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Artist-Teacher

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INSERT ARTIST-TEACHER
Michelle Wang



How do you balance being an artist and a teacher?

Balancing the roles of art teacher and artist can be a delicate balancing act. My ways to balance these two roles are to prioritize self-care and practice mindfulness. Both teaching and creating art can be demanding, practicing mindfulness and making time for activities that bring you joy and relaxation has given me sustained passion in both roles. Being part of a supportive community of fellow artists and art teachers can also be helpful in balancing these two roles. Outside of my classroom, joining art associations or online groups, attending conferences and workshops, and connecting with other like-minded artists and teachers help me to stay connected to the wider art community and to find support and inspiration when I need it. Ultimately, balancing the roles of art teacher and artist requires a commitment to continuously learning and growing. Staying up to date on the latest art trends and forms, and continuing to develop teaching skills and pedagogy are part of daily life. By finding a balance that works for you, you can thrive in both roles and make meaningful contributions to the world of art and education.

What do I explore in my personal work?

My artwork embodies the paradoxical relationships that exist in our world. I am fascinated by the interplay between opposing forces, such as perfection and imperfection, abundance and scarcity, and presence and absence. Through my work, I seek to understand these paradoxes and explore them in my attempt to ultimately find a balance. Therefore, one of the key themes in my work is the idea of balance. I often incorporate contrasting elements into my work, such as bold colors and delicate lines, or natural and industrial materials. For example, light and shadow are balanced in my cyanotype work (Figure 1) to create a sense of depth and dimension. Similarly, creation and destruction are portrayed in a site-specific installation work of a highly vulnerable yet harmonious site (Figure 2). Ultimately, my art is an attempt to understand the world around us and to create a sense of meaning and purpose in the face of the paradoxes and contradictions that exist in our lives. By embracing these paradoxical relationships, we can gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and of the world around us, and find purpose in our lives in the midst of chaos and complexity.

How do I find inspiration?

One of my favourite Hong Kong performance artist, The Frog King, once said, “any occasion, any dimension, anywhere art can be created.” To me, art is inseparable from life and there is no better inspiration than life itself. We are a reflection of our time and our art is a response and/or reaction towards things around us. Finding inspiration from everyday life and nature is my way to understand all the life happenings around me. Growing up with my botanist grandma and my curiosity and inquisitiveness from childhood along with my playful attitude led me to acquire double degrees in art and biology. The interplay of logical and sentimental sides of my brain gave me infinite imaginations and possibilities.

Wassily Kandinsky once said, “if the artist has outer and inner eyes for nature, nature rewards him by giving him inspiration.” Nature is an abundant source of inspiration for me. Take a walk in the woods and observe the way the sunlight filters through the leaves, or the way the wind rustles the branches of a tree. Notice the patterns and textures of the rocks and pebbles on a beach, or the way the waves ebb and flow. These simple, natural moments inspired me to create art that reflects the beauty of imperfection and impermanence.

As a perfectionist of Virgo type A blood, achieving perfection becomes second nature to me and thus staying balanced becomes increasingly challenging. One concept that inspired me to find and appreciate the beauty of imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness is the Japanese aesthetic principle of wabi-sabi. It propelled me to appreciate the simple, the natural, and the unrefined. This can manifest in many ways, such as admiring the unique texture of a weathered wooden fence, or finding beauty in the asymmetry of a leaf found on the roadside.



