

CAN TECHNOLOGY BE TRUSTED?

Artist
Leslie Leong
isn't sure

By Karen McColl
Photos by GBP Creative

Leslie Leong turns over a square, blue computer circuit board in her hands.

"Wow, exciting," she says. "This is a great board."

Staff at a warehouse in Whitehorse where computers are refurbished and repaired had guessed, correctly, that she might appreciate it.

"I don't know what I'll do with it, but I'll do something," she says, smiling brightly.

Where others see junk, Leong sees potential. One of her talents as a multimedia artist is "upcycling": taking discarded or unwanted materials and turning them into something of value, be it jewellery, wall art, or exhibit pieces.

"We have so many materials in our world. Why are we producing new stuff all the time?" she questions.

Leong is a photographer, printmaker, and graphic designer. One day she's crafting earrings from reclaimed copper, and another she's standing on a ladder in the Grand Hall of the Haines Junction Convention Centre, hanging 700 kg of steel cut-outs for an installation project involv-



ing three other artists that focuses on the natural world and our connections to it.

She doesn't limit herself to one material or approach. Leong is largely self-taught, but has taken a plethora of workshops ranging from ceramics and silversmithing to painting and fashion design, giving her a wide repertoire of skills.

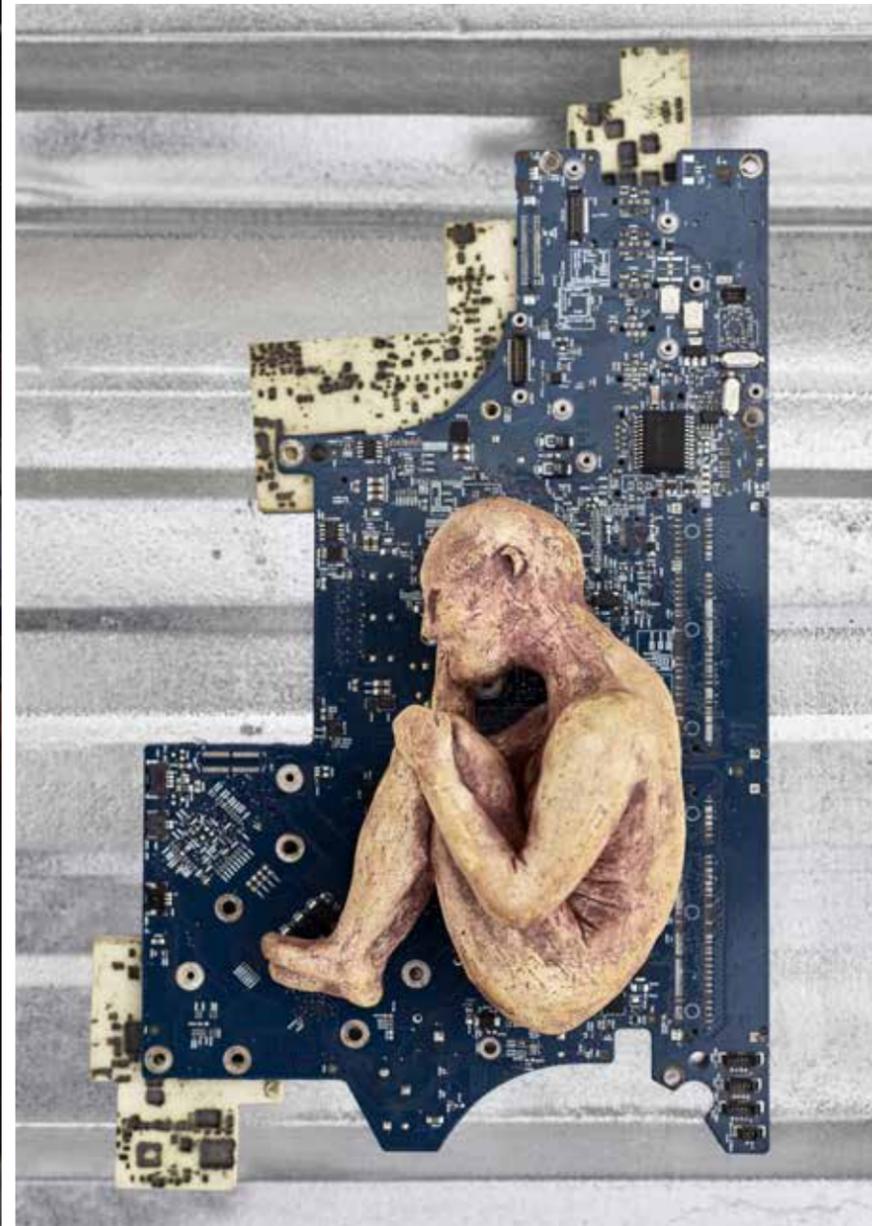
"I take a theme or issue ... and I do whatever medium I feel necessary to express what I am wanting to say."

