

Kara Ditte Hansen and Steffanie Ling on Ken Lum

Steffanie Ling 03:20

Greetings, listeners. Welcome to this edition of *Listening to Pictures*. We are Steff Hui Chi Ling

Kara Ditte Hansen

and I'm Kara Hansen.

Steffanie Ling

For this episode we're chatting about Ken Lum's *Youth Portraits* from 1985. Kara you want to say a few things about the artwork?

Kara Ditte Hansen 03:40

Sure. The *Youth Portraits* that we encounter from SFU's Collection is a grid made up of 16 black and white staged photographs of youth ranging from infants to young adults. They're photographed at different angles, but more often than not, they're shot from below. Their features are hopeful as they look off into some unknown future. Ken Lum made this work while he was still a student studying for his Master's in Fine Arts at the University of British Columbia. So, this style of portrait photography is known as social realism, which aim to depict the real-life conditions of working-class people to critique the structures of power behind them. These photographs reflect images taken by Russian artists Alexander Rodchenko, specifically a portrait titled *The Pioneer Girl* from 1930. Multiples of Ken Lum's *Youth Portraits* were printed cheaply on newsprint paper, when it was installed in 1985 at the Coburg Gallery. The individual images were cut out of the grid and pasted in loose clusters onto the walls. From exhibition documentation, the walls appear like constellations made of small optimistic faces with vast empty whitespace between them. We asked Ken what the negative space of the wall meant to him. He told us it was the aspirations and countenance of the youth. We also asked him if there was any cynicism or irony in the work, and he emphasized that his work is earnest and not meant to be ironic at all. *Youth Portraits* was first shown at Coburg Gallery, as we mentioned, a commercial photo gallery that was owned

and run by Bill Jeffries, who later became the director/curator at SFU Galleries from 2005 to 2012. And he also gifted this work to the collection in 2017. Ken Lum grew up in Vancouver's Strathcona neighborhood, and became interested in art as a student in high school, where he was asked to design yearbook covers and banners for school events. At this time, his class was learning about the enlarged comic book style paintings of Roy Lichtenstein and the assignment was to make a Lichtenstein inspired watercolor painting. Ken chose to reinterpret a traumatic image of a car bombing victim from the Vancouver Sun newspaper. The art teacher thought Ken's artistic gesture was completely inappropriate, and was told he would not be able to progress into Grade 10 art. Later in university, he studied mathematics and sciences and worked as a lab assistant in a research station for the British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture. He also had a part time job designing posters for the Vancouver Public Library, and worked for his former neighbour sign painting for stores such as Safeway. He enrolled in evening art class at Simon Fraser University, taught by Jeff Wall and could not read enough about art and art history. Regularly attending the VAG library, he met a senior artist who had decided to pursue art after retirement. She told him that he had no choice but to make the full leap into art. So thereafter Ken Lum quit the lab and enrolled in the MFA at UBC, and never looked back. Steff, can you tell the audience why we chose the work and why we spoke to Ken.

Steffanie Ling 06:51

So, I think, I think that we were drawn to *Youth Portraits*, or at least I was drawn to *Youth Portraits* because it seemed more immune to the sort of more uptight readings and conceptual art that we were socialized to develop when we were art students. And I think by nature of its material being newsprint and glue, and how the subjects are portrayed, it would feel maybe a bit disingenuous to project a whole lot of art history onto it, even though there is a conversation we could be having about social realism, like you mentioned before. So we have this idea of talking to Ken because for me this work really provoked memories of being a student. So in that nostalgic spiral, I remember thinking that artists were like these people in far off places doing brilliant things, and we couldn't talk to them, but they are just regular people working at the school, in cafes, washing windows, and struggling to pay bills, and what have you, at least some of them, maybe most of them. So yeah, I thought working artists had maybe like at the time when we were students, we were thinking of working artists, as people who would actually transcended working class society and would have nothing to do with us, even though you and I have working class and middle class backgrounds, or at least I think of

myself as coming from a working class background, with middle class optics, or growing up with middle class optics. Ken was very forthcoming about his background, and a lot of his work and texts, so I thought to myself that we should try to look past the fact that we were intellectually distanced and raised to put this person on somewhat of a pedestal and try to have a more regular conversation with them about their work. And you know, the way it should be possible to just talk to anyone about their job. So, what did you think about broaching the conversation with Ken?

Kara Ditte Hansen 08:27

I was a bit nervous to talk to Ken because even though we know that he's just a human being, and being an artist is his job, and he also teaches, it's hard not to feel like a fan girl just because he was so much a part of our education at Emily Carr. But it was really nice. We met his whole family and it was really humbling to hear that he was more interested in learning about us and our backgrounds than talking about his own work. And I just wanted to see if he spoke in the same way that he writes, because he writes in such an accessible and conversational way about his work, and his experience in the arts. And it just doesn't lose any of its poignancy. So, yeah, can you tell me what *Youth Portraits* reminded you of or what it made you think of or feel?

