

**(RE)VIEWING PRIVATE CHILDHOODS IN PUBLIC PLACES:
AN ANALYSIS OF KEN LUM'S *A TALE OF TWO CHILDREN***

Alice Stratford-Kurus

The children that Ken Lum presents as his subjects in *A Tale of Two Children: A Work for Strathcona* (2005) do not entirely conform to the parameters of childhood that art history has created (fig. 1). The children featured would not immediately be described as natural, romantic, innocent, poised, playful, or imaginative. However, these children are also not depicted in a sexualized or morally compromised way. The binaries of happy and sad, light and dark, good and bad are, at once, too general and too limiting for the subjects of the work. The children are not depictions of the extremes of childhood. Rather, Lum has constructed (through photo and text) portraits of two children who appear quite ordinary in the context of urban Canada. *A Tale of Two Children* demonstrates Lum's artistic engagement with social issues of the everyday. Particularly, this work examines the upbringing of a child, not just the child as product of upbringing but, in terms of his or her relationship to others and the moments that influence the child. It is not only the child who is examined but the viewer, too, is drawn into the work and provoked to reflect on their own childhood. It is significant that the subtitle of *A Tale of Two Children* is *A Work for Strathcona* since this is both the region where the work is permanently located and the area where the artist himself grew up.¹ The work will be analyzed in parts as well as in its entirety. This work will be compared to the artist's other portraits of children. The subject, process, aesthetic, and perception of Lum's *A Tale of Two Children* will be considered.

The image that comprises the left half of the installation (*What and idiot!*) shows a boy who appears to be distraught (fig. 2). His expression is somewhat of a grimace with a trembling lip and his shoulders are raised. The boy is vulnerable, intimidated, and sad. The distressed child makes the viewer uneasy. The child is suffering and he is alone in the image; no one is comforting him and the viewer is unable to help. This photo undermines the idea that children are insulated or exempt from adult feelings of suffering. The text that is paired with the image reads, "What an idiot! What an idiot you are! What an utterly useless idiot you are!" The text provides an omnipresent voice for the photo. The boy does not seem to be uttering the words out loud but it is quite possible that the words are his internal dialogue. The words are written starkly in black against a red background. Choice of colour is important. The red conveys strong ideas of rage, frustration, and blood-boiling emotion. Exclamation marks punctuate the text to communicate yelling. The viewer assumes that the text is referring to the boy as an idiot, but the person who said it is not clear. The tone is harsh, negative, and angry, obviously detrimental to the boy's self-worth. A parent, a family member, a babysitter, a nanny, a teacher, a sports coach, a bully are only some possibilities of who said the uncaring words. There are no explicit clues within the photo to confirm the viewer's suspicions. A parent seems the most immediate and likely guess. The second image in the artwork suggests that a parent-child subject is the focus.

The right-hand image of *A Tale of Two Children* (*You so Smart*) pictures a relaxed girl dressed all in white (fig. 3). Whereas the boy had to brace himself up against the fire hydrant, the girl's feet are not touching the ground, which suggests that she is not emotionally weighed down. The child is smiling up at an adult woman who returns her smile. Again, there is ambiguity in the photograph: the viewer is unsure

who this woman is. The common reading of this arrangement would be mother and daughter. The woman has her hand tenderly on the girl's shoulder; a sign of support, comfort and encouragement. Yet the woman is not on the same side of the bench beside the child. This can be seen as a barrier between the two people, which the child has overcome. This barrier may well be language. The text beside the photo states, "You so smart. You make me proud you so smart. I so proud you so smart." The words are pink a colour associated with love, happiness, caring. This text supports the idea that it is a mother who is speaking affectionately to her daughter. The imperfect grammar indicates that English is not the woman's first language. The woman may be a Chinese immigrant to Vancouver (the background of the portrait is Vancouver's China Town) who is proud that her child is excelling in Canada. At some level, this may translate into pressure that is put on the child to succeed. Issues of race and culture are interwoven with concepts of child-rearing. Lum's *A Tale of Two Children*, through the two scenes, illustrates two different points on a large spectrum of parenting. Race, is one factor among many that influences child-rearing. Socio-economic and cultural backgrounds effect the relationship between parent and child as well. Lum conveys the multiplicity of parenting.

