

Elizabeth 0:11

Hello everyone, welcome to season three, episode two of Art Lives. My name is Elizabeth DeLamater, and on this podcast I talk with artists one on one, about their art, their lives, and how they navigate the world. This episode features Li-Hsuan Hsu. She is an art educator and researcher whose interests lie at the intersection of arts and leadership. In this episode Li-Hsuan tells us about how she uses art to give students leadership and stress coping skills. She also talks about how making art can give us a place to pause, recalibrate, and process our emotions. Here is Li-Hsuan Hsu.

Li-Hsuan 1:14

You know, when I was in Taiwan, you know, I always learned art things. [When] I was like seven years old, because my classroom teacher happened to be an art teacher. So I asked my parents like, "Hey, I know that I can go to her studio after class to learn drawing." So my parents – they are very kind. So they sent me to join. So that was the first time that I have the experience with the arts, right. And later, my parents are generous again, to send me to ballet lessons and to the piano lessons. So I had those early engagements in the arts. So I'm always interested in the arts, and then very fascinated by those artistic creation. When I go to like college I went to this department of Fine Arts in National Taiwan – Normal University; so that is for creating teachers.

Elizabeth 2:17

A-ha.

Li-Hsuan 2:18

And then when I was like, more trained in the arts, then one day in a bookstore, I think, I see this book called, "Art Management and Arts Administration." So I picked it up, and I started reading. I ended up buying that book. Because I feel like in my whole life, you know, from elementary school, to middle school, high school, college, because I'm always in this art program, you know, in academic program; schools. But no one ever talked about management administration in the arts. Or maybe that training at a school, you know, it's not supposed to focus on management administration, but then just in my mind, this is like an interesting combination.

Elizabeth 3:11

Okay.

Li-Hsuan 3:13

So I started reading, and then later I also read some of the leadership books in business – because it's such a big topic in business. So then, I was like, "People talk about leadership and management a lot in business, but people don't really talk about this concept, Leadership as a concept in the Arts." But back then, as an undergrad student it was just like, a thought, because I never thought

I will get PhD and I will do research of my own. So that was [just] like this little tiny thought that I had. And I went on to Masters and focused on art education. And then long story [short] basically, I convinced my parents to let me come to the States to get a graduate degree. So by the time that they say, "Okay, you can go," I already got my Master's degree. Okay, so now I'll just go for my doctorate. So, it was an accident, but then when I started my PhD, and then on the way down like third year, I have to kind of pick my topic, okay, I was like, "Oh, what should I do?" Because you have to do something that can bridge the gaps of knowledge in the field.

Elizabeth DeLamater 4:33
Yes.

Li-Hsuan 4:34
And so I talked to my advisor and I said, "You know what, I am really interested in bringing the concept of leadership in the arts, because I have not seen a lot of people or scholarship or literature that discusses how the concept of the leadership is unpacked in art education," (which is my field of study.) My advisor said, "Yeah, this is a very new innovative topic, nobody has really dived very deep before. So what's your thought?" And then my first thought is: My advisor is a very influential scholar in the field of art education, and the way that I see her creating a new theory for the field is how she interacts with other influential scholar in the field and try to kind of like influence or move the field forward by publication and conference lectures, or in other different scholarly activities. And I am very drawn into that intangible impact, because it's not the impact that is so concrete, and so clear, but then over time, you know, how you can use all that scholarly work and activity to move the field forward, I find that particular part, you know, is, is abstract, but it's very important for me.

Elizabeth 6:06
Sure.`

Li-Hsuan 6:08
So I told her, I said, "You know, I actually want to study art educators' behavior. When they have a position as leaders in different types of arts education, or arts organization, or contexts, what kind of leadership behaviors do those art educators have that are unique? Or that are very relevant to the art experiences?" Because there is very little that we understand about leadership behaviors and art experiences. So then, for my doctoral research, I ended up doing... I kind of investigated different leadership behavior of art educators in three metropolitan areas in the States. So in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. I picked a total of 26 leaders in arts organization in the community.

Elizabeth 7:08

Oh my goodness.

Li-Hsuan 7:10

Yes, I talked to them, and then I visited many of the sites (not all the sites), but I made the visits to those three cities, I'd see the site, sometimes I observed them, you know, facilitated a meeting or hosted an event. So basically, that dissertation, my doctoral research was the very beginning element that proved that this is the thing that I can do. And this is an idea that I can continue to expand. And so through that research process, you know, one of the things that I really liked is that [participants said], because they have a lot of art experiences before, you know, as leaders, they are also art educators. So a lot of them are coming from a background that is very similar as mine; we are coming from a fine art background. And then eventually, because of certain opportunities, we become educators or we become administrators. Then we have to switch our gears, trying to bridge our art experiences in the past into this more organizational-based work.

