

Ken Lum



Ken Lum
Onions, eggs, milk, butter, newspaper, 1994
Private collection

TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE SPRING 2011

Vancouver
Artgallery

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Ken Lum
Red Circle, 1986
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Acquisition Fund
Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery

Vancouver Art Gallery

Teacher's Guide for School Programs

The exhibition *Ken Lum* contains the largest collection of work exhibited to date by this internationally recognized contemporary Vancouver artist. Much of his work seems startlingly familiar to us in that he uses signs, media and objects from the everyday world. But we soon become aware that these are no ordinary signs or objects, and this is not the world of commerce or domesticity. Lum uses this disparity to engage us in asking questions about who we are, how we reflect and present ourselves to the world and how the world presents itself to us.

DEAR TEACHER:

This guide will assist you in preparing for your tour of the exhibition *Ken Lum*. It also provides follow-up activities to facilitate discussion after your Gallery visit. Engaging in the suggested activities before and after your visit will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require few materials and can be adapted easily to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Vocabulary section.

The tour of *Ken Lum* has three main goals:

- to introduce students to Ken Lum's body of work and artistic practice,
- to consider Lum's use of materials and the space his work occupies between "art" and "non-art,"
- to explore individual artworks within their particular contexts and narratives.

THE EXHIBITION: *KEN LUM*

Background for Teachers

The exhibition *Ken Lum* presents an extensive overview of this contemporary artist's work, featuring more than 50 works created over the last thirty years. Many of these are ideas that Lum has returned to again and again throughout his career as a conceptual artist. In much of his work Lum uses signage from everyday life, from the world of commercial advertising that we think we recognize all too well. Finding these works and media in an art gallery can be perplexing and may cause us to doubt our ability to understand and read them. Why have these media suddenly become artworks?

We soon notice that Lum has taken these signs and subtly subverted the messages they would normally transmit. In crossing the boundaries between “art” and “non-art,” Lum is challenging us to question our perceptions of the world around us, using everyday media to disrupt our usual responses. Instead of letting us take the world for granted, he is making us aware that our external reality is constructed. He is asking us to think of how we usually read the messages around us. How do we use images, signs and text to interpret the world? How do we tell others who we are? How do we present ourselves to the world?

We will be focusing on these areas in the tour of *Ken Lum*:

- **Portraits**
- **Strip Mall Signs** and **Shopkeeper Signs**
- **Photo-Mirror Works**
- **Furniture Sculptures**

Lum combines portraits, text and symbols in various ways. In his **Portrait Logos**, he puts together two recognizable forms: the family portrait and the corporate logo. Using the visual language of the everyday commercial world, Lum presents us with an added concept—family as product. In **Portrait Attribute Series** he juxtaposes image and text, suggesting confusing realities. For example, in the work *Melly Shum hates her job*, Lum places the image of a half-smiling woman in her office cubicle alongside the large text that gives the work its title; the image seems to contradict the certainty of the language used. In **Portrait Repeated-Text Works**, phrases are set out alongside images: of a young boy trying to remember his shopping list, of a woman studying French. These words read as inner thoughts or internal monologues that both confirm and confuse the reading of the accompanying image.

The **Strip Mall Signs** and **Shopkeeper Signs** are immediately recognizable as coming from the world of commercial advertising. But we soon realize that these are not straightforward signs that advertise product or place. In **Shopkeeper Signs** we read text that would not be seen on everyday signs, giving personal declarations well beyond what is necessary for our normal commercial interactions. In **Strip Mall Signs**—which Lum says function as portraits—we glean information about the community (suggested by the abundance of Vietnamese restaurants and script) as well as the mall itself (the blank spaces suggesting this is anything but a thriving, successful commercial enterprise).

Lum has created several works in which he uses mirrors: mazes, galleries and one-way mirrors that reveal, obscure and sometimes hide. In the **Photo-Mirror Works** we find a room filled with oversize mirrors with photographs tucked into their frames—ordinary snapshots of other people's family gatherings and holiday mementos, much like those we find in our own homes. Except we are now in a public space, and we see ourselves repeatedly reflected, caught in the usually private act of observing ourselves. In blurring the distinction between

private and public space, Lum forces us to question the ways we see ourselves. In the **Mirror Maze** we are again barraged with uncountable fractured multiples of our own reflection as we wander, trying to find our way through, much as we would in an amusement park house of mirrors.