Taken together the works take on additional layers of meaning. The interpretation of one image is formed in relation to the other. The similarities in the formal construction of the two images further reinforce their connection. Both children are pictured fully within the photographic space through the use of a straight shot. Each scenario takes place in a public space. The viewer is positioned as a passer-by to the scenes. The viewer becomes both a witness and an eavesdropper to a stranger's private moment. The subject looks unaware of the presence of the photographer and this is translated through the artwork so that the subject is unaware of the viewer. The mid-action slice-of-life situation is intimate and there is a feeling that the viewer is being invasive. In *Fixed City and Mobile Globe: Urban Facts and Global Forces in Ken Lum's Art*, Jeff Derksen articulates that there is a "critical ambivalence in Lum's work that speculates on how things possibly are."² Both of the texts presented seem ordinary, as though the moment captured on film is not an isolated special moment but, instead, that the boy is often ridiculed and the girl is often complimented. *A Tale of Two Children* provides enough information that the viewer is able to speculate about the daily lives of the child subjects.

In actuality, the viewer knows little about the children. Their ages, hobbies, classes, friends, possessions, their names- all are unknown. The power of Lum's portraits allows the viewer to infer possible meanings. In the book *Photographing Children* the observation is made that:

It is almost a truism that children are frequently photographed but seldom portrayed. Millions of snapshots attest to the parental proclivity for preserving a record of their offspring's charming childhood. Yet few of these family album photographs do more than catch a glimpse of the child in a moment of time; what the child was really like at the time is still left to memory. The true portrait must also catch that evanescent element that reveals the child as well as the moment.³

By dismantling notions of idealized images of children and working within the vein of Realism, Lum achieves two successful portraits of children.⁴ Another of Lum's works, *Hum Humm Hummmm* (1994) also captures a realistic portrait of a child (fig. 4). In this image a child is laying on an exterior staircase. This photo shares the compositional technique (photo and coloured text panel) and subject matter (a

child) as *A Tale of Two Children*. Similar ambiguities are also present. The viewer does not know what prompted the child to lie here or if the child is waiting for something or someone. *Hum Humm Hummmm* and *A Tale of Two Children* both display the snapshot aesthetic; a moment is frozen in time. Snapshot images are not necessarily the way the child or the parent would want the child to be portrayed. An effort is made for the photo to look instantaneous rather than contrived. It is usually parents who photograph their children. In the instances of Lum's photographs, the artist is behind the camera instead of the parents but the influence of the parents is alluded to. In *Ken Lum Works with Photography*, Kitty Scott classifies Lum as a photoconceptualist who, "photographs the city and its surrounds in order to picture the economic and social history of the region (Vancouver), but usually in its more banal and sometimes even abject settlements and situations."⁵ She noted that, "Lum often gets ideas for new works by observing dramas that unfold in the street or elsewhere."⁶ The realistic results that Lum produces are meticulously staged.⁷

Not only is *A Tale of Two Children* on display in Strathcona, Vancouver, but the children were photographed in the area as well. Readings of the work are not confined to Vancouver, however, in that these children stand in for all children, all people. Everyone can relate to pictures of children because this is part of everyone's life despite the fact that childhood experiences vary widely. In *Felecia Maguire Moves Again* (1991), Lum (again) positions his child subject in the public sphere of the urban environment (fig. 5). This image differs from *A Tale of Two Children* because the child is in motion, she is specifically named, and the text is written in expressive fonts. While the viewer may not directly identify with the circumstances portrayed, they will likely still compare the childhood represented to their own experiences. In *Children in Photography* Gary Michael Dault writes that:

Photographs of children bear a remarkable power. They capture for us in the moment a quality unique to the photographic art, where the observer and the observed spontaneously collaborate- no matter how contrived the setting- to reveal something new about our relationship to the qualities of the child within each of us- to newness, to innocence, to vulnerability, to wonder. These photographs provoke, they demand response.⁸

Neither the artwork nor the viewer, are passive in the instance of *A Tale of Two Children*. Both elements are actively forming the meaning of the work; the artist presents information that the viewer attempts to decipher by drawing on their own personal history.