Elizabeth 8:24

Right.

Li-Hsuan 8:26

And one of the things that I really liked is what one of the research participants said: "I used to paint a lot, I did oil painting. When you look at the oil painting for so long, and then sometimes you generate different ideas as you go. Sometimes you look far, and sometimes you look close. And then when I finally finish my work, I always find that my finished work is so different from the work that I created in my sketchbook, you know, my draft." And then he said, "I always enjoy my finished work more than my draft. So I know, in the process of making, a lot of times, I was like, 'should I do this? It's not what I planned.' [So] it might not end up with the things that I wanted." But then he said he realized a lot of time that the finished product is always better than his original plan. So he learned how to embrace ambiguity in his painting processes. Because he allowed himself to one) 'Take a risk' and two) 'Just go with a little uncertainty,' it helps him embrace this finished product that is not as planned. So when he became this executive director in this arts organization in New York, he said, it kind of helped him to become a very good listener. He said, "If I am open to different perspectives in the process of organizing an event, or structuring a curriculum, or like a plan for student, if I listen and I get more perspectives, then I usually end up with a much better program."

So it is kind of parallel to the art making process, in which I find fascinating because I've made art for a long time in my life. But now I'm also trying to do the same thing. So now I'm an art educator, but I try to kind of interpret or to apply the visual arts and artistic creation into the educational work that I'm doing. So then, for this

Arts and Leadership Class that I'm teaching, originally, I was like, "I did this arts and leadership research for my dissertation, which is doctoral-level research work. ..and I don't have graduate student at this moment." So I'm like, "Hmm, maybe I could create a general education class that can allow all the undergrad students from different departments to engage in the arts, and to learn how artists, [use] creativity processes, and try to integrate those arts-based elements in their discipline. And so that was the the thought of creating this class: Arts and Leadership.

Elizabeth 11:54

Amazing. That's one... it's so cool, because some people, once they get very involved in, in a topic or their dissertation topic, they do not then know how to... (I want to say 'back out of' it) but they don't know how to expand it for younger students again. They have such a narrow focus, they don't know how to then open it back up. And what I saw of how you did that last semester, how you do that for your students is so valuable, because as you said, and as we've seen, the arts, artists who become administrators bring so many unique tools. If we can get students to be learning them, when they're younger, they will graduate with unparalleled experience and a bigger toolbelt. That's exactly – those are the leaders of the future that we need.

Li-Hsuan 13:10

Mm hmm.

Elizabeth 13:11

We need people who are very, very resourceful to help us out!

Li-Hsuan 13:18

Right. And then also, I think, for that class, you brought up a very interesting point, [which] is how we can modify that very in-depth, narrow knowledge of a particular field, [and] open [it up] to be this very open and then accessible, to all those undergraduate students who might not have had a lot of art experience before. So what I tell students is that "Y ou don't have to be artists to understand how artists think. But then through this class, you will do – I will help you engage in the arts, but you don't have to become masters in this particular art form. But I want you to learn to observe and understand., Understand all the creative processes other artists have, so you can try to comprehend, 'Okay, this is how artists' creativity works, and that's how artists encounter a problem.' And so maybe that might give you some entry point to your own discipline or your own coursework, or own life problem; a parallel mindset. So then they don't have to spend three years, five years to be very good at doing a drawing (for example), but then they can start to draw, and then they can. With guidance, I can engage them in this progressive processes, so in my class last semester, because we switched online. I mentioned earlier that they have to do this "sketch-noting."

Elizabeth 15:08

Okay, so they did the notes- what by drawing, that's what I saw, right? They drew. They took notes by making drawings, which was beautiful.

Li-Hsuan 15:20

They have to listen, either listen to a lecture and then create sketchnotes. Or they have to follow the prompt that I give them. So basically, in the beginning, what they have to do is to identify the, the top five strengths that they have.

Elizabeth 15:40

Oh, okay.

