

## Ken Lum Loves His Job

A new exhibit at CCA Wattis Institute might make this acerbic, linguistically playful Canadian artist as well-known in the U.S. as he is in Rotterdam.

Jonathan Curiel / Wed Mar 21st, 2018 4:25pm / Culture



*Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989-2018. Courtesy of Ken Lum  
Quite by accident, **Ken Lum** created one of Europe's most recognizable public art pieces. The year was 1990, and Rotterdam's Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art wanted an outdoor billboard to advertise Lum's inaugural exhibit. Lum convinced them to hang a copy of an exhibit work that blared the words "**Melly Shum Hates Her Job**." The billboard, which also included an image of Shum in an office, *didn't* tout Lum's show or the museum. It didn't use a real name, either: Melly Shum is a fake person with a fake job.

But when Lum's exhibit ended, and the museum removed the billboard, Rotterdam's residents rebelled. They got used to seeing Melly Shum's face and plea, and identified with her plight — and they demanded the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art keep the billboard exactly where it was. And so, three decades later it's still there at the corner of Boomgaardstraat and the Witte de Withstraat — and it's become a destination. The city's official maps point tourists there, and people take selfies and photograph it like they would the Eiffel Tower.

"Her scenario or dilemma is real to many people, and that's what I'm interested in," Lum tells *SF Weekly*, standing in the **CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts**, which is surveying Lum's career. (It has a version of *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* on its outside wall, on Kansas Street near 16th.) "The people at the museum told me, 'It seems that more than one person feels that there should be a monument to people who hate their jobs.'"

Like a literary novelist who uses intricate research and storyboards to conjure up characters that people closely relate to, Lum fabricates biographies. But unlike novelists, Lum uses relatively minimal language to synthesize these personas into provocative art pieces. The CCA Wattis Institute also features a series of poster-sized obituaries with 19th-century frontispiece-style design and flowery descriptions that are biting, irony-laden commentaries on 21st-century life. The poster for one Yasir Khorshed, for example, narrates the life of an Arab man who advocated for garment workers' rights, raised workers' wages, and curtailed sexual harassment in the garment industry — only to die at age 34 from exposure to the chemical compound benzene. The poster's top part reads:

*"A Recounting Of  
The Events and Experiences  
In the life of,  
Yasir Khorshed  
with  
The means by which He Acquired His  
Courage and Wisdom"*

Lum's poster for Jade Visscher, as another example, chronicles the mysterious death — "with facts derived from the most authentic sources" — of a tattooed woman who was finally identified as a wife and mother with the help of her Facebook page. Social media has altered the way people write and interact — prompting a generational shift to using short, punchy, click-bait language.

Academics have studied the phenomenon and published reams of research, as with the 2014 book, ***The Language of Social Media: Identity and Community on the Internet***. Lum's 2016 series of "Necrology" posters, which took two years to finish, act as a kind of gallery antidote — a return to typography and linguistic rhythms that are a pleasure to read and look at.



*Untitled Furniture Sculpture. Courtesy of Kerr Lum*



"In the context of today, they use at-odds design principles that you wouldn't use anymore — we prefer something lucid and pithy," says Lum, who's also the Chair of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Design. In the 19th century, he adds, "You had very interesting variations in terms of kerning, capitalization, and mixing of fonts. I wanted this older form of written language, not to call it up nostalgically, but to comment about what's lost when language changes in terms of how we imagine. When you read this, your imagining of Yasir Khorshed in this form takes a very different form than if I was just to state it in the most perfunctory terms. That's been lost. I wouldn't call it a degradation of a language. But a certain reduction means we lose certain types of experiences. It's through language that we constitute ourselves."

The bespectacled Lum, 61 and a native of Canada, has managed to navigate a successful career both in academia and the art world. He's won a Guggenheim fellowship and been appointed an Officer of the **Order of Canada**, one of that country's highest honors. He's exhibited works at the Whitney Biennial, Venice Biennale, and Shanghai Biennale, and art commissions in Vienna, Stockholm, Innsbruck, Istanbul, and his native Vancouver.

In 2002, he co-founded and became founding editor of ***Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art***, which was the first English-language journal to focus on Chinese contemporary art and culture. Some art-world administrators have tried to pigeonhole Lum's work because of his race and ethnicity, he says. In fact, the exhibit's opening wall text — written by CCA Wattis Institute curator Kim Nguyen, who interviewed Lum for it and got his approval — references the prejudice that artists of color and female artists face in the art world, saying that "It is still foolish to believe that admission, acceptance, and success in the art world are detached from race, class, and gender."

Lum says his early career was filled with roadblocks.

"When I first started, I'd say the first seven or eight years — I wouldn't say I encountered a lot of racist people but, let's say, they were racist-minded people," Lum says. "Like I would have a curator from Switzerland come in to my studio and say, 'Oh, I didn't know you were Asian.' And I said, 'Does that change the work?' And invariably, it was, 'No. Of course not.' Little things like that kept coming up. Like, 'You're Asian — why don't you make it more didactic?' There was a certain alignment with how I looked and how I should make art. Thank God, most of that is gone in terms of the art system. It's not perfect."

In person, Lum is funny and thoughtful. He laughs a lot. He titled his CCA Wattis Institute exhibit "**Ken Lum: What's old is old for a dog**." But he grew up in an economically challenging environment — his mother worked in a sweatshop — telling *SF Weekly* that, despite his own achievements, he lives with a "profound ambivalence" about the art world's fickleness and its emphasis on "successful" art.

"My wife even says to me quite regularly, 'Things are going well. Why are you like that?'" he says. "And I say, 'I can't help it. It's in my DNA.'"

And while Lum makes art about real people, even those works have a way of publicizing social conditions and biographies that are complicated and indicative of trouble pasts. CCA Wattis Institute features a series of 2017

busts that Lum did of people connected to Philadelphia, where Lum lives.

**Blenda Gay**, the Philadelphia Eagles defensive end who was murdered by his wife in 1976, has a bust. So does Nancy Spungen, the girlfriend of punk-rock singer Sid Vicious, who died of a stab wound that Vicious was charged with. And so does **Kathy Change**, the Chinese-American artist and activist (given name: Kathleen Chang) who burned herself to death in 1996 at the University of Pennsylvania.

Lum's art contains few happy endings, but he's not telling morose stories. Like the smiling woman in *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, Lum hints at things that are dissonant but ask art-goers to figure it out — to play along, as it were, and connect the art with conditions in "the real world." Lum's fans go all-in with it. In 2010, the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art put a Chinese-language version of the "Melly Shum" billboard on the outside of the Dutch Cultural Center in Shanghai during a major exposition in the city. The billboard coincided with investigations of Chinese factories where phones and other electronics were manufactured in assembly lines for the global market. Scores of workers were committing suicide. On opening night of his new CCA Wattis Institute exhibit, Lum asked an art-goer who just took in the artworks, "Do you feel uplifted now?"

Deep down, Lum probably knew the answer already. He had a kind of smile on his face. The same kind of smile that "Melly Shum" has on hers.

**"Ken Lum: What's old is old for a dog,"** through May 12 at CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 360 Kansas St. Free; 415-355-9670 or [wattis.org](http://wattis.org)