding—that they spend time reading this.

NP There seems to be a concern for the quotidian in your work; whether it's people who live or die, furniture we take for granted, or thoughts about our work lives.

KL That's a fair observation, but I don't do it to fetishise the everyday. This whole concept of the everyday man and woman is taken to an extreme today—certainly by politicians, but not just them.

I'm interested in the everyday because it's oppressive for a lot of people. For most, it's a slog: getting to work; missing the bus when it's full, and you can't get on—you must wait another ten minutes; or not having enough time in the day to spend with your children or to make ends meet, even when you're working three part-time jobs.

I think there is a huge disconnect in the art world on the experiential level, despite the art world's propensity to want to speak about subjects to do with race and class.

I grew up with a single mom, who died too soon from poisoning while working in a sweatshop. It's very real to me and I've always been fascinated by the concept of the real. I took some philosophy in university and came across the notion from Derrida and Lacan. The 'real' as a kind of immersive soup that is out there, and yet language can't totally grasp it because it eludes language.

There are so many things that are inexpressible; we can only approximate. It's only in those moments, when someone's truly wailing, totally broken, or in absolute ecstasy and pleasure that you start to see tangents to the real. That's what I'm interested in.

Going back to theology, I like that kind of deferral, even when it's temporal—this deferral of recognition from readers—is this a work of art or is this real? I'm interested in that illusion and divide, as well.

NP **You touched on your family, and I read an essay of yours in which you tell this very moving story where your grandmother attends one of your shows unexpectedly.**

You mentioned the very disorienting feeling of two worlds colliding: here you were as a practicing artist and there's your working-class grandmother coming into that kind of space.

You've also discussed your working-class roots and you have mentioned your mother. How have you managed the tensions between the art world and your origins? How has that tension influenced the work?

KL I mentioned my early biography, not to be confessional, but because people always ask me where it comes from. And I've always believed in saying, well, that's where it comes from. I don't try to couch it.

Often enough, when everyone asks you the same question, a narrative starts to form. That's the capture of language that functions for artists, right? But I don't beat my chest and say: 'I come from the working class.'

I did a very popular public art piece in Vancouver called *Monument to East Vancouver* (2010), and it's iconic there. People, including writers, would come up to me and say, 'You're expressing your pride in coming from the working class.' And I'd say, that's not what it's about. I would rather have lived in the richer parts of the town [*laughs*].

People feel better saying, 'Well, you struggled in the beginning. Now you're expressing pride. It's made you who you are.' It's made me who I am, but that doesn't mean I'd prefer growing up that way over living near the University of British Columbia (UBC). I try to keep it real.

A decade ago, I co-founded the think tank Monument Lab with a colleague at the University of Pennsylvania. We were finding ways to evaluate and talk about the monumental landscape, the unevenness of who gets heard, who gets represented, and who isn't even in the conversation; a lot of the First Nations, for instance. It's kind of a big thing now, I'm proud to say. We get all kinds of projects.

At the tail end of the 1990s, I also co-started the *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, worked on several curatorial projects, including historical shows like *Shanghai Modern: 1919 – 1949* in 2005, wrote a lot, and published a book. I do all that not as an extension of my art, but to save myself from solely being an artist in the art world.

NP Your work spans art, teaching, scholarship, and academic administration—it's pretty remarkable, all these distinct roles. You say it's a way to keep you grounded and not entirely taken up by the art world.

KL I've always felt some degree of discomfort, rightly or wrongly, being in the art world because it's not my background. I've met lots of artists, and some of them are my close friends, and they say, 'Ever since I was a little kid, I've wanted to be an artist.'

How is that possible? I knew nothing as a kid. I was drawn naturally to art too, but my idea of an artist was someone who could draw a horse. And you'd just be a graphic artist. I never imagined an artist in an art world context, with galleries, and so on. I imagined it in the most practical terms: applied arts. That was the extent of it. Everything else that went beyond was foreclosed to my imagination.

NP You mentioned the word iconic. Almost everything I've read about you online is connected to your *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* image, which dates to 1989, and has been repurposed by different groups and brought into different causes.

What's your view on how the internet has enabled a remixing and hacking of that particular work?

KL Well, it's something beyond my control. But I've also been referred to as one of the early meme founders. These were the years before the meme. It felt like I tapped into something other people appreciated and recognised, so I feel good about that.

In the case of *Melly Shum*, it was a response I couldn't have anticipated from non-art audiences. The number of people who hate their jobs or are dissatisfied is vast and they identify with that. It feels like that work entered a truly public realm, whereby I could no longer take ownership; somehow it belongs to the public.

NP **Then in 2020, the Witte de With in Rotterdam changed its name to Kunstinstituut Melly.**

KL I was not involved in the renaming; it was a total surprise. The process took over two years I think, and then they emailed me saying, overwhelmingly, people wanted the Center to be named after Melly.

NP **You are now based in Philadelphia. How has that move shaped your practice?**

KL Well, it's not just moving to Philadelphia, but the United States, the most powerful empire today. One that may be declining, with all the good and bad of being an empire.

I've always been interested in political questions and have never been shy about detaching art from politics. Monument Lab, which I previously mentioned, would not have been possible in Canada. I started it in Philadelphia and the good thing about America, despite all the bad things, is that if you have an idea and present it to people who have the power to support it, they're very receptive and fast.

NP **You have talked about the pressure to produce that comes with that kind of environment. It sounds like you're constantly navigating that.**

KL I've never worked as hard as I have at the University of Pennsylvania, which is one of the Ivy League universities. What does it mean to be working at an Ivy League? You're near power. I sat next to then-Vice President Joe Biden on campus, for instance. It's a wholly different level.

On the other hand, I kept getting job offers from the United States after I left the University of British Columbia. I didn't get any offers from Canada and needed an income to survive. People asked me why I moved down there. To take a job, I say.

They say, 'You could stay in Canada.' Some even suggested that I was turning my back on Canada by taking a prestigious position in Philadelphia. Or that Canada formed me, and I show my gratitude by taking a position in the United States.

The fact was that after I left UBC, I received multiple queries from American institutions, including another Ivy League institution, but nothing from Canada. I applied for positions in Toronto and Montreal, but didn't even make the shortlist. I'm not telling you this to gripe, just to say something about the way Canada often imagines the motivations of people of colour, which aggravates me.

NP **I marvel at how you move between art and university administration work, which is so often about budgets and enrolments.**

KL **I'm getting to the point where I can't do all that anymore. I used to be almost proud that I had a million things to do. But I think back and realise it's very stupid. You must smell the coffee in the morning, you know? —[O]**



Ken Lum, *I Said No* (2010). Site-specific installation. Exhibition view: Audain Gallery, SFU Woodward's, Vancouver (2010). Courtesy the artist.

Artforum

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ARTFORUM

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy on Kunstinstituut Melly



PRINT SUMMER 2021

*In 2017, numerous signatories of an open letter called for the name of the Rotterdam institution formerly known as the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art to be changed. The art space was named after the street on which it was located—which itself was named after a seventeenth-century Dutch naval officer—and activists raised concerns over the title's connection to that officer, who was an infamous agent of colonization. The questions emerged during director Defne Ayas's tenure, as part of a community discussion around Wendelien van Oldenborgh and Lucy Cotter's project *Cinema Olanda, 2017*, which represented the Netherlands at the Fifty-Seventh Venice Biennale. Ayas, together with her team and board, had announced the need to make a change. When Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy became director in 2018, she was tasked to take up the process. After three years of researching, workshopping, and strategically listening to the broader Rotterdam community, the museum officially assumed its new name, *Kunstinstituut Melly*, in January 2021. The unusual moniker is a nod to Melly Shum Hates Her Job, 1989, an artwork by Ken Lum that has adorned the building's facade since its inaugural year.*



Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989, billboard. Installation view, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art (now Kunstinstituut Melly), Rotterdam, 2013.