Li-Hsuan 15:42

So because this is Arts and Leadership, I want them to help themselves one: identify their leadership qualities, and two: who empowers their personal development with the good qualities that they have? So one is about recognition, one is about application. So they have to ask themselves and analyze all the different possibilities of their skills, and they have to choose the top five. So sometimes people, like some students, they pick, for example, like positivity. Some people pick competition. So they pick those five strengths that they are very good at. And the [reason] I asked him to pick strength, instead of strength and weakness, is because I want to make them feel empowered. Because if you know what you are very good at, then I think you have more opportunity to get even better, because you already generate that high level of competence. So I wanted to recognize, "okay, those are your top five life skills, or the top five things that you are very good at." So then they have to identify five supporting elements to tell me why positivity is something you are good at. So they have to reflect on their experiences in the past and give you - Give me the evidence. And along with their notes, they have to start to draw and include some visuals. I said, "You don't have to draw a human face, but you can create some patterns, some designs, or some geometrical shape, to kind of improve and make your sketch no more visually pleasant."

And then after they have those five major strengths identified, later in the semester I encourage them to think, "What is this transformational experience that you have had?" So it's a little bit deeper than just 'Identify what you are good at.' You have to think of the past, what you value and how you overcame those obstacles. And then you achieve these particular things that you want to achieve. For example, one of the students used this example of dealing with stress. She thinks dealing with stress for her is a transformational experience and learning for her. She said in the beginning whenever she had a very intense depression, she didn't know how to deal with it. So she would just collapse, but then after like different practices of counseling, and self-healing and self-care, and building

a support system of people around her, she started to identify, "Okay, when I have this very intense depression, or intense negative emotion, I have to help myself, to pull myself back, to sit down and think about how I can help myself heal. And then I go out to reach out to individuals or any other kind of resources that can help me go through this you know, 'foggy' stage." And finally, she can settle down and kind of bring herself back to the normal so she use water [theme] of transformation. So you know water – when you start to feel the water more and more, you know, in the sky, when the clouds become heavier, and become darker in color, they hold way too much weight of water – humidity – it drops. So that when the water dropped, that is the time that she collapsed because it's so much stress, so much depressed emotion that she couldn't breathe. And after the rain drops, then things get a little bit better, because you have less weight on your shoulders, and eventually the sun comes back out, and then you go back to the 'regular normal.' It doesn't mean it won't rain again; it will rain again. But because she continued to practice the cycle, whenever it is going to rain she will prepare herself better. So I ask them to... I try to empower students to think about what they are good at. So it's more about positivity, like reinforcement.

Elizabeth 20:48

And and you're preparing them. You're reminding them of what they already can do and helping them prepare for the future. A lot of teachers have talked about maybe college as a way of preparing students to, to get through hard times in the future. And this sounds exactly like you're doing that.

Li-Hsuan 21:15

I'm trying to, because there's another concept we've discussed before; it is our sustainability. Because, I mean, there are many different angles that we can discuss sustainability. And oftentimes we talk about things like how much water we can save, and how can we reduce the waste that we generate in everyday life. But for me, because my work has been surrounded in the arts and leadership... I think those two things, arts and leadership, they have this interdisciplinary nature, right? So every discipline, every area, if you can allow it, there is room, space for arts and leadership to interact with that particular content that you're talking about. And then for the sustainability, I think it's the same thing. I think it's interdisciplinary. Every single field, one: you can think about how your field can contribute to sustainability in a society or in the globe. And two; you can think about professionally, how the student – how students – can sustain their career or sustain their success as they move forward post college. So for me, I take sustainability more like: How students can learn good skills that they remember, and how they can apply [those skills] to their professional work. And then when they graduate, do they have ability or do they have the skills to help them succeed, even though society is constantly changing? So that's why I thought of Leadership. Bring that personal development

into the class, along with the art forms that we explore, because the ultimate goal is that I want you to become successful. I want you to become a leader. When the opportunity comes, I hope that you can influence more people because you have so many talents and so many skills that you are good at. So you should continue to empower yourself, even though the other people around you may not really know what you are good at. But then you need to advocate for yourself. So you have to build this platform, or stage, almost for yourself to thrive. So I think this is a very internal skill. But then if students can learn how to lift themselves up through some of the activities in my class, then I will be very grateful and happy and satisfied.

Elizabeth 24:02

"Build a platform for yourself to lift you up." I love that.

Li-Hsuan 24:10

And we all need that. Right?

Elizabeth 24:13

We do. And I love the idea of sustainability as sustainability of materials and of the earth, but also of ourselves and our skills and our success and our health. And that's a great word. That is a wonderful word. So, okay, when a student arrives, (or I guess this year) when they get your syllabus and they look at it online for the first time. Is all of this in your first syllabus or do you introduce these things gradually? Or how do you present it at first?