These days, Leong, who left an engineering career in 1994 to work as a photographer and graphic designer before expanding into other mediums, wants to say something about technology and its impact. The 56-year-old is preparing an exhibit on the topic, which opens at the Yukon Arts Centre in September.

Circuit boards are one of the main materials of the exhibit, which is why Leong is somewhat of a regular in this industrial building full of surplus computers. Here, among bins of keyboards, monitors, and laptops, she hunts for treasure.

Although she appreciates circuit boards for their unique aesthetics—including colour, texture, and shape—they represent something much more malignant in her art: the omnipresence of technology.

Leong worries that technology at home, work, and even in our bodies in the form of pacemakers, hearing aids, and more are separating us from our natural selves. She says technology was supposed to make our lives easier, but has often had the opposite effect. It has made life more hectic by increasing the expectations of



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Left page: Leslie Leong in her studio, preparing for an exhibit this autumn.
Right page: Finding beauty and questions in recycled computer keyboards.

FIND MORE OF LESLIE LEONG'S WORK:

Whitehorse

Arts Underground (305 Main St.), Yukon Artists at Work (4129 4th Ave.), and craft markets

Skagway, Alaska

Inspired Arts (555c Broadway St.)

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leslieleong.com

Leslie Leong's exhibition opens at the Yukon Arts Centre on Sept. 5 and runs until Nov. 23.

what one person is supposed to produce. One has only to look at their email inbox to relate.

"It makes me run ragged," she says with a sigh.

Leong isn't a Luddite, but as someone who started her career in the 1980s when typewriters were the typical office fixture, she can't help noticing how the world has changed with our "more, better, faster" culture. There are many studies that document the negative effects technology, and smart phones in particular, can have on our mental and physical health. And yet, we continue embracing technology in all forms, Leong explains. She wonders how much further it will creep into our lives.

Leong imagines a world where humans have become the "pets" of artificial intelligence or where we live in a world of virtual reality instead of reality.

"It sounds like science fiction, but I think it's science non-fiction," she says, eyes wide with conviction.

Her upcoming exhibit at the Yukon Arts Centre builds on a previous exhibit she produced, in 2014, about the insidious nature of technology. Five years hasn't done anything to assuage her concerns.

"I don't know why this theme hasn't left me," she admits.

Leong will use what she calls a "weird juxtaposition" between natural materials, like wood and clay, with computer boards. It will include a mosaic of ceramic humans mounted in various positions on

computer boards, like people sleeping through this massive technology shift.

At the warehouse, Leong pries open discarded computers one by one. When she finds a computer board she wants to keep, she hammers off the extraneous pieces to make it flatter and smoother.

Leong gets particularly excited when she finds a blue board, which, she says, are less common. She will eventually shape them using a scroll saw in her garage, perhaps putting them into the "sky" of her installation pieces or, if they are green, into trees.

Leong's fascination with computer innards started in 2005, when her husband had one to get rid of. At that time, computers were more of a novelty and Leong wanted something positive to



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come from throwing it out. So, with her engineer’s curiosity for learning how machines work, Leong asked her then nine-year-old son if he wanted to open it and look at the parts.

When Leong saw the computer board, she was struck by its beauty. At that time, she had already mostly left the engineering field to work as a photographer and graphic designer, and although she hadn’t yet ventured into jewellery making, the computer board inspired her. She made a necklace that garnered a lot of attention.

“People always commented on it,” she says.

When she and her family moved to the Yukon, in 2009, after several years in Australia and the Northwest Territories, she started selling jewellery made from computer boards. Then, she started using them in exhibits. Now, they have become one of her trademarks.

Arriving back at her Riverdale home after another successful afternoon at the computer depot, Leong muses over another piece for the technology exhibit. It lays flat on a table on her back deck, but will eventually be mounted on a wall. The frame is made from an old drawer. The trees are made from circuit boards and repurposed wood—either from an old door or plywood. Rocks fill a geologist’s old core box. Glue is about the only product that hasn’t been salvaged or reused.

Upcycling and using natural materials in her work is one small stand Leong takes against the onslaught of technology and the culture of consumption. The waste associated with technology is phenomenal, she says, because everything goes obsolete so quickly. She says we need to be more conscious of our desires to always want more.

Leong says she can’t control how people will react to her exhibit, but if her work triggers an emotional response, or at least gets people to acknowledge the influence of technology on our lives and society, she says it will be a success.

“Ultimately, what I’d like is for people to feel like technology is doing things that we’re not paying attention to.” **Y**

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