Richmond Art Gallery SCHOOL ART PROGRAM **TEACHERS' GUIDE**



Brenda Joy Lem, Car Ghosts, 2009, silkscreen on paper

April 15 - June 12, 2011

Homage To The Heart

Brenda Joy Lem

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THE EXHIBITION: WHAT YOU WILL SEE



Brenda Joy Lem, Floating (detail) 2008, silkscreen on paper

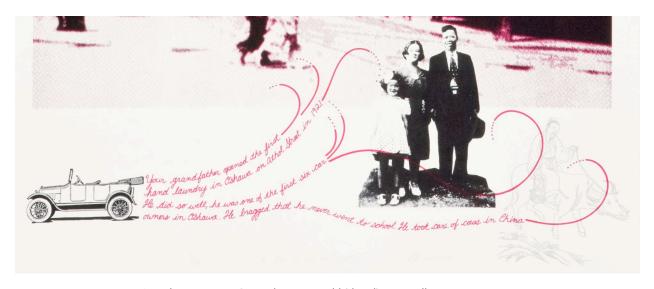
"How does the heart withstand hardship? Does the heart become stronger after enduring great sadness or loss? If we teach the heart to open more fully to pain and sadness can we develop greater capacity to open to love?" (Brenda Joy Lem, Artist Statement, May 2009)

These are the questions that artist Brenda Joy Lem explores through her art. She has described her process as a spiritual practice, and through the work, Lem seeks to gain a deeper understanding of her family's experiences as Chinese immigrants in Canada. While the work in *Homage to the Heart* demonstrates loving admiration for her family, it also addresses issues that ought not to be forgotten but that are seldom discussed in families, such as racism, poverty, and abuse. By acknowledging and ultimately embracing both the good and the bad, Lem's work expresses the complexity of family relationships, and the power of "the enduring heart" in accepting the entirety of human experience.

Homage to the Heart consists of a series of silkscreen prints, an interactive installation, and three video projections. The silkscreen prints are multi-layered, and incorporate Lem's family photos, and photos of historic Oshawa from the Thomas Bouckley Collection of The Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Superimposed on these photographs are images and text which recount stories told to Lem by her father and her aunt about growing up in depression-era Canada.

BACKGROUND

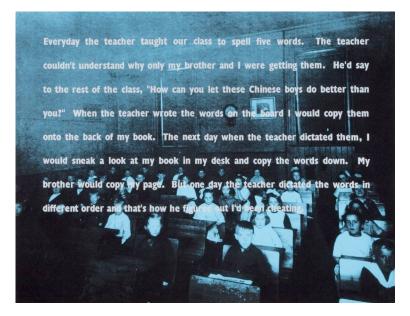
Lem's grandparents came through the Victoria/Vancouver port when they arrived in Canada over 100 years ago. Although Chinese immigration to Canada had been steady since 1858, starting with the Gold Rush and later the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Canada that greeted Lem's grandparents had become decidedly hostile. A head tax was imposed to limit Chinese immigration after the railway was completed, and the Chinese were prohibited from working in many trades by racist federal and provincial policies, as their cheap labour was seen as direct competition to white Canadians. Many Chinese-Canadians, found themselves relegated to the service industry, working as servants, waiters or cooks, and working in laundries. Lem's grandfather settled in Oshawa, Ontario, and started the city's first hand-laundry business.



Brenda Joy Lem, A Car in the New World (detail) 2008, silkscreen on paper

Text: Your grandfather opened the first hand laundry in Oshawa on Athol Street in 1921. He did so well, he was one of the first six car owners in Oshawa. He bragged that he never went to school. He took care of cows in China.

Through conversations with her family, in combination with archival photos, Brenda Joy Lem plumbs the depths of personal and societal memory, and the tension between the two is evident in her work. In one print, we see an archival image of children in school, sitting in orderly rows, which recalls a simpler time. Superimposed on this image, is text recounting one of Lem's family stories.



Brenda Joy Lem, How Can You Let Those Chinese Boys Do Better Than You? 2009, silkscreen on paper

Text: "Everyday the teacher taught our class to spell five words. The teacher couldn't understand why only my brother and I were getting them. He'd say to the rest of the class, "How can you let these Chinese boys do better than you?" When the teacher wrote the words on the board I would copy them onto the back of my book. The next day when the teacher dictated them, I would sneak a look at the back of my book in my desk and copy the words down. My brother would copy my page. But one day the teacher dictated the words in different order and that's how he figured out I'd been cheating."