Li-Hsuan 24:57

I tend to give a very general description in my syllabus. Because usually no matter which class... I mean, for example this leadership class that I'm teaching; a lot of the content that I cover in Arts and Leadership is intangible. So I think if I kind of give them all the detailed descriptions in the syllabus, and I think it will sound too philosophical for a lot of students. They will be a little hesitant like, "Is this what I really want to get myself into? or Is this is really a conversation I want to have?" So then in the syllabus, I try to keep it simple, right? So I just say, "In this class, I will design - I try to design - different parts of activities that involve arts and leadership. So you can understand other people's creative processes, and then how they build their own creativity, imagination." And in turn, I want them to reflect on their own talents in the arts and how they can transform their understanding into their leadership qualities. So [the syllabus] remains quite general, but then gives them a general sense about what they will be learning. But then my class is built on this spiral curriculum. So it always starts with like, very basic, fun, fundamental elements. And then completes at the very end, the ultimate goal that I want to achieve. So I think that ultimate goal, just needs a lot of building blocks. If I told them in the beginning, probably students probably would not receive [information] the same way as when they receive it towards the end of

the semester.

Elizabeth 26:58

Which is why you're a good educator.

Li-Hsuan 27:02

Thank you. And then I also feel like, students – they can see that. So I say at the end of semester, "I want you to recognize how you can help yourself transform your experiences, and try to retain that very high energy for your self development." I think in the beginning of semester, it's very hard for them to see that, because they have not yet experienced the dynamic of our discussion.

Elizabeth 27:39

Yes,

Li-Hsuan 27:40

So I want them to see that towards the end. But then along the way, I want them to see different things, and then that they are all connected together. So some of the best feedback that I received from a student is: "Towards the end of the class, I realized all the things that we have learned in this semester are connected together."

Elizabeth 28:06

(laugh)

Li-Hsuan 28:06

They cannot see in the beginning, but this is how I designed my class, because I don't want them to do a lot of random projects. But then for my class –and I have to spend a lot of time on arts and leadership– it could be very abstract to teach. And especially because we don't have a lot of hands on time, because this is not a "lab," this is more like a general education class. So how then, to help them to build this concrete understanding and continue to enhance that understanding to the next level, is always the thing I'm thinking of. In my mind, "how can I push the next step? And can students get it? And how can I guide students to unpack this, get the connective-ness in my class?" So it's a fun challenge.

Elizabeth 28:52

Wow. I had a student who was just taking instrument lessons with me. He had just started and about on the fourth week or so, let – this was about a year ago. He said, "I just figured out that you are telling me things in a certain order."

Li-Hsuan 29:13

Okay, yeah.

Elizabeth 29:14

"You, you are telling me something different this week than last

week." And I said, "Yes, this is called pedagogy. There is a certain order of information that a teacher gives to be successful to help you learn.

Li-Hsuan 29:33
Right.

Elizabeth 29:34
He was amazed. But what you are doing, your pedagogy; This is so complex, to make this work. And I'm - I'm so impressed.

Li-Hsuan 29:45
Thank you. And I think another thing, because the Arts and Leadership class is for all the students of different departments and they're all freshmen.

Elizabeth 29:57
Yeah.

Li-Hsuan 29:58
And then my Art Education students, and then other education majors that I teach... For Art Education, I teach them how to become an art teacher. For the other education majors such as elementary education and special education, or secondary education, those students, they take my class to learn how to integrate arts in [subjects] like history, science and math. So they know some basic elements of art and its impact, so we go through different methods, so they can apply those in multiple classrooms. So the way that I teach, it's almost like I want to model how we can build progressive learning for students. So instead of saying, "Okay, this is the spiral curriculum model, you have to do progressive objectives, and then you have to build different assessment tools." I did it. Usually the first project for those education majors, so I will have, I have like three beginning activities, and then I have a project, and I follow up with a three-step critique. So at the end of the project, the student already learned all those different steps. And then now, I teach them, "Okay, this is how you build your curriculum: you need to have an objective assessment, and you need to have some progressive activity." So then I will say, "Okay, since day one, what do we do?" So after these three activities, what project did we do, and how did I guide you to do this project? And what kind of critique question did I create for you?" And then they realize what they experienced is a way that they can frame their curriculum because they are going to become teachers. But at the end, I think we have such an amazing students that they can create outstanding curriculum on their own. So this is not the only way that you can do the curriculum. However, you need to inspire progressive learning. That is not going to change. So you got to model the way that you teach and to make sure that info is in the order, like you said, put in the order, in a mindful way. So you can amplify how much students can learn through your teaching in your

classroom. So then, I think, again, for me, that's why I don't like to teach the same project over and over again, because I always learn. There's a little hiccup here, and a little, minor mistake there. Or sometimes we have a major disappointment in the class. So then we find those and hopefully next time it will will be flowing better, or the sequence will work more effectively. Students gave me feedback that they think it's very helpful, because they see not just the final product, but also I think, they they learn better when you tell them, "this is my concept." But yeah, I I kind of struggle with myself about how to determine the next step. So then when they are doing their own, it almost encouraged them to think of a similar question, to frame their own work.

