

On Sunday, August 27, 2023, Ness Lee and Lesley Loksi Chan had a conversation. This is an excerpt from it.

Ness Lee: space of feeling

curated by Lesley Loksi Chan
will run from September 8 to
October 13, 2023 at Centre[3]
for Artistic and Social Practice,
173 James Street, North,
Hamilton, Ontario.

Lesley:

Okay, show me what's all around you!

Ness:

Let's see. This is a clock that I bring to everywhere. (Ness points to a plastic clock with long bendable limbs sticking out of its face, suction cupped to the window near their desk.) So a lot of these things I actually bring to every studio I have, because for a while I would call it nomadic studio or something, because I just kept moving to different studios for different reasons or whatever. So I just bring familiar things and kind of try to make it home, because a lot of these places, I do have the privilege of taking up that space. It usually feels very foreign to me and very often very, just very lonely, I guess. So these things kind of make me feel a bit more like I have buddies around me. So, let's see. I usually do bring a lantern of some sort, so I just call this my daikon (Ness points to a long paper white lantern with plastic leaves jutting out of the top), and I am very into lights and stuff, especially disco lights. So I kind of call this my natural sundial kind of thing. (Ness points to a mirrored sphere and a mirrored oblong thing sitting side-by-side on the windowsill.) I think it changes all the time, but I think maybe around 5:00 or 7:00, usually the sunlight hits it and then the lights will go dancing, and then I'll know it's like, Oh my gosh. It's like 5:00 or 7:00. You have to work. And so, yeah, a lot of these things are toys and junk. In a good way though. And everything has a bit of a small memory or just a reaction or something. I do really love fake food. I think fake food art is ultimate art.

Lesley:

Oh yes. Wait. And what is that?

Ness:

This?

Lesley:

Ohhh, it's a croissant.

Ness:

Yeah. And it lights up. It's actually a real croissant, and they resined it, so it's the shell of a croissant.

Lesley:

Do you squeeze it to light it up?

Ness:

There's a little thing here. (Ness flips a tiny switch on the bottom of the croissant. A faint pink glow emanates from the croissant's centre.) Yeah. My not-so-effective in-case-of-emergency studio light doesn't light up much. I'm like, I need it just in case. And I always bring a human foot to use, usually. (Ness holds up a plastic foot.) Actually, I have studio slippers, so I think I left the other one in my apartment. (Ness looks around the floor.) But usually my studio slippers, oh here's my studio slippers. Yeah, I usually do this. (Ness takes the fake foot and places it into a pointy white slipper on the floor.) That's how I leave my studio. I'll just put the two feet in it. But yeah, let's see, if I ever show you my apartment, there's always Kewpie babies everywhere. You know, Kewpie babies. (Ness holds up a Kewpie baby.)

Lesley:

Aww, Kewpies so cute.

Ness:

Yeah, so it's like kind of a token to remind me of

home, I guess.

Lesley:

Yeah. Why did you pick that one to bring with you?

Ness:

Oh, I mean, it had boots on, so I was just like, it's ready to go out. But I also have an embarrassing amount of Kewpie babies. I went to Japan twice, and each time I made a conscious effort to buy Kewpie babies, so I just had a whole box of 'em. I'm trying to give 'em to my students now. So every class I teach, I'm just giving them the babies, because I'm like, I'm too old for this. And they're like, oh, yay. And then they make jewelry. I'm like, well, they have a life now. So yeah. This is my Mahjong Rubik's Cube.

Lesley:

Oh!

Ness:

I need a lot of fidgety things. So yeah, this is one of my fidget toys, but I refuse to learn how to solve a Rubik's cube.

Lesley:

Oh yes, no. Never solve.

Ness: I know. There's a logic. There's this pattern to it. And I did honestly look it up once, and I couldn't understand it. I was just like, ah. I like not knowing, and I never solved it, and I never will. But once I shared a studio, I came back to my studio and it was solved, and I was freaked out. I was just like, someone just came and solved it. I'm like, wow, that's creepy. But yeah, this is Doraemon. My friend

Tessa got it for me, but only because the belly was matching the mouth. (Ness holds up a Doraemon with a red smiley mouth on its face and body.)

Lesley:

Ooh, I've never seen a Doraemon with a belly like that.

Ness:

I think it's maybe a mistake.

Lesley:

Oh, like they double printed the mouth by accident?

Ness:

Or when you're trying to make a duplicate and not get sued, I think maybe they did that, but she was just like, the belly is the face. I'm like, whoa.

Lesley:

So good. So sneaky.

Ness:

Yeah. Right? So it makes me laugh. So I kind of bring with me a lot of little paperweights. So this is like a miniature garbage bag.

Lesley:

Oh. I like that.

Ness:

A lot of things make me smile. Let's see a lot of, oh, this is my... I literally bring this one to every studio. This hand, did I show you this hand? And this ball? (Ness holds up a plastic hand with a ball resting in the palm.)

Lesley:

No! Yay! (Lesley applauds with glee.)

Ness:

(Ness holds up the ball.) It says, "Do something to help yourself." And it's a temperature ball. But I think it's lost that magic. When you touch it, it's supposed to change colour. It definitely doesn't do that anymore. And this is called a helping hand. (Ness holds up the plastic hand.) And I don't know why they painted their nails pink, but yeah. And it'll just bring, I think it's supposed to bring a drink to you or something if you want to send it to someone. I got this in an arcade in Winnipeg in one of the antique stores, so I just kept it. (Ness winds up the hand and places it on the table. The hand glides slowly across the table, empty palm facing up.)

Lesley:

Yes.