Lum began working on his **Furniture Sculptures** in the 1980s. The works consist of seemingly ordinary living room furniture arranged in the gallery to create an inaccessible space (see photo on page 2) The domestic and the public collide—even as we recognize familiar objects of our lives, we are excluded and shut out. Lum says that he wants to address the idea not only of the gallery and the home, but also of the street. He suggests the tension between these three spaces, and the way we interpret familiar objects, such as the furniture, differently in each.

Lum's *Monument for East Vancouver* (see photo below) is situated on a hill at the corner of Great Northern Way and Clark Drive. On this large, cross-shaped structure, the word *VAN* is written across and the word *EAST* down, crossword-style, so that the two words share the letter A. The sculpture recalls a graffiti image that has circulated for decades in the city's east side, often scrawled on walls in back lanes and on bus shelters. Although the origins of this emblem are unknown, its roots have long been linked to the immigrant and inner-city culture of East Vancouver. Documentation of the sculpture represents the work in the exhibition space.

Ken Lum's *Four Boats Stranded, Red and Yellow, Black and White* (2001) is a sculptural installation that was commissioned by the Vancouver Art Gallery and is mounted on the roof of the building. While it is not formally part of this exhibition, it is a significant part of Lum's art practice—he has received numerous public art commissions worldwide. The installation consists of four stylized boats and ships that represent different segments of Vancouver's layered history. They are scaled-down versions of a First Nations longboat, a cargo ship that brought refugees from China in the late 1990s, the *Komagata Maru*, a ship carrying Indian immigrants in 1914 that was expelled, and Captain George Vancouver's ship *HMS Discovery*.

This exhibition is organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and curated by Grant Arnold, Audain Curator of British Columbia Art.



Ken Lum
Monument for East Vancouver, 2010
Collection of the City of Vancouver

ARTIST INFORMATION

Ken Lum was born in Vancouver in 1956. He was raised in East Vancouver by his Chinese-Canadian parents, who often struggled to make a living. Although he was always interested in art, he had no aspirations of being an artist and did not consider art as part of a viable career path. One of his high school teachers actively discouraged him, telling him he had no sense of composition.

Encouraged by his parents, he went on to study sciences at Simon Fraser University. While there, he enrolled in a contemporary art class being taught by the well-known photo-conceptual artist Jeff Wall; this proved to be a turning point in his life and career. After receiving his Bachelor of Science, he attended New York University, where he studied toward a Master of Art degree in the department of Fine Arts. In 1985 he completed his master's degree at the University of British Columbia; he has taught there in the Fine Arts Department since 1989. He has also held appointments as visiting professor in Paris, Munich, San Francisco and Hangzhou.

His work has developed an international following and has been exhibited throughout Canada, North America and Europe. He has had more than 100 solo exhibitions and his work has been in biennales and major museums in places as far flung as Shanghai, Istanbul, Liverpool, Sao Paolo, Sydney and Johannesburg. He has received commissions for public artworks in several European countries, is editor of a journal of contemporary Chinese art and has curated major contemporary art exhibitions in Seattle and Shanghai. He has published essays, papers, journal articles and books, has been invited to serve as juror for numerous prestigious exhibitions and has received several significant awards.

In his art practice, Lum works with studio photographers and tradespeople who assist in building his pieces. He rarely manufactures or fabricates his work by himself. Although he has used sculpture, painting and performance in his art practice, it is for his photo-text works that Lum has become best known. When he first began to attract attention as an artist in the early 1980s, he was closely associated with the Vancouver School, a group of artists working mostly with photo-conceptualism, and which included Rodney Graham, Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace. These artists were working with media that deliberately blurred the boundaries between the worlds of commerce and art.

Lum has said that while he is interested in making art that may confuse “art” and “non-art,” in the end he’s an artist who creates art.

“I don’t want my art to be confused with non-art. I wouldn’t mind some degree of suspension on the part of the viewer—however provisional with respect to: ‘Is this real or is this art?’

“The realization that it is art opens the question: ‘What was he trying to say?’ In lieu of not knowing whether it is art, you’re mandated to ask that question.”

Lum’s experience as a Chinese Canadian living in East Vancouver has provided the context for much of his work, which often explores ideas pertaining to class, culture, race and identity.