While the clever scheme the boys have dreamt up may bring an indulgent smile to the viewer, the racist comments openly voiced in a schoolhouse shocks us today. The image and text work in combination to remind us to challenge the notion of the "good old days" and help us to understand the experience of Chinese immigrant families in a very personal and intimate way.

There are visual motifs that are referenced in the stories that are repeated and transformed throughout the work. The image of a chestnut tree appears superimposed over a portrait of her grandfather, with a story of him meditating at the tree's base. Another print references a story of her uncle being beaten while tied to the same tree. Finally, in the video installation, we see Lem's daughter Una seated at the base of the tree meditating, and climbing the tree as her great uncle George did. Lem believes that the journey and experiences of our families becomes woven into the fabric of our own and our children's lives, and that we can learn valuable, if painful, lessons from them. Making this artwork has been her way to connect with her ancestors, and to learn to open her own heart fully to accept the past.

PRE-VISIT DISCUSSION & ACTIVITY

Immigration to Canada

Discuss with students what immigration is, and how Canada has been built by the contributions of immigrants from all over the world. Throughout Canada's history, many people have come to Canada for a better life, for adventure, or to help their families back in their native countries. Discuss with students where their own families are from, and reasons for coming to Canada. For an extension activity, make a map of the world, and add stickers or pins to indicate where your student's families are from.

Everyone who has immigrated to Canada has had a unique experience. Some were welcomed and found much prosperity. Others met with resistance and prejudice. *Homage to the Heart* is about one family's story of their experiences.

Family Stories

Discuss what families are with your students. Have you heard stories about your parents when they were young, or about other members of your family? How do we learn about our family history? How is it different here than where you or your family are from? How is your life different than your parents' or grandparents' life when they were your age? What lessons have your family members taught you?

Activity

Primary Classes: Please ask students to bring in a few family pictures. These can be of their parents or siblings, or members of their extended family. (1-3 pictures should suffice). Have students show the class one of their pictures, and tell one thing about the person in the picture. Collect the images and bring them to the gallery workshop where they will be photocopied for students to include in their artwork.

Intermediate Classes: Please do a brief writing exercise with students. Ask students to think about stories they have heard about their family members. Did they learn that their Dad got in trouble in school, or that their grandmother was an opera singer? How have they learned more about that family member's personality from that story? Then have students think of a story to tell about themselves that reveals something of their character or personality. If they are having problems coming up with a story, have them write down something about themselves that they would like others to know. This text will be incorporated into their digital self portrait.

Classroom Extension: Have students interview a family member and collect stories to tell the class.

IN THE GALLERY: WHAT YOU WILL DO

Gallery Tour

As students are led through the exhibition, we will discuss the artist and the themes and concepts behind her works. We will focus on a few selected prints for discussion, look at the installation and DVD projections, and discuss how these different elements relate to each other and the exhibition as a whole.

The tour will focus on:

- Introducing students to the materials and techniques the artist used.
- Encouraging students to think about subject matter and inspiration for creating art, and to connect art with current issues or ideas.
- Discussing how the artist's experiences and culture informs and inspires her art, providing some background information on the social realities of the Chinese immigrant experience in Canada.
- Discussing how artists work and use personal narrative in the development of artworks and ideas, and the expression of self and shared experiences.



Brenda Joy Lem, Tell Me a Story 2009 wood table, silk Chinese tablecloth, photos, photo album, rock, sound and sensor

EXHIBITION BASED WORKSHOPS



Preschool & Kindergarten: Portrait Paintings

Using a directed drawing exercise, students learn the basics of drawing a face. Oil pastels will be added for colour, which is then painted over for a "resist" effect.

The students' portraits will need time to dry, and will be ready to be picked up the day after the workshop.

Primary Grades: Storytelling with Digital Portraits

Using digital photographs, text, and various drawing materials, students will develop layered self-portraits. Each student will pose for a portrait to include in their artwork, as well as use photos brought from home, to develop a personal story using symbols, words, pictures, and colour. Students are encouraged to think of an emotion or personal experience to explore in their portrait, and to explore means of expressing narrative in their work.

