

Ubiquitous – technology and the human experience

Visual artist and civil engineer Leslie Leong is one of those rare people who make time to not only smell every rose, but to observe, study and document it too, and stories of travelling with Leslie are legendary among friends. Yet she also tackles global issues and asks hard questions, and behind an infectious laugh and ‘aw shucks’ demeanor is a tenacious curiosity, desire for new ideas, and deep commitment to ecological health, sustainability and social justice. Able to focus on detail without losing sight of the big picture, Leslie shares her love and passion for nature, while asking us to re-think and re-examine our preconceptions.

Inspired by broader issues facing society, Leslie uses whatever materials are necessary and readily at hand to convey a message and provoke questions. The idea is to reach people at an emotional level, where they are more open to change, because experience shows that simply inundating people with scientific information has not had the desired result. People believe what they want to believe, not what the evidence shows, but art and music, in non-confrontational ways, can bridge gaps and inspire change.

Born in Vancouver and raised in Mission, BC, in the Fraser Valley, Leslie earned an engineering degree and worked for Transport Canada in Vancouver, on infrastructure projects at various airports around BC. She always felt drawn to the wilderness, which she addressed through hiking and climbing, and developing her photography as a serious hobby. A trip to Auyuittuq National Park on Baffin Island hooked her on the north and when a job posting appeared, she applied for and got a job in Fort Smith, in the Northwest Territories. She quickly fell in love with the people, wildlife and spectacular landscapes along the Slave River and beyond, and gradually transitioned away from engineering to focus on photography. Since then she has branched out into three-dimensional artwork, using a variety of media and methods, but credits her engineering background for developing her inquisitive nature, problem-solving abilities and technical focus. She has taught across the north, attended diverse workshops, exhibitions and symposia, and connected with other artists. Looking back at her university days, she sees too much separation between sciences and arts, and would encourage young people to get a well-rounded education.

A central theme in Leong’s recent work is the importance of learning from history, in this case the ability of information technology to transform society, from papyrus and ball-point pens to radio and television. Perhaps the best analogy for our current situation comes from the late 1800s, when punch-card technology greatly enhanced the ability of governments to gather and process vast amounts of census data. Punch-card technology, an early form of computing dominated by International Business Machines (IBM), was soon adopted by business to track production, inventory and payroll, and enable the highly efficient assembly lines pioneered by Henry Ford. Then the other shoe dropped, when Nazi Germany used punch-card technology to manage a complex war machine, and to identify and locate Jews and other ‘undesirables’ all over Europe. Punch-card technology also allowed the Nazis to track every locomotive and freight car in Europe, so millions could be efficiently transported to death camps. Without this seemingly banal punch-card technology, the Holocaust could not have happened.

Digital technology too, holds the promise of productivity and efficiency, as well as seamless connectivity, enhanced communications and endless entertainment, and a handful of new tech companies have become the most valuable commercial enterprises in human history. More recently the digital revolution has revealed a darker side. Personal data gathered by these tech companies is used to

manipulate human behavior and encourage ever-higher levels of consumption and material waste. Tech companies have also influenced politics and social issues on a global scale, largely by tapping into human emotions of fear and anger. Most well-known are Brexit and the American elections, but the impacts are felt in every corner of the globe. These changes are happening so quickly that laws and social conventions are always lagging. There is no time to plan a future or to learn from history. Wrongly, we assume that technological advances automatically equate to social advances.

One of Leslie's primary concerns, addressed in a work called *Golden Repair*, is the effect of digital technology and social media on society's ability to grapple with the problems of ecological health and sustainability. Technology is a distraction that encourages us to look away, she says, and discourages the human connections needed to enact positive change. A planned work is called *Melt*, which features a cross-section of permafrost and time-lapse photography, and considers the impact of climate change on northern communities. She worries that blind faith in technology and innovation to save the planet are allowing people to close their eyes to problems that will haunt future generations. She believes that art can make a difference.

- Detmar Schwichtenberg