

The Canadian Art Teacher Enseigner les arts au Canada



Amy Atkinson with Nancy Long

Amy Atkinson

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This is an excerpt from the podcast from Creativ-tea, a podcast I am in the ever-evolving process of developing. Over the years of studying and teaching Visual Arts, I have observed that artist-teachers have the most fascinating stories. Through years of trial and error and creative explorations, artist-teachers have balanced their roles as artists, teachers and researchers and developed connections and strategies to inspire themselves and their students. Some of the best conversations that have impacted my life and inspired my art have happened nonchalantly, over a hot cup of tea. To me, there is nothing as soothing and enjoyable as a comfortable setting, with something delicious and a hot cup of tea to enable one to relax and sink into unpacking the ways of the world. I am partial to chocolate chip cookies and jasmine tea. What would you choose?

Nancy Long is an artist and a visual art and media teacher within secondary education here in Montreal. She is also pursuing her doctorate in Art Education at Concordia University. In her artwork, Nancy examines the overlap of nostalgia and memory by reflecting how they interact with their senses. Her research focuses on engaging high school students to embrace process over product and welcoming mistakes in the art room as learning opportunities. Nancy has also recently steered her studio focus back to her first love of drawing.

LONG

From my background as a high school art teacher, what I've encountered in the art room is that students are really overly concerned with their grades. They ask a lot of questions that are about, "is this good?". It's a very broad question, and I was having a very hard time answering because it's so vague, and it's also not about what it is that they were doing and learning, but the end result.

What I found is that, in looking at the creative process of artists, we rarely see the artistic process itself. We can read about it after the fact, or in some exhibitions, we'll be shown the sketches but it's very rare that we show students in our school classrooms the artistic process of artists. To show the students that the end product didn't just happen with the strike of divine inspiration; it's laborious, it's involved, there's change of direction, there are hurdles to go over. Sometimes it's a failure. Sometimes it's just not working. And that whole process, I find, is really where you do learn more.

So, I considered, why not look at the mistakes the students are making and turn those into learning opportunities?

But then it gets dicey because how do you grade that? In my research, I'm looking at various ways to help not just students, but teachers as well, to navigate more of an emphasis on process, because I find it's a skill to be able to be comfortable in these moments of ambiguity, these moments of, "I don't know what I'm doing", and to be okay with that. This is a skill that can be developed a little bit more.

ATKINSON

Does your own personal creative practice inform your research into the idea of ambiguity?

LONG

The way I was making art was very meticulous and very end-driven. I would see what I wanted to make in my head, and I would work backwards from there. So it was very controlling. But fairly recently, I decided, I need to practise what I preach. I've challenged myself by trying art forms and art materials that I've never used before to be able to take creative risks, to put myself in positions of ambiguity and the unknown and not be worried about it. My past painting and drawing technique was not hyper-realism, but I would strive for a 3D-looking image, whereas now I'm okay to be messier, looser and more experimental.

I've recently found inspiration from William Kentridge, a South African artist who does a lot of animation with a process called destructive animation. In his process, he draws and erases so that the next

frame isn't a brand new drawing - it's an erasure of the former drawing. And it's filmed so you can see the process as the film moves forward; you see the past marks that have been erased. I think that's really cool. I find that to be okay with erasing your finished work, that's really difficult. In my work, lately, I've become a lot more brave, so to speak, in being able to erase my past work.

ATKINSON

When you look back through your own education, did you have any teachers that inspired you?

LONG

My high school art teacher was just the coolest. She had her own ceramics practice and introduced us to ceramics because we had a kiln at our school. She used a lot of humour in class, and she pushed me to go beyond what I thought I could do. I remember being able to take risks in her class because she was really pushing me to do it in a way that was very supportive. Also, when I was in high school, I had art every single day. That made a huge impact because we got to know each other very well, and we stayed in touch probably up until my first year of university. Sadly, she passed away a few years ago, and I remember hearing about it, and oh, my gosh, I was devastated. Even though we hadn't been in touch in about 30 years I was still very upset.