WHEN YOU ARE CHANGING the name of a thirty-year-old institution, it can't just be symbolic. You need to make a structural intervention. In the arts, we know how to create signs and give them meaning. That's our strength. At the same time, if you really want to tackle decolonization, you have to acknowledge that most of the symbols were and are made by people allied with hegemonic forces. We can't merely add symbols or question those we have; we must create a context in which we shift those positions of power. You need a new and more varied perspective on the production of signs and on the way these signs are empowered.

I grew up in Mexico, where we have a very different relation to our colonial past. There, indigenous signs that spoke to another (pre-Hispanic) history had been either elevated or sublimated, first as part of the independence movement and later as a national program of the twentieth-century revolution. Here in the Netherlands, the colonial period largely happened elsewhere, geographically and discursively. Locally, many people didn't really comprehend the Dutch empire's effect on the countries and peoples it colonized.

When I was assigned the task of changing the name, I realized I had to know more. Where did the problems really emerge? What is the history that is really being addressed? And what is the relationship between this institution and the colonial history that is being criticized? This is an art space that is known for a commitment to radical change—which includes enlisting a new director every six years—but what became evident early on was that there were new voices, primarily in Rotterdam's communities of color, critiquing the institution not just for its name but for its program. There was an assumption that the institution only showed artists who were firmly within the system. That's not exactly the case, but perception can have more validity than fact. So, in the end, we had to recognize that there is a deep communication problem.

Over its three-decade history, this institution has introduced its local and international audiences to artists such as Hélio Oiticica (1992), Meschac Gaba (2001), Yto Barrada (2004), Cecilia Vicuña (2019), and so many others from outside the Western world. This was only possible because the perspectives that were coming in had a presence in and a passion for parts of the world that didn't necessarily share the same visual language, philosophical references, or cultural influences upheld by the dominant art-historical canon. By intelligibly and historically framing these "new" figures, ideas, and conflicts, the institution was able to change the canon. However, whether by choice or external pressure, over the past decade this and other cultural institutions have sought to have an impact on a wider public sphere. A core component of this has been developing outreach programs and other modes of public engagement, all of which ultimately require different framing devices and languages.

In changing our curatorial approach and communication strategies and acknowledging wider audiences, we had to change our work culture and form a vision that accommodated many different forms of knowledge and not just those promoted by the Western canon. This is one of those situations where changing one little thing can have huge repercussions. It's structural, but it's not as if you have to come up with all these policy plans and make all these promises to the public.

Change doesn't have to be revolutionary; there are many proactive, subtle ways of creating culture. For example, one of our biggest moves has been to make our ground-floor gallery admission-free and open it up to alternative programming, such as the Sessions created by our new curator of collective learning, where "learning" happens through low-key yet festive call-and-response-type events. It doesn't matter if only ten people come, so long as something is happening. Tradition involves ritual, and, likewise, culture depends on recurrence. People feel more comfortable with a space as they become more familiar with it. It's been so popular, in fact, that we are finding that many of our visitors never visit the exhibitions upstairs. Through March of next year, we're hosting an initiative, "84 Steps," named after the number of stairs that lead up to the top-floor galleries. We've invited a group of artists to participate, and each of them has taken a gallery to design an immersive installation for use as an activity space. It's quite beautiful, organized a bit like a wellness center.

When I first arrived, I had wanted to convert the ground-floor gallery into a bookshop. My experience with booksellers in New York is that if you return often enough, they know the books that you read and can make more personal recommendations than some online algorithm. You keep coming back because you feel invested in an ongoing conversation. When a bookstore proved fiscally unfeasible for us, our team developed other ideas, including the Work/Learn program, a twelve-week collective-learning module for teenagers and young adults, in or out of school. We already have a college audience, but if we really want to be socially inclusive, we have to look outside our existing stakeholders. Our first program participants helped us build the initial case study for how we might create a new name, and many of them are still involved in the institution today.

We found that both our long-standing and new audiences responded to the figure of Melly Shum because it really pushed the idea of diversity. Not only diversity in terms of this or that race or this or that gender, but also in terms of class. Rotterdam is a very working-class city. The character resonated not because she "hates her job" but because Ken Lum's statement recognizes that, as a third-generation immigrant, he only had the option of becoming an artist because his grandparents had made the sacrifice to move from China to Canada to work on the railroad. And so "Melly" became the name first of our ground-floor gallery and later of our entire institution. Even if it wasn't originally on our short list, it was the favorite in the public forums and the advisory committees.

Throughout the entire process, community feedback was key. Decolonizing encourages new methods for listening—deep listening, strategic listening—that you can't find in Harvard business books on negotiation. Part of deep listening is that you have to let others speak, regardless of whether you agree with them, because the point is not about agreeing or disagreeing. The point is to understand. I am hoping that the institution's long-term audiences understand that this is a moment for new stakeholders to gain more visibility. People tend to believe that they have to identify with things for them to be meaningful, but I don't think that's the case. Art should be a space of confrontation.

Some people—many of whom happen to side with or benefit from dominant narratives, however consciously—might think that we are erasing history by taking on a new name. I don't agree. With the name change, the point isn't what is eradicated but what is created, just as with Rauschenberg's famous 1953 *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. It's a matter of which perspectives you value. The past can be written in myriad ways. We're not erasing our history. We're adding a new narrative.

As told to Kate Sutton.

Artillery

January 2021

artillery

A Reckoning: Monument Lab, Joel Garcia, Ken Lum, and Paul Farber

by Clayton Campbell | Jan 5, 2021



Joel Garcia, Toppling A Statue At Olvera 2, 2020

Monument Lab, based in Philadelphia, and founded by curator Paul Farber and artist Ken Lum, is a public art and history studio whose moment has arrived. Defining monuments as “a statement of power and presence in public” they’ve intersected with the active national movement to remove monuments and statues that reflect the racist history of the United States. Their values reflect progressive antiracist, de-colonial, feminist, queer, working class, ecological, and social justice perspectives working to inform our understandings of U.S. history and its monuments. In just a few years they have expanded from local projects to having a national and international profile. They just received a \$4 million grant as part of Mellon Foundation’s \$250 million Monuments Project. Monument Lab’s grant will support the production of a definitive audit of the nation’s monuments. This will help identify the stories and narratives that have been ignored and do not exist in monument or memorial form. They will be opening ten field research offices, one of those offices may be in Los Angeles next year.

This past year has stretched our capacity to imagine what comes next, with the confluence of the pandemic, a heightened movement for racial justice, and an election with its caustic aftermath. Throughout we have seen offending statues and monuments pulled down around the United States as well as Europe. Questions are unresolved about how to contextualize these faded, flawed icons. While some want to see problematic statues reflective of our racist past disappear, others would prefer for them to stay, so long as placards and descriptive texts that contextualize and educate the public surround them. Beyond this however, how do we then begin to memorialize our country’s many ignored and suppressed histories in their place?