“Vancouver is the source of all my reflections. It’s not just a fountain of all my ideas, but it’s actually constantly feeding back towards my art. I think I make the work I do because I think about this city a lot.”

PRE/POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Looking at Ken Lum (adaptable for all grades)

Objective:

Students explore Ken Lum's life and work.

Materials:

- writing materials
- Artist Information Sheet (p. 8), Student Worksheet (p. 9)
- Internet. One helpful site: www.wikipedia.com

Process:

1. Divide students into four groups. Give each group one of the categories from the Information Sheet (next page).
2. Give each student a copy of the Student Worksheet (p. 9) and ask them to consider what they need to find out to complete their section. Have them conduct research using the Internet, either at home or at school.
Older students: Add in-depth information.
Younger students: Find a few interesting facts or opinions about the artist.
3. Ask each group to find/copy/sketch a piece of work by the artist and add it into the space provided in the Worksheet.
4. Have each group present their information while the rest of the students fill in their worksheets.

Conclusion:

Points for class discussion and/or individual writing assignments:

- What makes Ken Lum a significant or important artist?
- What is interesting about his work and life?
- Can students find points of connection between his background and particular artworks?
- In what ways is his work relevant to the students' lives, to their communities?
- What else are students interested in finding out about the artist?

Artist Information Sheet: Ken Lum

Personal information

- Born in 1956 in Vancouver, east side
- His mother wanted him to become a scientist; he went to SFU and got a BSc
- Changed direction and got his Master of Fine Arts
- Lives in Vancouver, teaches at UBC

Art processes and materials

- Uses the type of signs usually used for advertising stores or products
- Has sofas made up for his furniture works
- Uses photographic images alongside text
- Has made several works using mirrors

Main bodies of work

- Strip Mall Signs and Shopkeeper Signs
- Portrait Logos and Portrait Text works
- Furniture Sculptures
- Mirror works, including the Mirror Maze

Exhibitions & Achievements

- Respected artist with international reputation
- Has had his work in exhibitions from Shanghai to Istanbul, Sydney, Liverpool, Sao Paulo and Johannesburg
- Invited as professor to Paris, Munich, San Francisco and Hangzhou
- Published essays, papers, journal articles, books; curated international exhibitions; organized conferences; served as juror for major exhibitions

Student Worksheet: Ken Lum

Personal Information	
Art Processes & Materials	
Main Bodies of Work	
Exhibitions & Achievements	
An Artwork: Title & Description	
Artwork: Sketch	

PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Significant Signs (all grades)

Objective:

Students look at store/business signs in their neighbourhood and design a sign that represents their school.

Discussion:

In much of his work, Lum uses the type of commercial signage more familiar in the everyday commercial world than in an art gallery. In doing so, he challenges us to question our perceptions of the world around us—the messages we usually simply take for granted. How do we use images, signs and text to interpret our surroundings? How do we tell others who we are? How do we present ourselves to the world?

Materials:

- ❑ large sheets of heavy paper or poster board
- ❑ markers or paint

Process:

1. Discuss the kinds of signs students might see in their neighbourhood, along bus routes or main streets: signs for corner stores, supermarkets, cafés, etc.
2. Ask students to look around the neighbourhood for specific signs and make notes. Note the words used, the layout, font, colours, images and symbols.
3. Back at school, discuss:
 - What were the signs advertising?
 - What kinds of signs were there most of? (e.g., restaurants, health stores, banks)
 - How did they get our attention? (e.g., colour, layout, contrast, words, symbols, etc.)
 - What do the signs tell us about the places they are advertising? What do we expect to find inside these stores or businesses? Who owns the business? Who works there?
 - What do the signs tell us about the neighbourhood? Who lives here? What do the local people like?
 - What's missing? What kinds of stores or businesses don't we see signs for in this area that we might find in other parts of the city?
4. Have students work in pairs to design a sign advertising the school.
 - What ideas would they want to put across?
 - What words would they use?
 - Plan the design—colours, text, layout, contrast, etc.
5. On a large sheet of heavy paper or poster board, have each pair make up their sign, using markers or paint.
6. Display signs.

Conclusion:

Discussion points:

- What do the students notice?
- How are these different from signs advertising stores or products?
- Is it appropriate to have signs advertising non-commercial spaces?
- Are these signs artworks, or are they just advertisements? What is the difference?