Steffanie Ling 09:18

Yeah, so it's sort of funny talking to you like this, because we've been friends for a really, really long time. And we're just trying to keep it cool for you, listeners. But yeah, Kara I went to high school together and then we also ended up going, we went to high school together and then I ended up graduating from a different high school in a different city. But then we like, found each other again, when we started going to Emily Carr, in 2019, sorry, 2009 excuse me, time. So, I like *Youth Portraits*, and I like talking to you about it because it reminds me of being a student and having friends like you—and lots of other people that I would love to shout out but maybe don't have time and room here to do—to mature and creatively and spiritually mature with, and yeah, it reminded me of that time in being a little bit less burdened with expectations about the relationship between art and politics, which is largely what haunts me now. *Youth Portraits* has the opposite effects of some of his other works that are more canonical, for example, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, which I'll talk a little bit more about later. And I wouldn't say that my affinity for *Youth Portraits* is motivated by nostalgia or anything like that, but it has a sort of future oriented quality to it with respect to that

aspect of the negative space and the installation format that Ken talked about when we were conversing with him. So yeah, right now Kara and I are both students, again, doing our graduate studies, myself and sociology, and Kara in cinematic arts. So yeah, we're still very tight friends, collaborating and maturing but I think I will probably still need more work in terms of tempering my expectations of art. But then when Ken was talking about how there is this expectation that art should have a punch line, or offer some sort of social irony, which are not exactly the same expectations that I'm talking about, but we're talking about expectations, nonetheless, he also talked about how he wasn't trying to meet that expectation with this work. And I remember thinking when we were art students, that we couldn't make anything sincere or non-ironic. We could only make smart or technically well executed things. I mean, I think it's nice to mention the East Van Cross because it's like, yeah, I don't know, like, yeah, we like lived with his artwork.

Kara Ditte Hansen 11:36

When Steph and I were art students, we thought that we couldn't engage with art sincerely, so we weren't making sincere work. So we were just missing the connection altogether. So midway through our undergraduate studies at Emily Carr, the East Van Cross was installed on Clark Drive, which was just in view of our first apartment together. And one year later, there was a Ken Lum retrospective at the VAG that coincided with the Vancouver Olympics, as well as the Occupy protests. And I participated in the Occupy marches and chanting, while also attending Lum's retrospective in the same square block radius. But reflecting on this moment, we recalled how the distancing of our art education actually prevented us from emotionally connecting the working-class subjects in Ken's work to the chants that we repeated on the streets. As youthful and keen arts students, we were just unable to meaningfully connect the movement of this moment in Vancouver with the artists and artwork we were learning about. Steff, can you tell us a bit about what you remember from our phone call with Ken?

Steffanie Ling 12:44

Right. So while we were talking to Ken, he said some pretty lucid things that I feel like are worth repeating here. Because I feel like simple things are usually lucid after they follow a period of complication, or overthinking, which is something we're all very good at as the result of our art education. So we actually spend most of our time speaking with him, not just about

Youth Portraits, or mostly not about *Youth Portraits*. I don't know would you agree with that?

Kara Ditte Hansen

Yeah.

Steffanie Ling

Anyway, some of the things he said ultimately just made me feel less jaded. Because he said that the art world is not a monolith. And that we should draw from the totality of the art world, what matters to you? Because yeah, generally, I think we do see a lot of things that we don't like, and we just kind of maybe want to kind of throw the baby out with the bathwater, I guess you could say. But I think we like art, maybe we just don't like some of the things we see in the art world. And I think that that's like an important way to stay connected to art and find different ways to connect with it. I think we realized, you know, in the last few years as we've become slightly like I don't know, just like softer in our engagements with art. I just don't really think that what happens in the art world is ultimately going to inform what happens to politics on the global scale. So I'm not out here trying to change the art world, I just, I have tried, and ultimately, the barriers and obstacles I encounter from doing that is actually coming more from the work to be done with broader political consciousness raising. Another part of talking to Ken that I remember was when you outed me as a Marxist and we segued into inquiring about his unrealized public artwork, which was called, *Monument to the Victims of Communism*, which would have been commissioned by the Government of Canada. Anyway, it's basically a sculpture of Lenin that is like, frozen in the moment of being toppled at like a 45-degree angle. And he said some interesting things about it being mid fall that I thought were really eloquent, but I think the best thing he said was, well, what about a monument to the victims of capitalism? And I couldn't agree more. So yeah, I don't know. What did you think of or what do you remember some greatest hits from our conversation.