Ken Lum is the Artistic Director of Monument Lab, but also a prolific Canadian visual artist, writer, and teacher of Chinese descent. He has produced numerous powerful public works challenging established worldviews about how we see ourselves. Artist Hans Haacke says of Ken, “ **Over many decades he has pointedly challenged ruling classes in many regions of the world, religious suppression, racism and other horrors. Driven by a deep sense of humanity, his engagement, backed by a wide knowledge of history and pertinent literature, is reflected in his thoughtful writings on art and life.**”

Next year Ken will be having an exhibition at Royale Projects in Los Angeles. His new works are photo-based images screen-printed onto mirrors. They make a strong commentary about bias in our popular imagination, cultural legacy and received histories. At sizes up to 6 by 6 feet, works like *Anna May Wong, Batista, or United States at Night*, cover a range of his social justice concerns by looking at Asian American stereotypes, U.S. foreign interventions, and climate change.



Ken Lum, *Anna May Wong*, screen print on mirror, 6' x 6', 2020



Ken Lum, *Batista*, screen print on mirror, 6' x 6', 2020



Ken Lum, *United States at Night*, screen print on mirror, 6' x 6', 2020

I asked Ken what public art commission he would like to do in Los Angeles if asked. His response was immediate. "The Chinese Massacre. Do you know about it?" I did, in fact, know a little bit because there is a plaque about it in the sidewalk in front of the Chinese American Museum on Los Angeles Street in downtown LA. What I didn't know was that Los Angeles Street was the original location of Chinatown in what had been named 'Negro Alley' after the dark skinned Spaniards who first lived there. It was also the red light saloon district where Chinese had been segregated to live. The plaque is all that marks the site of what is known as one of the worst mass lynchings in US history, a part of Los Angeles' history. It corresponded with the rise of Nativism, as anti-immigrant hostilities boiled over in 1871 when a mob of Anglo and Hispanic people attacked, robbed, and hung 17 Chinese. This history was more or less erased when Chinatown was moved to its new location in 1938. The site of the massacre is now an off ramp of the 101 Freeway. Not long after the massacre the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed to maintain white "racial purity" and placate complaints that the Chinese were taking jobs. They comprised .002% of the population at the time. Why does this refrain sound all too familiar today? Over and over again Los Angeles has been an epicenter of anti-immigrant hostility, racism towards people of color, and the erasure of indigenous people. With dysfunctional immigration and homeless policies, we are in the midst of yet another chapter of a long and tortured history of abuse and neglect.

The New Yorker

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THE NEW YORKER

THE NEW MONUMENTS THAT AMERICA NEEDS

Every statue defends an idea about history, but what if those ideas are wrong?



By Hua Hsu
September 15, 2020



Many images surrounding recent monument protests, including one of young people playing basketball next to a graffiti-covered statue of Robert E. Lee, in Richmond, convey a sense that anything is possible. Photograph by Eze Amos / Getty

Before protesters in America and Europe began painting over statues, or toppling them, or hanging them from trees, or rolling them into the nearest river, the historian Paul Farber noticed that people were putting masks on them. In the early days of the pandemic, from Wuhan to New York, Valencia, and Limerick, anonymous people placed COVID-19 coverings over the faces of local monuments. There was something tender, even a little funny, about these gestures, the kind of thing done for Instagram: a photo of a masked Patience and Fortitude, the two lions that sit outside the main branch of the New York Public Library, went viral. Whether monuments take the form of a statue, building, or pillar, they present themselves as universal and timeless, expressing something essential about all of us—at least in a way that flatters the powers that be. Putting a mask on these inanimate objects shifted them to a new context: the present, rather than the historical past. The act suggested a kind of solidarity, a symbol that we are all in this pandemic together. Yet Farber, who is the artistic director and senior curator of Monument Lab, a public art initiative that creates new monuments, saw the masked statues as an accusation, a reminder of how official systems had failed us.



In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, from Wuhan to New York, anonymous people placed mask-like coverings over the faces of local monuments. Photograph by Byron Smith / Getty

Farber and the artist and scholar Ken Lum started Monument Lab in 2012, shortly after they each began teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. Farber is a native of Philadelphia, where Lum had just arrived from Vancouver, Canada, a city with comparatively few historical markers. They shared a fascination with Philadelphia’s rich monumental landscape, from the Liberty Bell and Robert Indiana’s “Love” sculpture to the famed “Rocky” steps. But they were curious about what stories these monuments weren’t telling. Lum lived near Billie Holiday’s childhood home, where only a small marker indicated its history. “I would see these white guys on pedestals who I’d never heard of,” he said. “I was really interested in this unevenness.”

In 2015, Farber and Lum set up a makeshift office in a shipping container in the courtyard of City Hall and asked visitors: “What is an appropriate monument for the current city of Philadelphia?” They shared their answers with a team of artists, which included locals, such as the poet Ursula Rucker and the video artist and animator Kara Crombie, and others who shared Monument Lab’s fascination with the politics of public space, such as Mel Chin, a conceptual artist interested in the ecological imagination, and Tyree Guyton, who is famed for the decades-long Heidelberg Project, in which he turned a block in his native Detroit into a kind of living sculpture. Working with these artists, the Monument Lab installed prototype monuments throughout the city. One of the most striking pieces, a twelve-foot-high Black Power Afro pick, by the artist Hank Willis Thomas, was recently acquired by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

In March, Farber and Lum had just welcomed a new class of international fellows when COVID-19 forced everyone indoors. Suddenly, conversations about public space seemed a tease. But in the wake of George Floyd's death, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in protest, and they congregated in familiar spaces—near statues and monuments, in the shadows of yesterday's supposed heroes. Soon thereafter, statues across the country started coming down—removed by crowds or by city officials trying to get ahead of a controversy. President Trump signed a series of executive orders to protect monuments from defacement, which provided the rationale for a violent crackdown on protesters in Portland, in July.

When I spoke to Farber earlier this summer, he was excited, likening the statue-toppling to the celebrations that took place along the Berlin Wall in the dying days of Communism. Indeed, the scenes we were seeing throughout America felt like reënactments of news footage celebrating upheaval somewhere far away—the long-subjugated people, inspired by the democratic West, toppling a despot's statue. We were still in the “dancing on the wall” phase, he joked. “We still don't know if East Germany will be dismantled.”

What *isn't* a monument? The term is used to describe an incredibly wide range of structures, from ancient burial mounds, stones arranged with some kind of intention, and the pyramids, to concrete archways, magnificent palaces, columns, and statues of obscure local merchants. Monuments connect us to the furthest reaches of history, though why we value these things later on may have little relation to why someone was inspired to alter the landscape in the first place. The Great Wall remains a symbol of Chinese manpower, as well as a willingness to reject foreign influence; in contrast, the ornate façades of antiquity no longer communicate civilization's greatness so much as warnings about imperial hubris. In the case of Stonehenge—designated a “scheduled ancient monument” by the U.K. government—the mystery surrounding its origins and use contribute to its aura.

When we speak of monuments in America, we're often talking about structures such as statues, obelisks, and memorials that celebrate a relatively narrow band of our history: the Civil War, the First and Second World Wars, the civil-rights era. Our monumental landscape preserves a sense that we are an exceptional, upstart nation. (American civilization may not boast standing stones that date back to the prehistoric era, but we do have Carhenge.) The relative youth of our monuments also speaks to the enthusiasm with which previous generations simply erased the histories of those who came before. Mount Rushmore, for example, was carved onto a mountain that was of great significance to the Lakota Sioux, who had previously been promised the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming.