The response that Lum's photographs demand from the viewer is further provoked by the direct address text. By using the word "you" on the coloured panels, instead of the boy or girl's name or son or daughter etc., the artist is effectively implying that the text is referring to the viewer as well as the child subject. The viewer's reading of the text activates the work. The viewer's personal subjectivity becomes part of the artwork. Lum uses words as a strategy for involving the viewer. He believes that, "text represents a form of address, showing that the portrait itself is a kind of address."⁹ *A Tale of Two Children* belongs to Lum's *Portrait-Repeated Text* series (1980s onwards). In *Portrait-Repeated Texts* photos are paired with coloured panels that present a few words or phrases listed multiple times. This series is one of several projects in which Lum has examined the link between verbal and visual imagery. Lum asserts that, "we have actually entered a phase whereby language itself is pictorial."¹⁰ Thus the colour, font style, and size of the words all become meaningful.¹¹ This is evident in Lum's *Gillian &*

Smokey (1989) (fig. 6). This image depicts a young girl posing with a cat. Rather than a snapshot in the spaces of the city this photo is taken in an interior space and the fixed pose seems to reference commercial portraiture. The text is allocated more space and arguably more significance in the image than the photograph of the subjects. In this work the text is evocative and suggests how we should perceive Gillian and her relationship to Smokey. For example the size of the “Gillian” text is much larger than that of “Smokey.” Scott observes that in *A Tale of Two Children*, “Lum’s use of unobtrusive Helvetica typeface allows the feelings of the speakers to come through without apparent embellishment, on coloured text panels that are as strongly emotive as the photographs.”¹² It is interesting that such emotionally charged words are rendered in a plain font. Lum is acutely aware of how his choices of text stimulate the viewer and affect their reading of the artwork.

Ken Lum’s *A Tale of Two Children* presents the ideas of childhood and upbringing in an ambiguous way that encourages viewer response. Portraits of children are constructed to solicit the viewer to project an identity and daily circumstances onto the subjects. Lum composes photographs and text to create a loaded image that documents the everyday moment (albeit filled with emotion). The work is personal, local, and intimate while at the same time anonymous, global, and public. The complexity of the artwork mirrors the intricate multiplicity of childhood itself.

FIGURES



FIG. 1

Ken Lum. *A Tale of Two Children: A Work for Strathcona*. 2005.

Photographs in billboard format, located at the National Works Yard (corner of Malkin and Thornton streets), Vancouver.

(Image: <http://thingsthatexist.blogspot.com/2006/12/ken-lum-is-brilliant_03.html>)