Elizabeth 33:33

Aha. Yeah. What kind of art? So you said you have them do their sketch notes. What other kinds of art do you have non-art majors do?

Li-Hsuan 33:45

Oh, one of the projects that I created that I really enjoy seeing students do is called a social engagement project. A lot of art classes, use this mandala or mandala-type of circular design. And then so I think, a couple semesters back, I was like, "I'm always fascinated by those visual designs. Those are symmetrical, geometrical circular designs." And so now for my art majors, (this is for the class for my art education major class.) They don't have a lot of art experience before [the class]. Maybe some students enjoyed a drawing class in the past, but sometimes they don't have many experiences. So I need to assume that they don't know much about art, otherwise I would create a project that is very stressful. So then I say, "Okay, everybody needs to create this circular design. And then you have to decide your elements of your design in this circle." They get to do this, and then it's an interdisciplinary project, as it combines the visual arts, the visual elements, into a social issue that they care about. They are going to become educators, so I want them to stay current, about the external world. So each of them has to pick one social issue that they care about. It could be pollution, it could be global warming, or it could be the death penalty, it could be sex trafficking, or it could be depression, or racism. So I designed different brainstorming activities for students to think about, "Okay, what do I care about?" And then, "Why do I care about it? Which aspect of the social issue do I want my students to know about? [What do] I want myself as an educator to be able to teach my students in a positive mindset?" So they pick the social issues.

Elizabeth 36:11

Mmm-hmm.

Time stamps will be incorrect from this point on

Li-Hsuan 9:02

So, for example, if this student picks pollution, and then they have to analyze internally, "Why do I care about this, and what kind of concept do I want to include in my circle?" So, then they might say, "You know, all the cars make a lot of polluted air," or they can [choose] whatever pollution-related issue that they have come up with, and then they have to pick all the elements that they can draw. I say "With your ability, you only pick what you can draw. You are not picking the item that you have to practice like 100 hours."

Elizabeth 9:47
Yeah (laugh)

Li-Hsuan 9:49
And then they have the sketchbook, so they have to kind of do the self study.

Elizabeth 9:55
Sure.

Li-Hsuan 9:56
"Can I draw a car? Can I draw a cloud with all the polluted grey shades?" So then they have 10 elements that they already know they are good at, because they did the practice, right? And then I say, "Okay, now we are going to use your 10 elements to create your circular design." And then I have some very basic criteria such as you have to include geometrical design. So students can repeat elements, they can divide their circle into multiple layers, multiple sections. Also they have to correspond those items to each other in a circle.

Elizabeth 10:41
Right.Okay.

Li-Hsuan 10:41
And then, so at the end of the project, you can imagine - I'm happy to share them with you - they are fascinating. So each student creates a circle that is complex in structure and everybody picks a different issue that they care about. And even though I [may] have two students who both pick depression, their circles will look totally different, because of how they unpack the issue of depression, or how they cope with depression is different.

Elizabeth 11:16
Absolutely.

Li-Hsuan 11:18
And so I think through the project, you know, it's an art project, but also it inspires them to think about, "How can I be an advocate for this in our society?" Ultimately, I think the reason why I love this project is that the people who pick pollution [do so] because they care about how much polluted air we have in our everyday life. The

students who picked depression, or mental health, usually [do so because] they had a very difficult or have very obvious experience in the past about this particular issue. So through that art making process, it is my intention, I want them to feel a personal [connection] when they are doing the drawing and doing the designing process. Because again, I already know, that drawing is not the most confident thing that they do. So I want them to have that personal connection. So they bring the passion on the paper that they are creating.

Elizabeth 12:32

That sounds.. I bet those are very beautiful and powerful.

Li-Hsuan 12:36

Yeah, I like those. When I put those circles on the display, you have all these, I don't know, I would say- Passionate. And they are hopeful. You so many caring young individuals, and they are going into the field of teaching.