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, there were not many monuments to the Confederacy, beyond memorials placed in cemeteries for soldiers who had died. Today, there are over seven hundred Confederate monuments, situated in far more than the eleven states that seceded from the Union in 1860. Many of these monuments went up in city squares or in front of official buildings between 1890 and 1950, coinciding with the Jim Crow era. As the historian Mark Elliott observes, groups like the Daughters of the Confederacy were interested in rehabilitating and glorifying the Southern cause. Monuments of this kind exist at the intersection of art and infrastructure, public memory and elite whim. They possess what Farber calls an "aura of permanence." But they embody the struggle to interpret a shared past, and they contain a desire, he said, to "stop time, to hold on to power."

For the past few years, Monument Lab has worked with fellows around the world to bring conversations about power and public space to new communities. Initially, Farber and Lum found it was often hard to convince local officials to act on problematic old statues and placards in their cities. A turning point in the broader public imagination came with the Unite the Right rally in August of 2017, when white-nationalist groups went to Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of Confederate statues and memorials. The protests turned violent, resulting in the death of a counter-protester, Heather Heyer. Monument Lab is now invited to assist forward-thinking local governments and historical commissions.

Earlier this summer, I spoke with the indigenous artist and organizer Joel Garcia, a former Monument Lab fellow. Garcia grew up in Los Angeles, deeply immersed in the local punk scene. He found meaning in the punk ethos of D.I.Y. resourcefulness, particularly when it came to repurposing spaces, like restaurants or community centers, to perform, create, and commune. As a teen-ager, he got a job at Epitaph Records, a respected punk label. Although the office was a straight shot across the city from his home on the Eastside, he had to transfer buses at Grand Park, where a statue of Christopher Columbus stood on the courthouse steps. Looking at all the homeless people and those awaiting their court hearings, Garcia said, was a contrast of “domination and poverty.”

Over time, Garcia became fixated on how the city landscape was decorated with these tributes to a colonial past. “Who gets to decide what is the authentic history of Los Angeles?” Garcia drew on his experiences working as an organizer and realized that “you can spend a lot of energy doing a huge push and not move an inch. Or you can become this little pebble in somebody’s shoe that they’re always having to deal with. That’s what I became.” He familiarized himself with the county officials and their protocols, showed up to all the meetings, and became a kind of community liaison. When the city finally agreed, in 2018, to remove the Columbus statue, Garcia took part in a purification ceremony.

As part of the removal process, the city had hired an assessor to estimate the statue’s artistic or historic value. “It’s not worth shit,” Garcia told me, laughing. As far as Garcia knows, the Columbus statue is gathering dust in a warehouse. The question of what to do with these monuments after they’ve been taken down has proved vexing for many cities. Should they remain on public display in museums or historical institutions, where they might be surrounded by more detailed context materials? Or will they end up as a kind of petulant, elite in-joke? That’s the impression many came away with when a statue of Robert E. Lee that had been removed in Dallas in 2017 was purchased two years later and placed in a luxury golf course along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The question of what a community wants is at the heart of the Monument Project, but where does one find that data? In 2017, Farber and Lum worked with Sue Mobley, an organizer and researcher, and Bryan Lee, Jr., an architect and design activist, on Paper Monuments, a participatory design project in New Orleans. The people of New Orleans, Mobley explained, have a tendency to see themselves and their city as exceptional, overlooking the way that New Orleans reflects the same inequalities felt acutely throughout the American South. Mobley and her team posed similar questions to the ones that Farber and Lum had asked Philadelphians, about what new monuments people wanted to see. Predictably, many of the proposals were about culture—jazz, the Mardi Gras Indians, and other vestiges of New Orleans’s identity that are increasingly imperilled by gentrification. But many answers engaged with the deeper structures of civic life, Mobley said: “People were suggesting, ‘Tear down the statues. . . . but what I need is a police budget that’s half what it is.’ ‘What we need is health care, what we need are protections to voting rights.’ ‘What I actually need is a living wage for all. That’s my monument. That’s what I would propose.’”

Mobley was also in the midst of a separate research project that mapped the locations of protests in New Orleans. In the mid-nineteenth century, protests would take place at the headquarters of local political parties, the docks, or trade institutions. In the twentieth century, they took place in city squares and plazas. More recently, they’ve moved to the elevated highways. The two projects orbited the same set of questions about the politics of shared space. “What does it mean to try and create a demos that has room for all if inclusion is defined by ‘I get a statue, so you get a statue’ that breaks into further constituent parts?” asked Mobley. “Is there a way in which we can weave together and lift up what it means to occupy space together?”

Art Margins

August 2020



Everything is Relevant: Ken Lum's Writings on Art and Life 1991-2018

BY CRISTINA ALBU · PUBLISHED 08/10/2020

Ken Lum's collection of writings *Everything is Relevant* offers an insightful inquiry into the complexities of the contemporary art world from the perspective of an artist, curator, and educator who refuses to be confined by aesthetic, cultural, or professional categories. Primarily known as a conceptual artist, Lum creates works that interrogate how we assign meanings to images, texts, and objects based on cultural, racial, and social cues. Whether puzzling the beholder through incongruous visual signs or evoking overlooked historical narratives, his practice compels viewers to reflect on misconstructions of reality and the explicit and implicit biases which inform acts of interpretation. Lum's writings closely tie in with the interrogation of how meaning is decoded and by whom, what cultural and artistic views take precedence, and how seemingly marginal practices play poignant roles in the evolution of art. His premise "Everything is Relevant" is not a postmodern dictum enforcing relativism but a call for scrutinizing power relations within and beyond the art world.

Gathering Lum's writings over a period of almost three decades, the book offers a comprehensive picture of the intersections between art and multiculturalism, the social and cultural disjunctions subsistent in the globalized art world, and the politics of art in public space. It provides a candid view on Lum's misgivings about the art system but is not a mere personal testimony on his approach to art production. It encompasses not only essays and diary entries that attest to Lum's struggle for distancing himself from hegemonic value judgments, but also philosophical and historical reflections on the deep imprint of imperialism on cultural exchanges. In addition to this, the volume includes Lum's thoughtful commentaries on Canadian cultural policy and the model of artist-run centers which strengthened social critique in Canada in the 1970s.

The only essays that fit less easily into the book's framework are the artist's exhibition reviews, which lack the self-reflexive voice of his other writings. Although they address works that tie in with Lum's interest in the legacy of pop and minimalism, the reviews are slightly at odds with his broader critical views on the art world's operations. The essays in this volume are arranged chronologically, facilitating the observation of changes in approaches to issues of art and identity from the 1990s to the present. Their organization by decade also makes evident multiple stages in Lum's negotiation of his role in society, from his hesitations about his position in the art world in the mid-1990s to his engagement in educational and curatorial projects that enable him to return to artmaking with a greater understanding of the tensions subsistent in the art system.

Andre Malraux's *Imaginary Museum*, composed of a seemingly endless series of reproductions, is juxtaposed with an image of an as yet void exhibition space at the Sharjah Biennial; a panoramic view of an extensive lot cleared for the design of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis paired with a Pazyryk Carpet with a similar grid pattern that was preserved almost intact under a glacier; and an image of Karyn Olivier's temporary encasement of a Philadelphia monument in mirror plates that is set face to face with a photograph representing a stoic group of Punjabis who were denied entry into Canada after traveling aboard a Japanese ship at the beginning of the 20th century. These image juxtapositions are not easily legible. They repeatedly ask the reader to suspend presuppositions and consider less immediate connections between contingent events which may lie at a temporal and geographical distance. The book is prefaced by a short text by Lum which introduces the reader to the artist's views on writing, and an essay by curator Kitty Scott who positions Lum's engagement with social issues in the context of Canadian and global art.

