

Judgment and Beauty

Yoon Soo Lee

1. Judgment.

Judgment. I am so good at it. But I hate it.

Growing up, judgment was part of our everyday meal. Along with rice, kimchi, and water, it was a part of our daily ingestion for how to be a human—how to understand the world. Judgment kept us from skipping homework. Judgment kept us from spending too much money. Judgment kept us in line with societal and familial responsibilities. Judgment also kept people at a distance, and judgment kept us feeling a bit better than anyone around us. Judgment was productive, but it was also hostile. When I watched television, commentary such as this might happen:

That one should not be wearing shorts. Look at their calves. Are they blind? Are the producers blind? Oh, that one sure is ugly. No wonder they are a comedian. You have to make up for it somehow.

Even this process of recollecting is painful. Like an alcoholic remembering all the events of Christmas past coming back to haunt them. Many of these judgments had to do with how people looked. It was all about the visual.

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2. Visual Judgment

I am a visual artist. I am a graphic designer. Depending on the need for clear and precise communication, my work ebbs and flows between art and design. Depending on how strict the interpretants have to be kept in check, I work as a communicator or visual explorer. Interpretants are the microscopic cultural lint that floats around us that distorts, filters and interferes with the visual information that we decode. If I have to design signage for an emergency room, I would have to be very clear about the core needs of the user. Interpretants that are part of that particular community or country have to be measured and

accounted for so that quick decisions can be made with little effort and with minimum risk of mistakes in comprehension. If I were to design the CD cover for Lady Gaga, interpretants be damned, I could do a mash up of Jackson Pollack, Yayoi Kusama, and James Ensor, name it interpretive visualization of contemplation and call it a day. Interpretants point to how critical precise judgment needs to function in the communication process.

Due to my training as a designer, most of my work has been anchored in the function of communication. What is the goal? Who is the audience? As a goal-oriented person, this was a perfect match.

But it turns out, with age and finally being comfortable enough in my own skin, I am also exploring—without any other goal other than exploring my thoughts, ideas, dreams and desires. The problem occurs when I get into the making part. The visualization part. Because that's when all the judgment kicks in. Is it beautiful? Is it aesthetically pleasing? Will people like it? Will it move them? Or bore them? Is it redundant? Is it cliché?

3. Judgment and Beauty

Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. When the beholders who are in charge of creating and consuming imagery start to agree, manage, control, manipulate the images of beauty, reality can become distorted, and our value system can be subjected to external pressures to conform.

When I first started teaching graphic design in the mid-90s, my biggest hurdle was talking about taste and style to students. The privileged students understood taste and style knowingly and unknowingly. If grading the results of a graphic design projects were predicated on the visual outcome only, the privileged students got better grades with more ease than the student who juggled two jobs. The merits of graphic design education came charging at me like 1000 murderous bulls. If I art directed my students so that they had a good looking portfolio, they could possibly get jobs, but are they the owners of their own work? Isn't failing a part of the learning process? But if students only have a handful of chances to create work, how can they balance learning through failure and creating a marketable portfolio? I was accused of promoting ugly design. When the teacher does not replace the students' visual choices for the teachers' own taste, the student work can look naïve, and even tasteless compared to the well polished student work of the portfolio schools: the schools whose goal it is to make beautiful portfolios for students so that they can get an entry level design job. At this point, Graphic Design education becomes focused vocational training, instead of focusing on the critique of visual culture

and how to practice it mindfully. Allowing students to fail at making visuals, allowing students to fail at making meaning is like letting a child taste mud—once they taste it, they may then choose not to taste it again, not because we forbade them, but because they can make a decision for themselves. The choices are self-propelled instead of being based on rote memory. As a new professor, I intuitively understood that the design process was more important than the particular outcome, but in a world where short-term accountability was a core measurement for success, I felt helpless, frustrated and angry. And my anger went to blame beauty. It went to blame the vanity of designers. It went to blame the human desire to consume beautiful objects.

Is it beautiful? Fuck beauty. Is it aesthetically pleasing? Fuck aesthetics. Whose beauty are you talking about? The imperial set of beauty standards that you have breathed in unknowingly? Fuck beauty.