It is recommended that students bring some family photographs to incorporate into their portraits. Original photographs will be photocopied by Gallery staff.

Intermediate Grades: Storytelling with Digital Portraits and Monoprints

Students will incorporate watercolour **monoprints** (one-of-a-kind prints made with the printing press) with a transparent digital portrait to tell a personal story. Students will have their portrait photographed by gallery staff, and printed out on transparency paper. They will then paint a watercolour background on a plastic printing plate which will be printed in the press to create a colourful **monoprint** background. Time permitting, students will add symbols, text, and drawing. The result is a multi-layered portrait using photography, printmaking, text, symbols, and colour to tell a personal story.

It is recommended that students have prepared a brief family or personal story to include as a textual element (see pre-visit activity). The students' prints will need time to dry, and will be ready to be picked up the day after the workshop.

POST-VISIT ACTIVITY

Preschool & Kindergarten: Family Trees

Have students create their own family trees, to start to see connections between themselves and their family heritage.

- On green construction paper, cut out leaf shapes. Or make leaf rubbings with green crayons on white paper and cut out the shapes.
- Students write the names of each member of their family on a separate leaf, starting with siblings and parents, then branching out into aunts and uncles, grandparents, and cousins. (*Parents can help with this as homework*)
- Using brown tempera paint, students can paint the tree trunk and branches on a large sheet of white paper.
- Once their painting is dry, glue the leaves on the tree, with close family members in the centre, branching out to more distant relatives.

Primary: Family Stories

To accompany their digital portrait & drawings, have students write a short paragraph about their family. Include details such as:

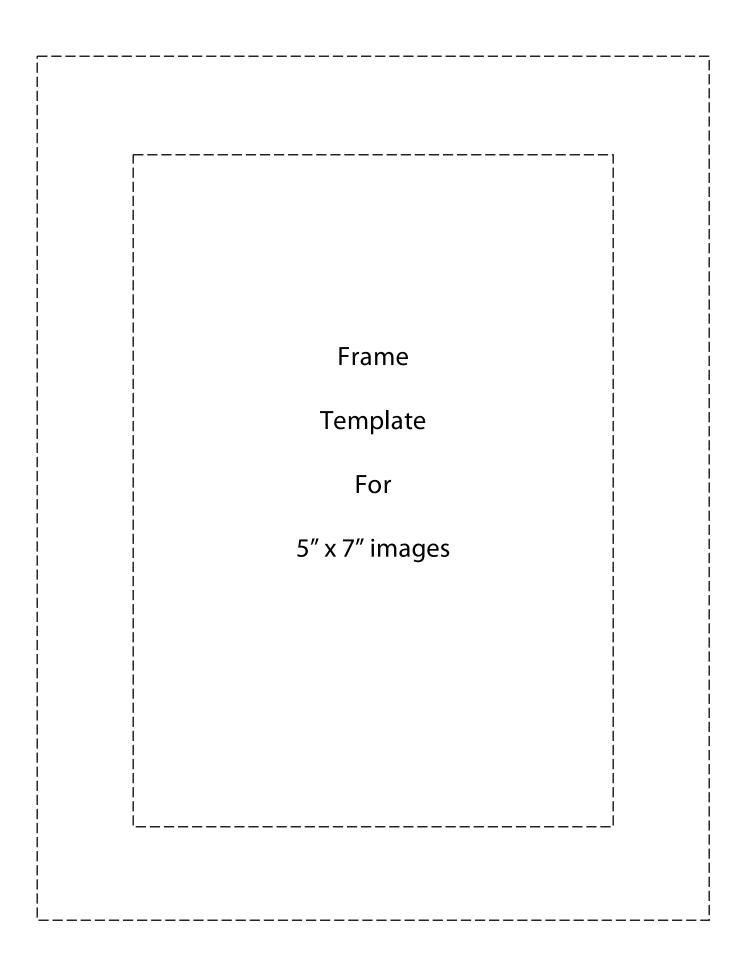
- Where they are from (if not from Canada) or where their parents are from
- What life was like for their parents growing up
- How life for their parents (or grandparents) is different to their experience

If they know any family stories, like the ones recounted in Brenda Joy Lem's work, they can include these as well. Students can interview a family member, such as a parent or grandparent, to get more information.