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Neighbourhood Sculpture (intermediate and secondary students)

Objective:

Students look at Ken Lum's *Monument for East Vancouver* and create a design for a sculpture that represents their own neighbourhood.

Discussion:

Ken Lum's *Monument for East Vancouver* is a large cross-shaped structure, on which the word VAN is written across and the word EAST down, crossword-style, so that the two words share the letter A. The image is one that Lum was familiar with while growing up in East Vancouver—it was often found as graffiti scrawled in back lanes or in bus shelters. Although its origins are unknown, its roots have been linked to the immigrant and inner-city culture of East Vancouver.

The sculpture has been mounted on a hill at the corner of Great Northern Way and Clark Drive, facing west—a defiant, visible marker of East Vancouver.

Lum says:

"It's a marker in a city that has very few markers outside natural markers. Here's a marker of something that's not the mountains, not the sea and not some escarpment. And people are kind of shocked by that."

"Vancouver is the source of all my reflections. It's not just a fountain of all my ideas, but it's actually constantly feeding back towards my art. I think I make the work I do because I think about this city a lot."

Materials:

- pencil crayons and large sheets of paper
- Internet for Ken Lum images: Google Images for "Ken Lum, Monument for East Vancouver"

Process:

1. Without giving the title, have students look at an image of Lum's sculpture. Discuss:
 - What do students notice?
 - What do they think it is about?
2. Give the title. Discuss:
 - Does this alter their understanding of the artwork? How?
 - What are possible meanings of it?
3. Give students background and read Lum's quotes (above).
4. Tell students they are going to plan a sculpture to represent their own neighbourhood. Have them work in small groups to plan their sculpture. Discuss meanings, location, materials, etc.
5. Using coloured pencils, groups sketch their design and make descriptive notes about dimensions, materials, location, etc.
6. Groups write up a statement explaining or justifying their design.
7. Groups present finished works to the class.

Conclusion:

Discuss:

- Would students like to have any of these as sculptures in their neighbourhood? Why or why not?
- Do they represent the neighbourhood's demographic/interests/personality? How?
- Are any of them practical to build/create? How? Why? Where?

VOCABULARY

conceptual art: art in which the ideas behind the creation of the work are more significant than the end product. During the 1960s and '70s, conceptual artists rejected the idea of the unique, precious art object and focused on intellectual explorations into artistic practice.

contemporary: created in the last thirty years. Most contemporary artists are living artists. Challenging traditional boundaries, many contemporary artists use a limitless range of materials and ideas to reflect, explore and comment on today's world.

curator: the person who is responsible for an exhibition—including selecting and displaying works, writing labels and organizing support materials.

installation: art that is created from a wide range of materials and installed in a specific environment. An installation may be temporary or permanent. The term came into wide use in the 1970s, and many installation works were conceptual.

logo: a recognizable symbol or graphic, often including a name, that acts as a means of identification for a brand, product or institution.

performance art: works in any of a variety of media that are performed before a live audience. The performance itself, rather than a specific object, constitutes the artwork. Documentation is often an important part of the performance.

photo-conceptualism: an artistic movement that emerged in Vancouver in the 1960s. The work is characterized by large-format photographic prints. This movement explored the ideas behind the photograph, the assumed "truth" of photography, and the nature of photography as fine art versus commercial art.

portrait: artwork in which the artist's principal goal is to capture the physical likeness and personality of an individual or group of people.

RESOURCES

Print:

Arnold, Grant, et al. *Ken Lum*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010.

Anderson, Michael, et al. *Under Construction: Rethinking Images of Identity*. Pasadena CA: Armory Center for the Arts, 1995.

Godfrey, Tony. *Conceptual Art (Art and Ideas)*. London: Phaidon Press, 1998.

Hannah, Martha, et al. *Ken Lum Works with Photography*. Montreal: ABC Art Books Canada, 2002.

Lum, Ken, et al. *Ken Lum*. Paris: Canadian Cultural Centre, 2002.

Robertson, Jean. *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Wells, Liz, ed. *Photography: A Critical Introduction*. New York/London: Routledge, 2000.

Online:

www.artcyclopedia.com

Online art encyclopedia, listing international artists, and museums and galleries with collections of their work.

www.wikipedia.com

Online dictionary and encyclopedia, created collaboratively by laypeople

Vancouver Art Gallery 2010-2011 School Programs Supporters:

School programs generously supported by



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