And yet I creep towards it. Like a baby towards a mothers teat.

4. Practice Love

When I was in high school in the mid 80s, getting ready to go to art school, I wanted to be a painter. Or a sculptor. But whatever I made, whatever I drew, it looked sad. And defeated. I did not have the words to express concepts such as depression, or projection, but that is what was happening. As I could not bear to look at sad things, I decided to become a designer. A designer was a conduit for communication. No one had to look at me. They looked at the message. And I had to do my best to create a message for the audience and for the client. A perfect match for a Korean woman: don't look at me, but look at what function I can fulfill. But the desire to express myself and my thoughts never died. One cold day in January of 2001, I made a simple passive declaration of "I am so not a painter." And with that statement, I started to make paintings. The paintings that came out of me were pretty. They were beautiful. If I identified as a warrior, my paintings felt like they wanted to be Barbie. I felt betrayed by my paintings.

The paintings that came out of me were made out of polka dots. They came out in concentric circles. I decided that if these paintings were truly mine, and they were not accidental, that meant that I had to be able to replicate it. Like a science experiment.



practice love #9, "ghosts," 36" x 36" mixed media on canvas



practice love #12, "ghosts," 36" x 36" mixed media on canvas



practice love #20, "ghosts," 36" x 36" mixed media on canvas

So my goal was to replicate the previous painting. But what happens when you repeat something? You learn. And that learnedness makes you try new things. And so I ended up creating a painting that was different. It was something new. I, then, of course, had to try and replicate that new painting. Which led to more learning. So the paintings grew and morphed. And each time, I did not give up on my initial goal that I had to try and replicate the painting.

Why the scientific experiment of replicating? Perhaps it had to do with not believing in myself. It seems to me that when you are not good enough, you have to scientifically prove yourself to the imaginary “others” of the world, where they sit in judgment of who you are based on their standards. You are before the judge and jury and you have to make a case for yourself: what you are, what your worth is, and why you should exist in this world. My art making took on the role of evidence gathering. I am worthy because I can make these things. And it was not an accident that I made these beautiful things, because, if it were an accident, I could not have made it twice. The fight for worthiness, and defending myself against the judgment – there it is again, judgment – chased me all throughout the process of making.

One day, I had to name these paintings. And I found the title “practice love”. Practice as a verb, and practice as an adjective. As love is living and never finite we have to practice love and have practice loves. The daily ritual of painting became a prayer for love, a deep love, a forgiving love, of accepting love. A love that stays with you, a love that dies with you, a love that never leaves. Because it is inside you.

5. Beauty

Judgment, beauty, practice love. Judgment. Beauty. Practice love. I wish I arrived at a simple, crisp conclusion. I wish I could say that I now understand my conflict with beauty and am able to pursue it without guilt. But conclusions have been elusive. Perhaps because conclusions are yet another device for control and predictability. Brené Brown says in her TED Talk “The Power of Vulnerability” that research is a desire to control and predict. A desire to control and predict. Perhaps that is at the heart of all academic fear—the need to control the uncontrollable. Maybe this is why I painted the way I painted. And maybe this is why I think about beauty the way I do. Because I can easily say something is not valuable if it is not measurable and controllable.

So what is beauty now? Beauty is still in the mind of the beholder. But my eyes now see visuals with context. The visual has a person behind it. The visual has feelings behind it, a history behind it, a story behind it. It is linked to a specific

person. A real person. Anonymity can kill compassion. Because then the visual is a 'thing' or an 'object' and not a person. Anonymity makes the visual into an orphan that does not have a home or parents. We can take cheap shots at it or we pity it. Instead of having a relationship with it. If you care for something, if you love someone, do you ever judge it for its beauty? Maybe this is why they say love is blind.

Today I contemplate my sight and I contemplate my blindness in my pursuit to create visuals to express and share how I see the world, and how I hope the world to be.

Judgment. I hate it. But I am so good at it. I am learning how to use it wisely. With compassion. With love.

Judgment. Beauty. Practice. Love.



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