Ness:

Wow.

Lesley:

That was too epic.

Ness:

Right? Yeah. What else? Yeah, I usually have some kind of food brooch, like a cracker. (Ness holds up a plastic cracker with a clasp on the back.) Oh, this is what I wanted to give you, actually. Well, where is it? I'll ruin it. Anyway, but I wanted to give you this. (Ness holds up a plastic leaf.) It's a clip, so you could put it... (Ness puts it on her head.)

Lesley:

I will wear that when I watch you do your painting on the street. My new sun visor.

Ness:

Yes! Oh, this is my other paint hat, but the brim I was talking about the other day is way bigger. Yeah. Let's see, what else? This is another food art thing I bought, actually, this was at the chocolate store on James Street. This little, this is my, I dunno, they're just like a maid, I guess.

Lesley:

Yes, I think so. I like how you can see her scarf from the back. On the back she's wearing a little triangle scarf.

Ness:

Oh, yeah, it's very sailor moon or whatever. Yeah, so that, this is my Hamilton souvenir I got at the chocolate store for some reason. Yeah. What else? I always have fruits. (Ness points to a plate with mandarin oranges stacked into a pyramid.) Kind of looks like, I know, it looks like real. Yeah, look. Now it's spinning. I dunno what time it's though.

Lesley:

What's spinning?

Ness:

Oh, the disco. (Ness points to the mirrored sphere and oblong shape on the windowsill.) Well, I kind of got lazy. It's not really a disco ball. It's just like a lump of mirror, but it's starting to move, so maybe that's like what, 4:30? Yeah, that's how I tell time.

Lesley:

Tell time. So. Do you think the things that you have around you are, well, because you said you bring them everywhere, do you feel really attached to them?

Ness:

I think familiarity is important. A lot of it, I mean, they're all actually from my apartment, so I think home, because my apartment, I think is my safest space I have, or the place I feel like I could just be completely free and to do what I want. So I think I try to take a little bit of that with me. And I think it went full throttle when I did the AGO residency, because the room they gave me was a cool room, it was just such an office room. So I just brought all of these things and all of these lanterns, and just hung everything up. So from there, I kind of realized the importance of stuff. I usually have miniature things, so I showed you some. This is like a cup. And then here is the little fan. My friend brought me a fan. Probably as a joke.

Lesley:

That is a good fan and friend.

Ness:

Yeah, it moves. Yeah. Yeah. A lot of them is comfort. It is familiarity. And I think I feel like a bit super nomadic sometimes. I've never really stayed in one place except for my apartment. So I think having that feeling is important. Yeah. The disco lights are going.

Lesley:

Yeah, I can see the reflections behind you on the ceiling now.

Ness:

Yeah.

Lesley:

Yeah. So to be in a space where you feel comfortable is obviously important to your work, and

well, also, is it hard to have people around you while you're working?

Ness:

Incredibly hard. I think I'm used to being so quite literally alone. So I maybe see the handful of friends I do have once every two weeks or something, or once a month. So I'll just be alone in the studio making stuff. And I think starting more installations and public art and stuff, or like murals. You're definitely alone a lot. Just painting. I mean, unless I have help, but that's pretty rare. So I think a lot of it is feeling a sense of belonging, a sense of being okay, taking up space, or being in a space, or being respectful or mindful of space. I think a lot of my work mean maybe from the beginning, but a lot of my work as of late has been very conscious of those kind of things, like the space we take with each other, from each other to each other kind of thing. And connectivity, like the invisible or visible links we have to one another, whether it be engagement, presence or just crossing paths or something. Those kinds of things. I've been very much thinking of. A lot of it is because of being queer, and also with my background being Hakka. Hakka is literally called "guest people." So I think I really got drilled into my behavioural existence, I think, because trying to be covert and just fit in and not make waves and stuff like that. So yeah, I think that's kind of the underbelly of it. And then I think a lot of it is expression with language through creation and stuff. But I think definitely my space is, I definitely know how I feel when I see the space around me and how my space is, and I could get a pulse on my headspace or my mind, or I could get a read.

Lesley:

As you accumulate more stuff for your space, do you also find your relationship to your stuff changes

too? Can it become too much stuff? Do you have that feeling, or is it like the more you have, the more comfortable you feel?

Ness:

Yeah. I've been battling with that. I'm not battling, but very conscious of it, just because I think at some point in the past few years, I got really into reading about death and grief and afterlife kind of things. And one of the first comments my neighbour ever said to me, he moved in and he went into my apartment. He was just like, this is a tomb. You're getting ready for death kind of thing. I have things like wall to wall, ceiling floor to ceiling everywhere. And I was like, did you see me so quickly? Yeah. So I think a lot of it is memory, though. I do have a really bad memory. So visual recall is kind of literally how I remember things or experience things. I only know if I remember doing it, so I write a lot of stuff, so I remember writing it. So I think I've been thinking about the accumulation of things or minimalism or maximalism and what that means. But yeah, I think that kind of circled back to my thinking of space and taking up space and when do I ever feel inclined to, and that's when I really noticed it is my apartment. I just feel completely free and alone. And then other places, it's very a slow accumulation as I get more comfortable and stuff. So now that it's maybe the final month of this residency, I think it's kind of looking like how I would have a studio in a way to what I can. Yeah. But I do think about that. I do think about what do we leave behind for people and our family and things like that, or what do we acquire from those that leave things behind. And really just the after or the aftertaste of it, or the aftereffects of someone's existence, I guess that's what I've been thinking of. Yeah. Yeah. It didn't make me stop from accumulating stuff, for sure. For some reason.