One of the most recurrent themes in Lum's writings is "the problem of non-identity" (p. 145) with the art system, and the environment in which an artist establishes his practice. His thoughts on this matter are resonant with Giorgio Agamben's equation of "contemporariness" with a relationship of imperfect coincidence with one's time which can be a source of enhanced consciousness.(1) Lum's ideas also recall Okwui Enwezor's thinking on the "unhomely," an alienating experience which unveils the limits of totalizing cultural narratives and prompts the assumption of an activist stance.(2) In addition to these concerns, Lum's ruminations on the issue of "non-identity" pertain to his attempt to resist absorption into the art system after receiving critical acclaim in the 1990s. His anxiety about belonging may be one of the reasons for which he has increasingly turned towards creating art for public spaces where measurements of success are not restricted to the art domain.

Lum repeatedly confesses to unease with the quick rise of consensus in the art world, and with the persistent dominance of art historical narratives that privilege the unidirectional transmission of ideas from Western art centers to other regions. He insists that we need to question the notion of objective criteria for assessing the value of art and examine long neglected circuits of art information such as those between Vancouver and Hong Kong, or Nairobi and London. (p. 77)

To broaden his view on the global art system, Lum has resorted to traveling and teaching in different parts of the world, thus repeatedly putting his assumptions about art to the test. Reflecting on his experience as a lecturer in Fort de France (Martinique) or his visit to the Dakar biennial in 1998, he unveils clashes in views on the role of art and confesses his own limitations in evaluating art from non-Western cultural contexts. Lum admits to his disappointment with the limited political content of art from these regions in the late 1990s. While students in Martinique were skeptical about the notion that art could address their personal experience as post-colonial subjects, Senegalese artists exhibiting at Dak'Art 98 contended that their abstract paintings held political implications which may be imperceptible to an outsider to their culture. Despite his expectations concerning the convergence between art and politics, Lum defines art in contradistinction to life, since he fears that the utter collapse of boundaries between the two would jeopardize critical distance. In "Something's Missing" (2006), he states that "art should be about life" and "offer a space for pause and reflection" (p. 163) since it cannot compete with the complexity of life.

This being said, he also ponders the limits of an Eurocentric view upon art which privileges an understanding of art as representation rather than a creative act of shaping daily life. In later essays, Lum discusses the functionality of art and its inextricability from social and cultural practice. In “The Other in the Carpet” (2016), Lum questions the rigid separation between art and craft, asserting that “the debate between aesthetic value and practical function is also a debate about a culturally constructed divide.” (p. 262) He is deeply concerned about the ongoing consequences of colonialism and argues that universalism has constituted a guise for the imposition of hegemonic views. Despite his unease with this oppressive ideology rooted in the Enlightenment period, Lum believes in the possibility of a “genuine kind of universality” (p. 71), but does not elucidate how this alternative might be attained in the contemporary context. Admittedly, this is a difficult task to undertake, especially at a time when the celebration of the art world’s “pretense of globality” obscures its persistent inequities.(3)

Having abandoned a promising career in chemistry research in his youth, Lum occasionally relies on scientific terms to explain dynamic processes in the art world. Thus he draws attention to the “diffusion of art” (p. 147) and to the lack of isomorphism in globalizing forces. By “diffusion of art” he means both the spread of ideas about art and the erosion of boundaries of art categories validated by the art network. Given these analogies between physical processes and art operations, Lum’s writings remind one of the thinking of conceptual artist Hans Haacke who parallels the functioning of biological systems with socio-political and art systems. (4) Well aware of the fact that an artist cannot function completely outside of the art world, Lum insists that there are different degrees of integration and that an individual can maintain some agency in establishing his position in this complex.

Lum’s oscillations between multiple roles in the art world, including those of art critic, curator, project manager, and teacher, have permitted him to repeatedly recalibrate his relationship with that world. His travels all around the world suggest a search for how to resist identification with a fixed cultural viewpoint. Yet, alternating professional functions and intense mobility also pose problems. They reflect the logic of neoliberal late capitalism which calls for perpetual adaptability and endless creative resources.(5) While traveling helps Lum’s personal and professional growth up to a certain point they also prove to be energy-draining. He expresses at times his desire to stay longer in remote places that are off the art world’s radar but he does not fully commit to this goal.

Writing has constituted for Lum a strategic tool for maintaining critical distance and brokering identity issues. As an artist born in Vancouver in a working-class Cantonese family, he is acutely aware of the assumptions the public or critics may draw based on his physiognomy or linguistic abilities. In several essays, he ponders issues of identity misrecognition and forcefully denounces essentializing attitudes. While condemning such tendencies, he also acknowledges artists’ desire to belong to the elite circles of the art system. In one of the most emotionally charged accounts of the book, Lum discloses his discomfort at having his social identity exposed when his grandmother, a Brooklyn-based sweatshop worker, arrives at his exhibition opening in NYC and asks who all the people gathered there are (p. 194). The social and racial tensions underlying the art world become apparent in many other essays that expose ongoing disparities leaving their mark on artistic judgments. Yet the overall tone of the volume is far from pessimistic. Lum maintains hope that art can overturn misconceptions through its power of defamiliarization.

Besides tackling many broad problems concerning the relationship between art and life, the volume offers many glimpses into Lum's encounters with other artists. His conversation with Chen Zhen on the physical and psychic impact of migration (p. 173) or the correlations he draws between Ian Wilson's art practice and Buddhist thinking (p. 241) reserve to the reader many opportunities to examine how aesthetic experience resists the foreclosure of meaning. Equally engaging are Lum's ruminations on art education in his letter to art critic Steven Henry Madoff which signals the need for studio art programs to enable students to define their practice in relation to their subject positions in society. Lum disputes the standardization of these degrees and finds that the emphasis on "technical finish" (p. 78) can take away from the emotional charge of art production. In Lum's opinion, loopholes in the dense web of a market-dominated art system are likely to emerge when aesthetic and social experiences overturn expectations. Throughout the volume, he deftly intertwines phenomenological and psychoanalytical ideas with socio-political critique to complicate the narratives of established art tendencies and emphasize the deep imbrication of corporeal and mental responses to art.

Overall, the book offers a consistent perspective on the dynamics and contingencies of the art world. Lum is adamant about defining art making in terms of a process of coming to grips with a feeling of insufficiency and a desire to bring to the forefront what is misconstrued as irrelevant. Nonetheless, his confidence about effectively confronting these challenges shudders at times under the weight of hesitations about the social impact of art practice. In an essay on his move from Canada to the U.S., he skeptically states: "I still believe in art, if only in the narrow sense of what art has done for me in my own life." (p. 254) This statement is somewhat surprising given Lum's insistence on the social engagement of art in other parts of the book. There is little doubt that he has accomplished much more through his art than merely enhance the understanding of his own place in the world. Judging by the overwhelming public response to his phototext *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* (1990 to present), one can easily tell how incisive his engagement with social issues has been. The piece depicts a seemingly satisfied and proud worker whose smiling demeanor is totally at odds with the message. Presented on a billboard in conjunction with Lum's Witte de With retrospective, the work has acquired a permanent position on the building at the request of the public and has become a significant part of the visual culture of Rotterdam.

The artist's curatorial initiatives have also gone a long way in extending the presence of art beyond the walls of museums. His recent work on *Monument Lab*, a public art exhibition program co-organized with Paul Farber in Philadelphia, shows his commitment to resisting the closure of meaning of both art and social space. Interestingly, Lum sees his curatorial projects as "extensions" of his art (p. 159), but does not hold similar views on his writings. In his words, they fulfill the function of preempting "a turn inward" (p. xxxi), serving as an instrument for tackling differences that extend beyond his own identity. His resistance may have something to do with his strong belief in the disruptive power of sensory experience, as well as with taking a distance from certain conceptual artists' insistence on equating discourse construction with artmaking.