ATKINSON

It sounds like she made you feel really safe in your classroom?

LONG

Absolutely. Very safe. I was doing installation art as a high school kid in the '80s.

And through my own experience as a student and then a teacher myself, I can see the changes that are happening. It's important to consider what our current school system is doing to our youth. You and I went to high school in Ontario. We come from a system where school subjects were semestered. At any given time, I only had to juggle four or five subjects, whereas current students may have 9-10 courses at once during the school year. That's an insane amount of things to juggle. And it's a lot to put on young people, not only in terms of school, but in terms of what else they're doing with extracurriculars, keeping up with social media and all those pressures. I find it's exhausting. It's really demanding. I read a really staggering statistic. It's an American statistic, but it's likely not so far off [in Canada]: 70% of teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 say that anxiety is a major problem in their lives. They polled over a thousand students randomly and 920 students responded. And of those, 61% said the anxiety is due to their grades. It's from the pressure to get good grades. I found that this tied directly into what I want to do in the art classroom; to mitigate those anxiety levels, to lower them, to model that it's okay to make a mistake. But it's easier said than done. Saying "it's okay to make a mistake" to students is very different from helping them live through it, to develop those skills in making mistakes and being okay with making those mistakes. Any opportunity we can give to our students to take more time to do something is like gold. Time is gold. And it's really difficult when they're juggling nine or ten subjects when they only have art once in a while. I find the art room is a good place to start simply to figure out with students and teachers, how do we give them that time?

I am also hugely inspired by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, and one of the things they talk about in their interviews is the gestation period of an idea. Cardiff fully acknowledges that making a piece of art can take an incredibly long amount of time. So when we're asking our students to make something at a specific time, in a specific day of the week, at a specific hour in the day, it's very difficult to generate authentic work because they haven't had that gestation time, that time to really put something away in the back of their minds and just let it sit for a bit. And then the question is, how do we encourage this experimental gestation period that in a system that is required to have grades on a report card and where teachers are bound to certain parameters of their own to produce grades? This is what I'm wrestling with. Putting all that stress on teachers, and even more stress on the youth, it's a problem, and I'm sure the pandemic didn't help that stress. We need to figure out how to minimise that level of stress.



ATKINSON

In your artwork, you are exploring nostalgia and memory, so what are your memories? What were you like as a student when you were a child?

LONG

I was a really good student. I loved school. One story that comes to mind in terms of grades and making mistakes is from Grade 1. I was six. I can remember everything about that day. We were given a page, an illustration to colour. At the bottom there was a flower, and I coloured each petal the same colour, but left one petal blank. I then incorporated all the colours I had used in the picture into that one petal, creating little dots like a pointillist petal. I was super proud of myself; it was such a good idea. I got the work back, and it was graded a nine out of ten. The petal was circled like it was wrong that I did this and I just didn't understand. I didn't understand why it was wrong because there were no criteria. The teacher just said, "colour".

ATKINSON

And that petal probably took you longer and used more colours than the other petals.

LONG

I just thought I was being really creative. In my mind, it wasn't taking a risk because I was six, and I was just thinking, "Oh, this could be cool, this would be fun". It was playful, right? So that sense of play comes into risk-taking and not worrying so much about errors. But that stuck with me for years. It was like a measure of my worth: a nine out of ten. At the end of the day, these numbers on the report card, that's how students are measured. It's that performative aspect that is so prevalent in our school system, particularly for students who want to go on after high school. The numbers are not a measure of who they are, but that's how they are measured.

ATKINSON

I'm so curious, what then, if you were frustrated with the grading, what made you want to pursue higher education in art education?

LONG

I started in art history, actually, because my art teacher in high school introduced us to architectural history, and she made buildings fascinating. She made me think, this is what I want to study. So I came to Concordia to do Art History, with a particular focus on architectural history. There was a professor in the Art History Department at Concordia named Robert Gifford. I made a point of taking a class with him every semester because the passion that exuded from this man was just infectious. And in fact, he informed much of the travelling I did after my first bachelor degree. I would go to these obscure little places in Europe to find this wacky church that Bob Gifford was so passionate about. He would sometimes hug the screen. He was so into it. I loved that.