Elizabeth 12:55

Wonderful. Do you have any students who tell you things like, "I'm really afraid? I don't know how to do this," or "I'm not very good at this" at first? Or do they -

Li-Hsuan 13:10

Yeah, I have a lot of students come and say, "I don't know, I don't know how to draw. I never made art before. So I don't know what I'm getting myself into with this class." And then because I - because when I taught undergrad classes in Illinois, and here, you constantly have students who tell you that from day one. So now, when I start my day one of those non-art major [classes], I have to give a talk about, "You don't have to be artists to take this class," and I will go on and tell them the rationale. "You don't have to be good at art." And then I have to tell them, "Okay, you don't have to be artists to be in this class. And you don't have to be good at art to be successful in this class." And of course, they all want to know, "If I'm not good at art, can I pass this class?" Of course you can pass, as long as you complete the assignments. None of the assignments [are meant to] judge how good you are in drawing, because you are not an art major, and that is not the major purpose of my class. But actually art is like a vehicle to bridge your learning. It's a different way to engage yourself and to help you to bridge your interdisciplinary experience into the classroom.

Elizabeth 14:45

Yeah, I mean the thing with - the neat thing and maybe the sad thing- is that most students, most people in the US do draw when they're little. It's just that they stop. I mean, is that how it is in Taiwan? Do students reach a point where they say, "I'm not good" and they stop? Are students judgmental in the same way in Taiwan?

Li-Hsuan 15:15

Mmmm...I think a lot of my friends... we learned piano when we were little. Usually girls?

Elizabeth 15:27

Okay.

Li-Hsuan 15:27

I'm not sure these days, but in Taiwan, a lot of girls learned piano when they were younger. And then when I was little, though, I didn't have a lot of peers, who learned drawing, or who learned the arts. I think because, I'm always grateful that my parents sent me to that drawing studio when I asked them to, because in Taiwan, we still have this, social mindset that being an artist might not be the best career to make your [living], or you might be starving. So it still had this, it could be a mindset, it could be a stereotype. But then my parents never said, "No, don't learn art, it is not going to work."

Elizabeth 15:30

Lucky for you.

Li-Hsuan 15:34

So that's why I'm grateful I learned how to dance, I learned how to play piano, I learned how to draw when I was in elementary school. So it was an important part of my childhood. So that's why I think now, for college students, with a totally different cultural background? I don't know how much art experience that they have. But because when I was little I was inspired. And I think art creates many spaces, or space for ourselves. That space is so private, and it can be intimate too, so you have a space that just belongs to yourself, that can handle or that can take your frustration, take your excitement, and take your vulnerability. So a lot of you can be accepted in that space that you create through art. I think because I have engaged myself in art since I was little, I enjoy that personal space. So I can always go into a piece of paper, and have a pen and I can just be there and feel content.

Elizabeth 17:55

That's beautiful.

Li-Hsuan 17:58

But then, I don't know if I answered your original question, I think I got sidetracked!

Elizabeth 18:03

That doesn't matter! (laugh)

Li-Hsuan 18:05

(laugh) That's good.

Elizabeth 18:08

That's, that's really wonderful, that you can create your own personal space that you can be vulnerable in. You have mentioned a pen and paper. So is drawing your favorite thing? Do you have a favorite way of creating art?

Li-Hsuan 18:33

I think right now. I think since I kind of like shifted my fine arts academic work into art education, I also see my publication in the written work as my artwork. But this is an early type of artwork for me, so I still need time to polish this particular medium, which is writing. But now, even though I don't make as much art as before, I still – the most natural and spontaneous way that I want to engage myself in art, yes, is with a pencil or pen and a piece of paper, because drawing was the very first thing that I did when I was seven. I continued to do drawing, [from] seven all the way to now the whole time. So that is the most familiar language like visual language that I like. So whenever I have time, I go back to drawing. However, interestingly, I think starting from like four or five years ago when I was doing my PhD, I have had the opportunity to learn how to sew with the sewing machine.

Elizabeth 20:11

Ohhh Yes.

Li-Hsuan 20:12

Yeah. So that was the time that I was like, oh, there are so many great patterns, you know, and the fabrics! And so I learned how to use the sewing machine, and then I started hunting those beautiful fabrics. And I had never done any art with fabric before. Because in Taiwan, we are so geared toward standardized testing, even in Visual Arts. So it sounds a little ridiculous, but go to the middle school, the high school and the college; all those art programs, you have to go in the room and have standardized tests for sketching, for painting, watercolor, Chinese painting, Chinese calligraphy. So there wasn't much opportunity for me to slide in an interest in fabric back then, under that particular educational context. So then about four-five years ago, and I was like, "Oh, that is so cool. So I started to kind of teach myself and watch a lot of YouTube videos about how people quilt. So I started to do quilting and easy sewing. And later, in the recent two years, I started to make garments, make clothes.