Intermediate: Layering and Framing Family Stories

The monoprints and digital prints need to be combined and framed with a personalized frame. To complete the prints, have students complete the written exercise in the *Pre-Visit Activity* of this guide, then follow these instructions:

- Write out prepared text directly onto the monoprint background or onto a sheet of tracing paper to create a third layer.
- The digital print, the text, and the monoprints are then combined and placed in a frame. Use the template on the following page to measure out the 5"x7" picture opening for students to create their frames.
- The template is a basic, 1" border, but students can make their borders wider if desired, and can design the shape of the outside border (make it curvy, zig zag, bumpy, etc.).
- Glue additional images or objects to their frames that relate to their story or who they are as a person, such as a pair of dice if they like to play games, some crayons if they love art, etc. or additional text.



GLOSSARY

Collage

Collage was originally a French word, derived from the word "coller", meaning "to paste". Collages are made by gluing elements such as papers, photos, or cloth to a flat surface, creating a new picture or design.

Contemporary Art

Artwork that is produced in this current time, generally considered to be artworks made from 1970 to the present. Contemporary art is a very broad term, including artworks made in almost any medium and incorporating many different themes and ideas.

Installation

Artwork that has been installed or arranged in a place, either by the artist, or as specified by the artist. Any materials can be used, and often materials that relate to the artist's concept or theme are used. Installation art often includes physical involvement with the audience through touch, smell, or sound.

Monoprints

Also called **monotype**, this is a one-of-a-kind print made by painting on a smooth surface and then printing the painting on paper with a printing press. The pressure of printing creates a texture not possible when painting directly on paper.

Narrative

A narrative is a story, and a narrative in art uses visuals to tell a story. Narratives often develop from a series of images, as seen in storyboards, photography essays, and video.

Portrait

A work of art that represents a specific person, a group of people, or an animal. Portraits usually show what a person looks like as well as revealing something about the subject's personality. Portraits can be made of any 2-D or 3-D art medium.

Silkscreen

A method of generating multiple copies of an image by creating a stencil of an image on a screen of silk or other fine mesh. Blank areas are coated with an impermeable substance, and ink is forced through the mesh onto the printing surface, such as paper or fabric.

RESOURCES

Printmaking

MOMA: What is a print www.moma.org/whatisaprint/flash.html

|Monoprints www.monoprints.com

Printmaking Lessons for kids www.kinderart.com/printmaking

Chinese Canadian Heritage

Chinese Canadian Historical Photos www.ccnc.ca/toronto/history/index.html Histor!ca Asia/Canada www.histori.ca/asia-canada/index.do

Chinese Canadian Migration www.sfu.ca/fromctoc/timeline/

UPCOMING EVENTS

Doors Open

May 7 & 8, 10:00 am to 4:00 pm

Whether you live in Richmond or you're a welcome visitor, don't miss this fascinating chance to discover many special parts of Richmond and its rich history. The doors are open for you to see Richmond like you've never seen it before! For more information, consult the City of Richmond website at http://www.richmond.ca/culture/about/events/doorsopen.htm

Storytelling with Jim Wong-Chu

Saturday May 7, 1-2pm

Local storyteller Jim Wong-Chu will share personal and historical stories that include tales of the Chinese Lepers colony of D'Arcy Island, the 1907 Riots in Vancouver's Chinatown, Bing Kee Street in Nanaimo, Chinese House Boys and China Mary.

Mandarin and English Tour Guides

May 7 and 8: 11am-1pm Saturday, 11am-3pm Sunday

Mandarin and English speaking Tour Guides will be available to visitors.

Imaginary Enclave

Saturday May 7, 6:30 pm - 10:00 pm

Short performances and interactive activities throughout the Cultural Centre including music, dance, spoken word, and visual art. Gallery event: Storyteller Jim Wong-Chu will relate short stories and poems reflecting personal and historical events from Chinese-Canadian history in BC.

Family Sunday

May 22 & June 26, 1:00 - 4:00 pm, Free

It's fun, fabulous and free, thanks to RBC Foundation. Join us in the Gallery for a family art activity that relates to the current exhibition.