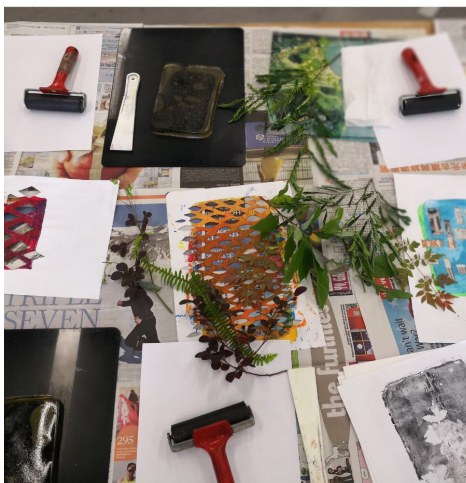
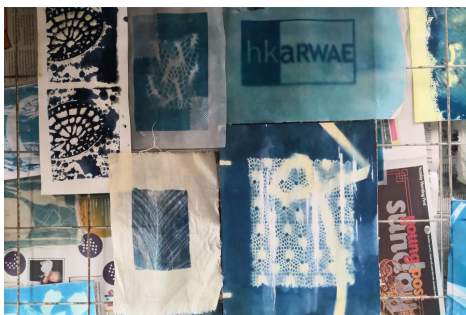
What is your creative process?

My cyanotype project started while I was traveling to Japan back in 2016 and was introduced to this photographic printing process. I was fascinated by the unique textures and varying tones it produces as well as the countless possibilities for experimentation. Fuelled by my interest in botany, I began my “Roadside Cyanotype Impressions” series in 2018 traveling across the rural areas of the Izu peninsula of Japan (cover image). I continued my road trip journey crossing five provinces of the east coast of Canada in 2019 (featured in the insert), and then another road trip passing through the northern regions of Italy in 2023.

My creative process starts with an experience and/or an observation. I am most inspired while traveling or taking a day trip away from city life. Each cyanotype is my meditative way of reaching out and connecting to nature by observing its simple yet aesthetic designs. Practicing mindfulness by being fully present is an important part of my creative process. Finding undivided time for art making and incorporating mindfulness to find inspiration helped me to create work that is more authentic and meaningful. In addition, making art is also a therapeutic and stimulating process for me to balance the chaos of my teaching life and allow me to recharge physically and mentally.

What advice do you have for aspiring artists and/or art teachers?

My advice for aspiring artists and art teachers is to stay inspired and practice self-care. I often think of this quote from performance artist, Marina Abramovic, “I test the limits of myself in order to transform myself.” Teaching is a demanding and stressful job and it will not get much easier. Stay close to your inner child and nurture your curiosity and creativity with art making, art activities, and learning from your local art communities. Living and working in an information-saturated world can be incredibly stressful and exhausting. In today’s digital age, we are constantly bombarded with a constant stream of multisensory information. This information overload and the pressure to stay connected and available can also make it hard for us to stay focused on important tasks. It’s important to stay connected as well as to take time offline to self-care and set boundaries around technology use. Striking a balance is always harder said than done. I always make time to attend in-person workshops, talks, and local exhibitions. My habit of journaling also helps me to gather my thoughts and ideas everywhere I go. Staying inspired and practicing self-care have been my sustainable ways to stay energized in this field.



Incorporating empathy into arts education via world classroom

Kith Tsang, an college arts educator in Hong Kong and Founder of School of Everyday Life, once said that “artists have social responsibilities to raise awareness about social issues and injustices... the essence of education is not outcome-oriented but the heart changes and relationships around them change.” He believed that humans have the innate curiosity to find the “truth” on their own from their experiences. Having attended Tsang’s workshops and talks at the School of Everyday Life, I was inspired to incorporate empathy education into the arts curriculum and experiential learning as part of the International Baccalaureate (IB) world classroom. By creating opportunities for students to engage in creative productions outside of the classroom, they can learn to understand and relate to the experiences and perspectives of others. During Creativity-Action-Service (CAS) trips to a tsunami-relief orphanage school in northern Phang Nga, Thailand, my students were given the limited resources left behind by the tsunami to rebuild playgrounds for kids who were rescued from the tsunami. Through this experience, students honed their problem-solving and creative thinking skills while exploring topics such as poverty and inequality, which helped them develop a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by individuals and communities who may be different from themselves.

Figure 1: My cyanotype Process



89
Teacher 19.2