Elizabeth DeLamater 21:31

Yeah!

Li-Hsuan 21:33

And getting into this area of sewing or designing with fabric is a new experience for me, because I had drawing and painting design experience before. And now in my hand, I have different kind of

medium, which is not familiar. So I want to apply my knowledge of art within this new medium. So I am trying to manipulate the fabric, But again, fabric for me is still new. Just like we tell stories [with words], we make art, so fabric is a new language for me. So I can't really tell a fascinating story, because I'm still trying to get along with this particular medium.

Elizabeth 22:35

Aha.

Li-Hsuan 22:35

But like language, I had to learned English in a way that I could express my own feelings; it's a different level of language learning. So now fabric is my new medium. So hopefully I can continue to engage myself with those fabrics, and then one day I can be very flexible using the fabric as a way to create art, as [I am with] a pencil and a piece of paper.

Elizabeth DeLamater 23:11

We are zooming with video. And so right now I'm looking at the quilt that you made.

Li-Hsuan 23:15

Yeah!

Elizabeth DeLamater 23:16

Which is really beautiful. I know that you think it's, it's sort of a beginner piece of art for you, but I think it is absolutely stunning. So I think that when you think that you are actually advanced in your knowledge, that those works of art will be truly sophisticated!

Li-Hsuan 23:39

You know, thank you. I'm actually in the process of creating my next quilt. I'm kind of like manipulating this idea of hexagons. So I created different – like a lot of little hexagons – and then different sizes. So while traditional quilts are a solid piece, I created these parts of hexagons and I want to sew them together, but then not completely fill in that 'in-between' space. So when I hem the quilt, you can actually see through those 'in-between spaces.' When the hexagons build around each other, you can create a star in between – a different kind of star.

Elizabeth 24:32

So the negative space in between the hexagons make a star.

Li-Hsuan 24:37

Right.

Elizabeth 24:39

Wow!

Li-Hsuan 24:41

But I haven't yet. I have those hexagon pieces. Because each hexagon has a frame in the internal fabric. So I am trying to create many hexagons so I have enough pieces. So when I put them in the larger pieces, I can see the bigger picture of the composition. Like how I arrange those things and how I want people to see; maybe a corner, it will be all blue and green and the other side will be bright orange... I don't know. But I'm kind of excited. And I actually want to put paper cuttings [inside] the negative space. But then again, I'm newer to sewing. So I don't know the best way to sew the paper with fabric. But I'm kind of experimenting right now. But I'll keep you posted!

Elizabeth DeLamater 25:38

Oh, wow. I like the way you talk about the art as language. Um, I think that's really wonderful. And I think that because- yeah, of course- you're 'expressing' yourself with your art. And that's why I think art is really helpful right now, and anytime, that society's having a big problem. And I think that it's probably extra helpful to students. During this pandemic, they're really lucky to have you.

Li-Hsuan 26:15

I think it's almost like music. So when I was little my art teacher told me, "When you engage in art, it takes a little time. So when you are standing in front of artwork, you gotta look, and you might see different parts of the work." But music gives you instant engagement, because you hear the music right away. I'm not music person, so I can't really speak to that power. But I think for art, without words, or without interpretation, it already gives the audience the power, or the opportunity, to do self examination or interpretation of what they see. So like the image... for example the image doesn't have to be an 'artwork.' We have had many race-related conflicts lately; when you see those videos, when you see those images online, it gives you a very strong reaction right away.

Elizabeth 27:26

Yes.

Li-Hsuan 27:26

So a visual has the power to engage you without telling you a word

Elizabeth 27:32

True.

Li-Hsuan 27:33

And so that's why I think, one: it has this instant impact when you try to convey messages. So if we are able to convey our message through some kind of art form, then we might be able to generate different conversations, compared to just telling people with words, what they can think or how they can interpret a situation.

Elizabeth 28:05

Yeah. So I have one more question for you.

Li-Hsuan 28:09

Mmm-hmm?

Elizabeth 28:10

That is, why is art important to us now?