Lum's writings reflect a fervent devotion to keeping the boundaries between the art and the world porous, with the aim of resisting the congealing of categories, whether they pertain to identities or art tendencies. He finds himself at home in liminal zones of the art system, where it is possible to envision alternative models of art education and historical narratives. *Everything is Relevant* is an inspiring volume both for studio art students and for those who have been part of the art world for a long time. It exposes the unevenness of the global art system while maintaining a hopeful message about how art can serve as an irritant to the status quo.

Artforum

January 2020

ARTFORUM



Ken Lum. Courtesy of Misa Shin Gallery, Toyko.

January 09, 2020 at 10:10am

KEN LUM WINS ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO'S 2019 GERSHON ISKOWITZ PRIZE

The 2019 Gershon Iskowitz Prize at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), which is presented annually to an artist who has made an outstanding contribution to the visual arts in Canada, has been awarded to Ken Lum. Administered by the Gershon Iskowitz Foundation in partnership with the museum, the honor comes with a \$38,000 cash prize and a solo exhibition at the AGO that will be staged within the next two years. “The circumstances of Gershon Iskowitz’s life make him an exemplar of humaneness and global citizenry,” said Lum. “I am honored to be considered worthy of a prize began by and named after him.”

Born in Vancouver, Lum is a multidisciplinary artist known for his conceptual and representational work in painting, sculpture, and photography. Through his practice, Lum draws attention to issues of identity in relation to language, portraiture, and spatial politics. His work has been featured in international exhibitions such as the Whitney Biennial, Documenta, the Venice Biennale, the São Paulo Biennial, and the Shanghai Biennale and has been showcased in solo

exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum Luzern in Switzerland, the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, and the Lenbachhaus Museum in Munich.

Since the mid-1990s, Lum has also worked on numerous permanent public art commissions, including installations for the cities of Vienna; Zuoz, Switzerland; Rotterdam; Saint Louis; Utrecht, the Netherlands; and Toronto. A longtime educator, Lum currently holds an endowed professorship at the University of Pennsylvania’s Stuart Weitzman School of Design in Philadelphia where he also serves as chair of the department of fine arts. He is also the founding editor and cofounder of *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*.

The 2019 prize jury comprised Catherine Bedard, curator and deputy director of the Canadian Cultural Centre, Paris; Naomi Potter, director and curator at the Esker Foundation, Calgary; Geoffrey James, artist, winner of the 2002 Gershon Iskowitz Prize, and museum trustee; and Stephan Jost, director and CEO of the Art Gallery of Ontario and trustee of the Gershon Iskowitz Foundation.

Commenting on Lum’s career, Potter said: “Engaged in art making, writing, teaching, curation, and leadership, he continues to advocate for thoughtful negotiations of social and political conversations both inside and outside of the art world. His personal reflections on identity and belonging, social justice, and the value of pedagogy makes his outstanding contributions, regardless of medium, absolutely worthy of this prize.”

canadianart

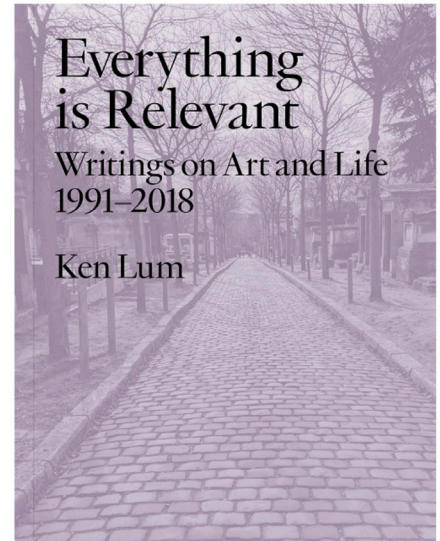
November, 2019

canadianart

From Margin to Centre, and Back Again

"I sensed a social ecology I had to navigate but did not understand," says artist Ken Lum of the rules-based art world that surrounded him. "And when I did start to understand it, I was unsympathetic to why this social ecology had to be heeded"

As a prolific international artist, curator and writer, Ken Lum has written extensively and voraciously. *Everything is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life, 1991–2018* brings together for the first time a survey of these writings from across four continents, covering expansive ground from art school pedagogies, cultural nationalism and public art to writings on his contemporaries from Chen Zhen and Tania Mouraud to more personal, nuanced reflections on identity and belonging. As the inaugural publication of Concordia University Press's new Text/Context: Writings by Canadian Artists series, *Everything is Relevant* is an illuminating exploration of our globalized art world through the lens of one of its most self-reflexive thinkers. Currently based in Philadelphia, where he is chair of fine arts and holds an endowed professorship in the Stuart Weitzman School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania. In advance of the book's January 2020 publication date, Lum joins writer Amy Fung for a conversation via email that weaves across personal and professional coping mechanisms for self-perseverance in and out of the art world.



Cover of Ken Lum's *Everything is Relevant* to be released January 2020 from Concordia University Press

Art in America

June, 2018

Art in America

MEMORY BANKS



A romantic myth pervades memories of 1970s New York. Movies like *Taxi Driver*, *The French Connection*, and *Dog Day Afternoon* have immortalized the city as gritty, hardscrabble, streetwise; glamour was somewhere else. Artists lived in lofts. Nonprofit spaces predominated. There was a vibrant energy associated with a geographic locale simply referred to as Downtown—a space that was ecumenical and radical, accommodating to both punk and poststructuralist theory. When compared to the professionalized art world of today, this image of New York is idyllic. It stirs wistfulness, dreams of better days. But **nostalgia** is just a representation infused with emotions. It thrives on conceptions of the past, not actualities. And while it is real, in the way that any feeling is, nostalgia nonetheless distorts the perception of time, filtering it through want and longing.

It may be precisely because it is instilled with this sense of melancholy that much of the work in “Brand New” appeared remarkably contemporary. While the Pictures Generation is closely associated with film, video, and photography, Jetzer presented a more expansive selection of work that included the sly conceptualism of **Louise Lawler** and **Dara Birnbaum** and Bender’s remarkable videos, but also the sculptures of **Joel Otterson** and **B. Wurtz**; the installations of **Ken Lum** and **Alan Belcher**; the poignant critique of gender inequality offered in the **Guerrilla Girls’** posters; and the paintings of **Meyer Vaisman**. What these works express is less a coherent critical position than a shared sense of dispossession. In this way, “Brand New” feels like less a historical survey than a field report of the current moment.

Art in America

April 2011

Art in America



Last year, [Ken Lum](#) erected a monument to East Vancouver, sponsored by the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Public Art Program. It's a 65-foot-tall cross made of two words in white LED lights, "EAST" and "VAN," intersecting so that they share the A. Lum was born and raised in East Vancouver, the rough side of town, where the cruciform phrase has been a kind of underground icon for decades, appearing in unofficial places—scrawled on the side of a building, tattooed across a shoulder blade—often followed by the word "rules." Lum's *Monument for East Vancouver* is positioned in the eponymous region so that it faces west, its marginalized voice projected outward.

Lum has spent 30 years depicting the tension between personal experience and external classification. (Before he took up art at Simon Fraser University, the son of Chinese Canadian immigrants studied biology, specifically pest management.) [Vancouver Art Gallery](#) has organized the largest survey to date of his career, including more than 50 works arranged in series: early videotaped performances, large captioned photographs, language paintings, text-etched mirror pieces, furniture arrangements, personalized strip-mall billboards and psychologically controlling installations. Throughout these works, the artist subtly addresses the discomfiting transactions that occur at the convergence of public and private.