ATKINSON

That's so interesting because when you were recently in New York I noticed that you had posted on your social media all these pictures of buildings. And I mean, they're beautiful photos and they're really cool buildings. But I didn't get the connection until just now that you said that you were so inspired by this professor.

LONG

It's still in me for sure, even though I'm not studying that at all now. It definitely has made a massive impact on my aesthetic.

ATKINSON

It sounds like it wasn't the subject that he was teaching, but more how he was able to translate how important and how in love he was with this subject that was infectious to you.

LONG

Definitely, his passion led me to go see these things led me to learn even more once I was there. I'm very grateful to Professor Gifford. Also when I was in New York, there was an exhibition of the painter Jacques-Louis David's preliminary sketches. I love an opportunity to see the preliminary work, the process work, so when large museums show this, more people can see that a large famous

painting, like Napoleon's coronation, painted in 1805 to 1807, is not how the artist necessarily intended it at the beginning. There were changes along the way. In the painting, Napoleon is crowning himself as Emperor. He's about to place it on his own head, holding the crown above his head with both hands. This is the final painting, but the preliminary sketches show a different version, which I was really stunned by because the way Napoleon is holding the crown in the preliminary sketches is not what you can see in the painting. In the sketch, he's holding it with one hand above his head, and it's a bizarre and awkward pose. It does not look regal. It looks like some buffoon about to tip his cap. David did many versions of this one-handed crown placement. I don't know what made him change his mind; I haven't researched this. I just found it compelling to see the difference in the final result; it's much more regal. The preliminary sketches seem just odd. But the point is, students don't seem to get enough exposure to these things. I'm sure there are teachers out there who do this, but generally speaking, we show the students the final, polished work of other artists to get them motivated to do their work. I love the idea of being able to see the preliminary versions.

There are a lot of artists nowadays that actually do show their process, and they're very open about it, which is great. But to also be able to showcase the process behind those canonic paintings that students might recognize, to show them that this wasn't, like I said earlier, divine inspiration. This took a long time to plan, to sketch, to think about. So bringing students to galleries to see the process, I find really helps to minimise the gravity of a mistake because they can see it's not a big deal.

The current deficit model in school of taking marks away when students make a mistake, that's what they're living, that's what is causing this anxiety.

ATKINSON

I can see that the current assessment model gives the mistake so much added weight as opposed to allowing students to lean into the learning and explore the process. Even when students are finished sometimes they're actually not finished. There's still time to refine and rethink their ideas. So giving students that space is so encouraging for them as opposed to hovering over them asking, "Is that it? Are you finished? That's an eight out of 10" type of conversation.

LONG

It's difficult, too, because in many schools art classes are not every day, and often only once a week. Then it is challenging for teachers to be able to give students that time. When I was teaching, I was giving students less and less homework because it's too much. There's just too much going on for them with their subjects and extra-curriculars - and we don't know what's going on at home. We don't know if their situation could exacerbate the stress on top of getting good grades and juggling nine or ten classes.

ATKINSON

Even as adults working in education, we find that there aren't enough moments in the day, and we are focused like blinders on our one topic. Imagine having to juggle nine or ten different topics, and then your own hobbies, and family or social life? I agree with the point that you raised, that it is crucial to take a step back and really consider the importance of time and what to do with the time we are given and how making mistakes is really poignant. I'm so curious to google David's work because it's reassuring to see that as he created these iconic masterpieces, he took years to develop his idea. It's that gestation period that you were talking about. And that's not a failure, that's a journey of learning.

Much gratitude to 4th Space at Concordia University for their support in hosting and filming this edition of Creativ-Tea. To listen to the complete episode, you can find Creativ-tea on Spotify or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcNiL2sr9gg&ab_channel=4THSPACEConcordiaUniversity



Images From

Nancy Long, *Weavers* (2021-ongoing), charcoal, white gesso, paper.