Li-Hsuan 28:14

Yeah, that's a big question. Yeah, I think, all of the big questions that we are asked or we have in our lives, they really push us to be constantly thinking, so we can have an evolving answer as we grow with our experiences. I think, 2020 is such an unusual year, that has created so many challenges for every single individual. I mentioned earlier, I value art from my personal perspective, because art gives me a space that I can go to whenever I need. So nobody has to force me to go into that space. I think it could be any kind of art form, or any kind of art creation. If you can allow yourself to go into a space that you know is very safe, then it's very embracing. And I think that is a good space to create a self-support for yourself. So for me, whenever I need, or whenever I feel un-comfortable, frustrated, or I have negativity, then I want to go somewhere to release that. And I always find art is a good space for me. And I have the ability to create that space. Right now, we are often encountering a lot of instances of dissatisfaction culture around us, right? So a lot of times people will feel very upset, or feel, "Why do other people have such a good life?" "Look at his social media..." and "Why does everybody have a good life and I have such a sad life, right?" I think because there's so much instant satisfaction culture around us, it gives a lot of space for comparison. And then when we compare ourselves to others, is very hard not to see, you know, those not-so-pretty aspects of our lives. Because it's such a fast-paced society. I mentioned that vulnerability, for me, is such a key thing that we need to learn how to support ourselves through. Vulnerability, also mental health, all the mental health; mental illnesses, depression, the very deep, very intangible, but very painful sides of one's emotional self. If you can help to build this support system... I think it's very hard to go through. So everybody's different, everybody can build their support system in different ways. Some people will always go to their comfortable group, or the best people to talk to, so they feel healed, and some people might meditate. And some people might play piano, so everybody has different ways. But I think for me, art creates such a quiet space, that just belongs to myself, and I can share all sides of me with that particular space. And also, I have that piece of artwork at the end, that doesn't just show this visual artwork, but also is a representation of my experience, my strength, and even is the representation of a particular stage of my life.

Elizabeth 28:17

Yeah.

Li-Hsuan 28:31

So that's why I think that art carries a lot of experience forward with us. That's why I think it's important for me. So that's why in my class, when I have a chance I advocate for the arts for other people, and for this context it's students. Since I really want to empower them in my class, no matter if they become an educator, you know, and teach in a classroom, or if they become a medical professional, or they become a businessman, they will have to help themselves grow and lift themselves up.

Elizabeth 33:21

Yes.

Li-Hsuan 33:21

So I think art is a way to do that. And I show them how I approach this. So hopefully, they will also have this sensitivity about how art can help you to heal, help you to grow, or help you to have more conversations with yourself, which sometimes is very hard as our lives are bombard with so many external stimulations.

Elizabeth 33:55

It helps us process pain, it helps us process many things. I love the part where you pointed out that it's a momento and it's a representation of what we've gone through, which is so important, sometimes people go through things and they don't have a way to, to process it or to describe it or to and now I can't even say what you just said that's fine, because you just said it. (they laugh)

Li-Hsuan 34:30

But I think that it's also the other thing; I think for me, art helps me to pause.

Elizabeth 34:40

To pause?

Li-Hsuan 34:42

Yeah. Because as I said, I think that space for me is not just very unique, intimate and then very embracing, but also when you are engaged in the art experience, that the time is just for you. So you kind of have a very fine boundary between the internal and the external. So you can give yourself a break. So when I'm grading my students' work and giving them feedback, I do the best I can. And then if I jump into my sewing machine station, then I have a different world, so I draw the boundary. So I think art also helps me to divide different aspects of my life.

Elizabeth 35:35

Sure.

Li-Hsuan 35:37

Sometimes the external can be very complicated, but when you are coping, with whatever things that you need to cope with, with yourself, it's more quiet. In that it's simple in a way, although sometimes we still have to cope with complex things. But I think that boundary between external and internal is needed for each individual in a way. So I think that pause is a good feature for me, that art can do for me.

Elizabeth 36:13

Beautiful. Thank you so much.

Li-Hsuan 36:17

Sure.

Elizabeth 36:19

Li-Hsuan, thank you thank you.

Elizabeth DeLamater 36:20

You have been listening to the Art Lives Podcast. I am truly grateful to Li-Hsuan for talking to me. I have posted information about Li-Hsuan Hsu and links to her work on the Art Lives page of my website, elizabethdelamater.com. Please take a minute to rate Art Lives on Apple podcasts and Stitcher. More ratings help more listeners listen to our podcast, which would be great! Special thanks to Bill Sallak, artist Eduardo Moreno for our logo, and to composer Nicholas Meyers for our theme music. And as always, thank you so much for listening to Art Lives.

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