House of Realization, made for the 10th Istanbul Biennial in 2007, and not seen in North America until now, is an environment that uses a stretch of two-way mirror to transform viewers into voyeurs and then back again, inviting them to inhabit both sides of the conflict it stages. The attempt to bring ineffable internal phenomena into standardized language is the basis for *Mirror Maze with 12 Signs of Depression*, made for Documenta 11 in 2002. A viewer enters the maze and immediately confronts self-reflections set at multiple angles, finding the space difficult to navigate without continually crashing into the mirrors. Expressions lifted from a diagnostic test for clinical depression are etched in the surfaces, serving as generic statements that viewers might or might not identify with ("I'm afraid of doing something bad," "You'd be better off without me").

Lum's clashing lineups of image and text often borrow the graphic formats (and agendas) of simple textbooks or commercial signage, with results that can be funny, biting political or strikingly touching. An oversize photograph of a plump, distraught Asian schoolgirl leaning against a fence, with an attractive young white woman bending down tenderly in front of her, is juxtaposed with a purple monochrome panel printed with: "Don't be silly / You're not ugly / You're not ugly / You're not ugly at all / You're just being silly / You're not / You're not ugly at all."

Only one room in the show has no visible text. It contains an installation in which the viewer walks among a series of mirrors on the walls, unidentified photos from separate unknown lives tucked lovingly into the edges of the frames. As the mind tries to read the photographs, it imagines what the strangers looking outward would read in return.

Calling From Canada: Ken Lum 30 Year Retrospective at Vancouver Art Gallery

by Raji Sohal | Mar 14, 2011



Ever watch a three month old baby stare into a mirror for the first time? Its face is an expression of pure awe and confusion. What is the thing in the mirror? Why isn't it like me (three dimensional)? Over time, of course, that curiosity turns into fascination at the stage when the child learns that the image he sees *is* himself... or, at least, *the image of himself*. That recognition may seem trite but it is a critical site in the individual's subjectivity-formation. At this level there is still much play and experimentation as he learns how to be and how to identify himself in relation to others.

How we self-identify relative to others is a key issue of exploration for Vancouver-based artist [Ken Lum](#). Lum's retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery involves several installations using mirrors as well as riffs on public signage that create what he refers to as "triangulation": a visitor is always projecting his or her own identity onto characters on a sign or poster. A kind of looped communication occurs between expectations, projection/reflections, and identification. These works by Lum are focused on issues of identity, evoking empathy at the same time as alienation.

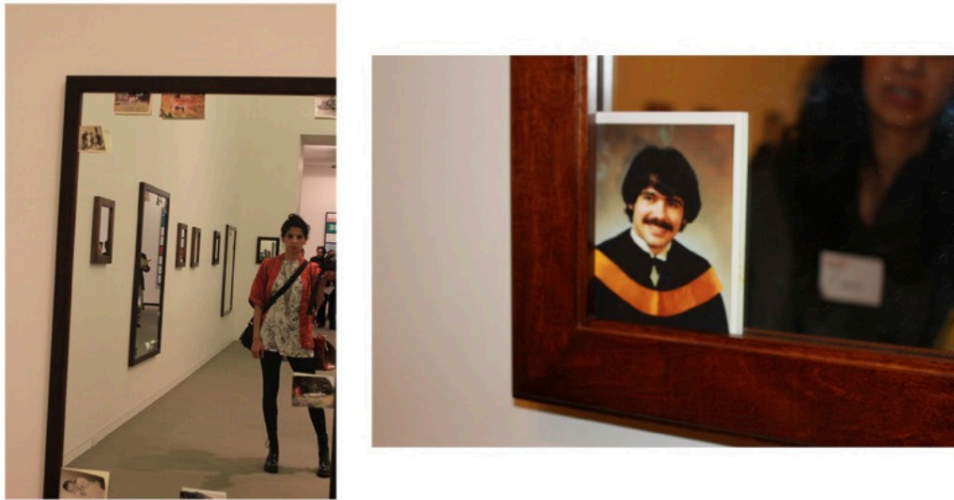


Installation view from Ken Lum's "Photo-Mirror" series. Photo: Raji Sohal



Installation view from Ken Lum's "Photo-Mirror" series. Courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery.

In the *Photo-Mirror* series Lum began in 1997, the viewer walks into a room where personal-use mirrors hang. Wedged on the inside edge of each mirror's frame, photos of random people and scenes stick out — strangers smiling in seventies school studio portraits, eighties birthday shots, and scenes of backyards and beautiful sunsets that belong on postcards. As the viewer amusingly looks at his own reflection in the mirror, his face is quite literally framed by the small photos of other people looking back at him. A series of reflections in a room of mirrors could go on forever. We get the metaphor. But here, also, art gets to perform its occasional magic by debunking common sense, replacing it instead with what Gilles Deleuze prefers to call "good sense." Good sense, as opposed to common sense, is where "difference exists at the origin of individuation," and the subject's sense of what is is defined by the process of prediction, rather than recognition. I don't actually recognize the smiling faces in the portraits but they are ubiquitous nonetheless. Unrecognizable but familiar. I've got the same (but different) photos in my roster of old photo albums at home.



Two separate installation views of Ken Lum's "Photo-Mirror" series. Photo: Raji Sohal.

In my conversation with Ken Lum for [Radio Canada International](#), he shared that he aims to “destabilize the position of the viewer.” While it’s not possible to consciously return to a state of presubjectivity (like the infant in front of the mirror), destabilization is possible. A museum is already a public space for private contemplation. It operates on a code of social conventions when it comes to invading others’ personal space. This dynamic is exacerbated in a room where the visitor awkwardly stares at reflections of himself — a highly personal experience — but in public. Lum’s recontextualization of an everyday object reveals a certain continuity of feelings of amusement as well as anxieties across various social strata that form (and inform) the way people live ordinary lives.



Installation view. Ken Lum, "Steve," 1986. Photographic c-print on photo paper resin coat, acrylic sheet. Courtesy Bob Kronbauer and VancouverIsAwesome.com.

Lum's *Portrait-Logo* series takes conventions of common studio portraiture (professional lighting, individuals dressed and groomed to impress) to an extreme. In *Steve* (1986), a large (one square meter) print, the subject's name seems to cartoon-explode from his head in a loud, radiant font; its spirit is celebratory, as though Steve were an award-winning entrepreneur or better yet, just someone important. The implication is, of course, that Steve matters, ordinary as he may be.