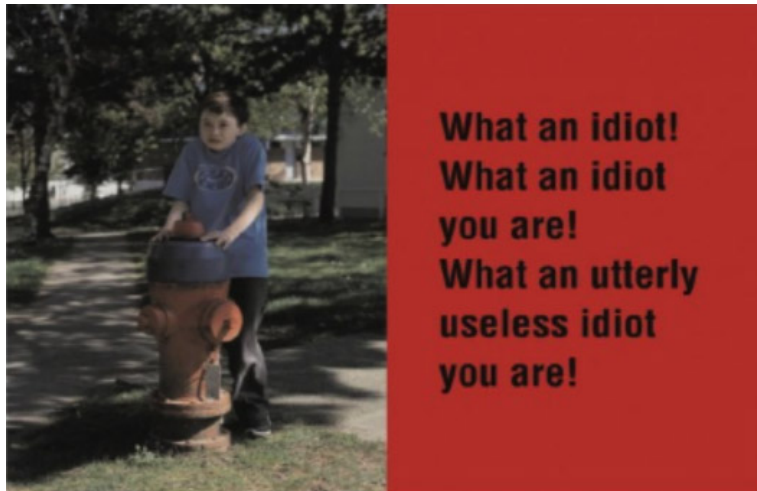


FIG. 2

Ken Lum. *What an idiot!*, from *A Tale of Two Children: A Work for Strathcona*. 2005. Photographs in billboard format, located at the National Works Yard (corner of Malkin and Thornton streets), Vancouver. (Image: <http://thingsthatexist.blogspot.com/2006/12/ken-lum-is-brilliant_03.html>)



FIG. 3

Ken Lum. *You so smart*, from *A Tale of Two Children: A Work for Strathcona*. 2005. Photographs in billboard format, located at the National Works Yard (corner of Malkin and Thornton streets), Vancouver. (Image: <http://thingsthatexist.blogspot.com/2006/12/ken-lum-is-brilliant_03.html>)



FIG. 4

Ken Lum. *Hum Humm Hummmm*. 1994. Chromogenic print.



FIG. 5

Ken Lum. *Felicia Maguire Moves Again*. 1991. Chromogenic print.

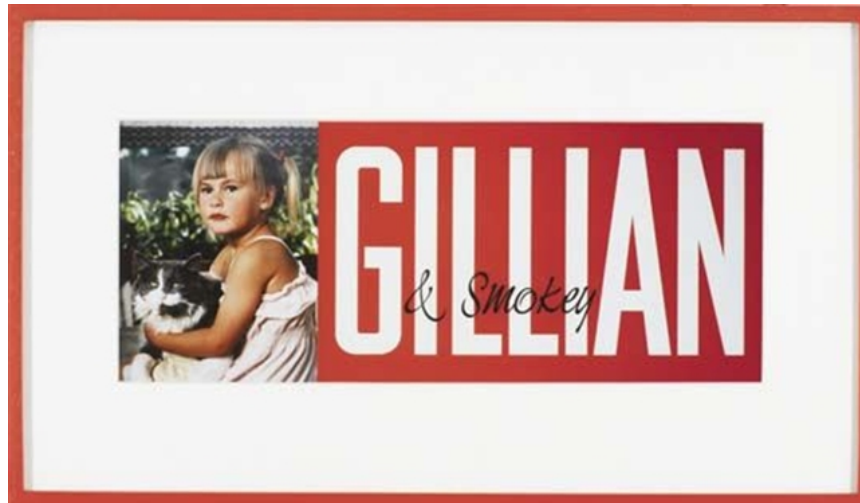


FIG. 6

Ken Lum. *Gillian & Smokey*. 1989. Chromogenic print, enamel, Plexiglas.

ENDNOTES

¹ Robin Laurence, "Ken Lum: A Tale of Two Children," *Georgia Straight* <<http://www.straight.com/article/ken-lum-a-tale-of-two-children>>.

² Jeff Derksen, "Fixed City and Mobile Globe: Urban Facts and Global Forces in Ken Lum's Art," *Ken Lum: Works with Photography*, Kitty Scott, Matha Hanna (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2002) 38.

³ Editors of Time-Life Books, "Portrait of the Child: Revealing the Signs and Character of Mood," *Photographing Children* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1971) 160.

⁴ Kitty Scott, "Ken Lum Works with Photography," *Ken Lum: Works with Photography*, Kitty Scott, Matha Hanna (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 2002) 14.

⁵ Scott, 16.

⁶ Scott, 16.

⁷ Scott, 25.

⁸ Gary Michael Dault, Introduction, *Children in Photography: 150 years* (Willowdale, Ontario: Firefly Books Ltd., 1990) 3.

⁹ Scott, 23.

¹⁰ Scott, 23.

¹¹ Scott, 23.

¹² Scott, 12.

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