Kara Ditte Hansen 15:02

I liked his story about his stacked furniture sculptures. I think he called them *Tower of Love* or *Tower of Love (seats)* from 1987. And he said, it was mouse infested, and how the mice ran wild in his studio. And it just made me think about my first year on Hastings and Main, and all my naive ambitions about what would happen after my education. And it just makes me think of the negative space in *Youth Portraits*. There'd be a lot of negative space around

my portrait. But yeah, talking in general with Ken made me feel less embittered, and I was reminded that I'm constantly reengineering what I want to do and what world I want to learn from. Yeah, I guess his work just really makes me feel empathy. And I think what's most important for me in art is to feel something.

Steffanie Ling

Hell yeah.

Kara Ditte Hansen

So, tell me what your favorite Ken Lum work.

Steffanie Ling 15:59

My favorite Ken Lum work is definitely and probably obviously, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*. In 2020, I was in Rotterdam and I bought a postcard of a photograph of the work installed on the side of the Witte de With, now it's called the Kunstinstituut Melly. There's also a small vitrine exhibition of materials related to the organization of Ken's exhibition in 1991. And in one of those documents on the vitrine, I read this description that he had written and like faxed to the, to the Melly. And it said that Melly is also a picture of my mother, something like that. I think it was, I think I'm slightly like paraphrasing, but yeah, Melly is also a picture of his mother. And I pinned this postcard up at my desk at work in a very prominent place so that whenever I looked at it, I non hatefully thought of my hatred of work. My silence of my hatred of work, and my mother. It reminded me that hating work was not just something I was experiencing, but probably a lot of people were, and how that feeling is important to remember when we're feeling alone in our disdain for work. So mother's especially work extremely hard, but tend to hide how much they do or if they dislike it, especially from their children. In Ken's description he relays an anecdote from his childhood, where he described seeing his mother at the laundromat where she worked, and she was joking with her coworkers. But once on a particularly hard day, she portrayed her hatred of her job to Ken like this, like quiet mother. So Mellie's hatred of her job was also very grounding, because we have this kind of work culture where we're supposed to love or show gratitude for being in our jobs because of its proximity to art and culture, which are generally considered leisurely, leisurely engagements. So, this leaves us open to rationalizing lots of exploitation and self-exploitation because we also have to come across as very psyched about our jobs or gigs because of how elusive opportunities can be. I don't want to assume that everyone hates their job, and I'm

genuinely glad for people who like what they do for work, but I think it's a sentiment that most people can get on with or be in solidarity with because, especially among working class people, and I think that is a really difficult thing for contemporary works of art to sincerely achieve. So, in the sense Mellie Shum is not just a picture of his mother or my mother, but a lot of smiling alienated workers who are silently hating their jobs. What's your favorite work Kara?

Kara Ditte Hansen 18:19

My favorite Ken Lum works are the Portrait Repeated Text Series. But just for the sake of listeners who might want to refresh their memory in person, you can bike or drive to Strathcona and right by Trillium Park is a two-panel work called, *A Tale of Two Children: A Work for Strathcona*. In this series, in general, and the Portrait Repeated Text Series, there is a staged photograph with text on a colour field beside it. The colours of the text and background are often referenced in the photograph. For instance, in *A Tale of Two Children* there is a photograph of a white boy in black jeans and a blue t-shirt, bracing his anxious body up against a red fire hydrant. Beside the photograph on a red background in dark blue text, it reads his inner monologue: "What an idiot! What an idiot you are! What an utterly useless idiot you are!" The panel beside has a staged photograph of an Asian girl sitting on a green bench and an adult in a pink blouse stands behind her looking into the child's eyes as she places a reinforcing hand on her shoulder. On a green background in pale pink text reads the adult's encouraging words: "You so smart. You make me proud you so smart. I so proud you so smart." For me these works function like stills from documentary movies. We witnessed the emotional lives in the everyday consciousness of these made up but very realistic people. There are often moments where an individual is having a personal crisis or doubt over their self-worth. In this work. For instance, we experience the boy full of shame, and while the girl's seemingly encouraged, we also intuit the enormous expectations this adult must have for her. So yeah, maybe it's silly, but I totally believe that these the Portrait Repeated Text Series are snapshots that destigmatize mental health, and just like internal struggles in general, and they just really hit me in the heart and in the gut.

Steffanie Ling 20:22

That was really nice, Kara.

Kara Ditte Hansen 20:25

Thanks. And that concludes our conversation on *Youth Portraits* (1985) by Ken Lum, thanks for listening.

Steffanie Ling 20:32

Shout out to Kim and Karina at SFU for giving us this opportunity. And now Kara will acknowledge the readings that have informed our conversation.

Kara Ditte Hansen 20:40

So thank you to Ken for writing *Everything is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life, 1991-2018* and that was published by Concordia University Press, Montreal. Also, the Vancouver Art Gallery's Ken Lum exhibition catalogue with writings by Grant Arnold, Okwui Enwezor, and Roland Schoeny. And also the beautiful publication that Steff has that was published by the Witte de With, now known as the Kunstinstituut Melly, and Winnipeg Art Gallery. Thank you.

Steffanie Ling

Bye, everyone.