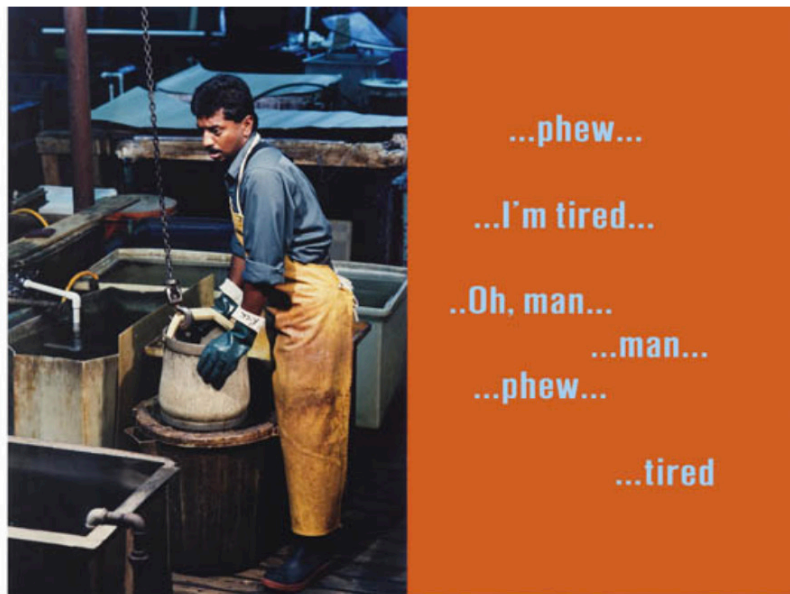
Casting an East Asian man as the subject of *Steve* is intentional and interesting, especially as Lum produced the work in the mid-eighties when the image of an East Asian man in Vancouver heralded on a poster would have occupied an ambiguous political and social status. Many East Asians by that point in Vancouver were either immigrants themselves or sons/daughters of immigrants if not grandsons/grandaughters. For that demographic cohort, the game was much about ease of assimilation. "Steve" could likely have been a first or second generation Canadian and as such could easily have faced feelings of exclusion and isolation trying to fit in to what was then a predominantly (though changing) mostly English-speaking Canada. In talking about *Steve* with me, Lum mentions a memory from his childhood in first grade, when his teacher was asking him a question in English and he hadn't yet learned the language and thus had no idea what the teacher was saying. Lum calls the event "traumatic."

The anecdote is a reminder of what the iconic-like image of *Steve* represents. After all, what is being fêted in the poster image of *Steve*? Is it Steve's ability to conform to ubiquitous conventions — be fashionably dressed, appear happy, etc.? Or perhaps is it society's successful amelioration of Steve into the fold of mass and popular culture? Is this a poster for the [Canadian Multiculturalism Act](#)?



Ken Lum, "Sandhu's Maple Leaf," installation view, 2002.

Lum has said that his work has “always had a public address to it.” Lum tells me he considers himself an “empath,” and the descriptor is a fair one in his case. He says he absorbed the quality of empathy from his Buddhist mother who, while she was alive, worked strenuously as a manual laborer in a suburb of Vancouver. As a child, Lum had hoped to get his parents out of poverty and faced disappointment from them that he was not pursuing a more professional career. That Lum went on to create works about existence and identity is fitting. There are moments in viewing his works where a sense of social justice triumphs; where a voice is imagined for characters often absent from popular images and public discourse, including archetypal working-class individuals.



Ken Lum, "Phew, I'm Tired," 1994. Chromogenic print, aluminum, enamel, Sintra. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery; courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery.

Lum's *Portrait-Repeated Text* series puts ordinary people on the front of billboards and in the center of signs juxtaposed with messages of uncertainties and inadequacies. However, in our interview, the artist reminds me that it is the viewer who ultimately projects his own experiences on an understanding of the subject's woes. One possible narrative pairs an image of a South Asian worker alongside text that reads "phew...I'm tired... Oh man...man...phew... tired." In another image, a partially-naked woman rests her head on her hand in what looks like a dingy dressing room.



Ken Lum, "What Am I Doing Here?," 1994. Courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery.

In effect, these works provide a kind of history for Vancouver, where these stories – the less obvious ones of everyday hardship and mundanity – can lack representation in the public sphere.



Ken Lum, "Taj Kabab Palace," 2000. Lacquer and enamel on aluminum and plexiglass. Via artnet.com.

Lum's *Shopkeeper Signs* series consists of low-end fictional retail advertising signs imbued with social, political, and personal messages that often (but not exclusively) deal with the complex place of newcomer status in Canadian society. The signs themselves look like legitimate business signs you might see outside a small business while driving through a town. But it is their text that sets them apart. One sign reads: "Taj Kabab Palace Free Pakoras Before 7 Peace in Kashmir End Conflict India & Pakistan." "McGill & Son Paper and Printing" announces the moving words: "To my valued customers: My son is no longer my son."



Ken Lum, "McGill & Son," 2001. Courtesy Ptarmagen.

While it can be said that Lum is one of Canada's most internationally-known artists working today, his retrospective is a special one for Vancouver. This survey of over thirty years of work finally establishes "Ken Lum" as a household name *at home*, in the very city which he proudly shares as inspiring most of his work. And although some of the works convey bleak or disparaging scenes and are embedded in fictional narratives, they are also small celebrations of the city of Vancouver and a tribute to the differentiation it has engendered in its young history.



Museum visitor looks at Ken Lum's "I Can't Believe I'm in Paris" at the Vancouver Art Gallery Bookstore. Photo: Raji Sohal.

Artforum

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ARTFORUM**Ken Lum**

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

Ken Lum's five large diptychs clone boisterous sign painting and on-location photographs of dubious folk heroes; each begs the question, "What's wrong with this picture?" A local businessman ready to make a deal, a quartet of wannabe Jon Bon Jovis, a chainsaw-toting, cigarette-smoking redneck couple, prosperous Oriental real estate agents taking time for a quick snapshot, proud racially mixed parents and their darling daughter greeting a fuzzy pink pig promoting pizza—Lum draws us into these everyday fictions gone strange and slaps on captions that augment the slice-of-contemporary-life vignettes.

In *Nancy Nishi*, *Joe Ping Chau*, *Real Estate* (all works 1990), the two young Orientals pose proudly on a balcony overlooking an urban boomtown. Taking time from their busy schedule to oblige the photographer, Nancy and Joe exude (humbly, of course) the ethics of hard work and pride of ownership before their concrete empire; the photo is emblematically captioned in towering chiseled stone blocks that spell out the words "Real Estate." The subtext is that of entrepreneurial conquerors who have grown secure enough to become tourists. "A Woodcutter and his Wife," spelled out with cute little logs and broken slats of wood against an acid-green monochrome surface entitles a short fable about consumption and preservation. The gothic story begins and ends at the base of a giant hemlock before the simple folk (stuck-in-the-'60s hippie-types) set about their daily labor of razing a tree large enough to be a national treasure. "We Are Sacred Blade"—scripted in stylized daggers against a flashy hot-pink ground—seems geared to attract fashion-conscious teenage devil-worshippers. Opposite is a shot of the band, not nearly satanic enough to transcend the suburban rec-room aura of polished linoleum floors and wood-veneer paneling.

The viewer who dismisses Lum's witty combos of lettrism and flat photography simply as humorous kitsch or making fun of the middle class deserves a starring role in a future Lum diptych: a slightly bored, know-it-all gallery goer dressed from head to toe in black with a caption set up like a slick exhibition announcement. The interpretive impulse finds far more fertile turf in consideration of the split personality of these allegorical works.

The tautological relation that plays obliquely between text and image operates in a similarly self-contained manner between paintings that aren't paintings and photographs that aren't photographs—at least not in the traditional sense. Both are fake in their own beguiling way: one with captions painted on aluminum by a commercial sign painter who makes pictures out of words, the other with portraits of stereotypical real-life characters who, since they are frequently played by actors, are wholly contrived. Lum sends a second-level shock wave by leavening the austerity of the Jeff Wall school of conceptual photography (his mentor) with the candy-colored trappings of Pop art, in the same irreverent manner that his sectional couches and conversation pits played with the conventions of Minimalist sculpture. The salient effect of his high-low synthesis of humor, sociopolitical critique, and art is to keep us guessing and catch us just a little bit off guard.

—*Jan Avgikos*