

Musings on Creativity: Finding Inspiration in *Low* Places

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Author Bio

Christine L. Cho, PhD is an Assistant Professor at Nipissing University's Schulich School of Education in Brantford, ON. Christine is a practicing visual artist (interdisciplinary and multi-media) and a former elementary school teacher. Christine utilizes visual media and critical pedagogy in her teaching of undergraduate courses in Visual Arts and Curriculum Methods using concepts imbedded in creativity to expand upon diverse ways of knowing. Her research in teacher education contributes to current educational conversations on racial, ethnic and linguistic representation in schools specifically exploring the constructions and understandings of teacher identity, including immigrant teacher aspirations, within the structures of schools. Her work challenges pre-service teachers and educators through critical consciousness-raising to examine their own social location and trouble "the way things are" in schools.

Abstract

This paper is an examination of the influence of music, specifically the music of a Toronto band, *The Lowest of the Low*, on a visual artist's creative process. The ways in which music and lyrics have informed and been the foundation for two paintings will be explored.

Key Words

Visual arts; creativity; musical inspiration

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I was standing minding my own
Business, when you came up and
Decided you'd mind it for me
Four O'clock Stop

I need music to paint. Not just any music. My tracks of choice are from *The Lowest of the Low*, a Toronto alternative band from the early 1990s. And not just any album, only *Shakespeare My Butt* (1991). At the start, it was the lyrics – poignant at times, waxing poetic, edgy and quintessentially Toronto. I began to find parallels between the lyrics of various tracks and events happening in my own life – segments which translated into visual pieces for me.

Looking back on the retrospective of works created during my most prolific “Low” period (2003), what characterizes these pieces is their use of geometric segmentation and fragmentation. The lyrics themselves from tracks such as *Four O'clock Stop* and *The Gossip Talkin' Blues* (Hawkins, 1991) inspired a painting I entitled “Lounge Lizard” (28.5” x 40.5”). This particular piece, acrylic on masonite, is of a fragmented lizard, bisected and dissected by geometric shapes. Superimposed on the image is the following text:

Social Parasite
Idle One

Haunting
Establishments

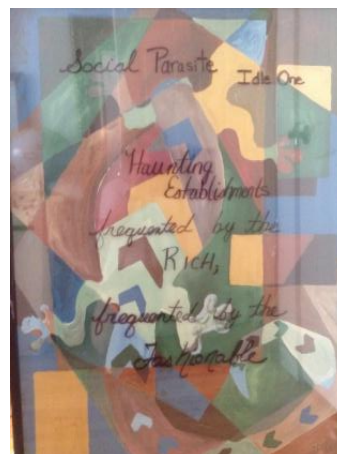
frequented by the
RICH;

frequented by the
Fashionable

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Lounge Lizard was about the social politics of my work environment – it was a commentary on the petty gossips, toxic to collegiality. I chose the title “Lounge Lizard” to be derogatory – to build on the idea of gossips as “well dressed” or, rather, well disguised seducers, who come into your life and through false charm use flattery to spread rumours and innuendos and make it their business to know everyone else’s business.

A closer examination of the pieces revealed to me that there was something more going on – my inspiration went beyond the lyrics. The rhythm, beat, and tempo of the various tracks press their way onto and into my canvases. When I look back at these works, I can still hear the tracks that I played over and over during the creation of a various pieces. When I look at *Lounge Lizard*, I hear *Four O’clock Stop* and *The Gossip Talkin’ Blues*:

She's the reigning queen of "how ya been?"
 She's got the gossip talkin' blues
 She'll photocopy her friends' lives and pass one on to you
 And how do you think that I found out that Henry needs new shoes?
 But I'm convinced that she could find something better to do
The Gossip Talkin’ Blues (Hawkins,1991)

Sometimes when I think of the music of *The Low* I do, in fact wonder, as in the *Four O’clock Stop* lyrics, if the band, or rather the band’s music, is a muse of sorts, infiltrating my creative process – a muse who decided, to paraphrase Hawkins lyrics, “to mind my business of creation for me”. Of course muses are historically and mythically believed to be one of the nine Greek goddesses, the personification of the arts (Green, 1965). A muse is typically believed to be, and is defined as a person, usually a woman, who is a source of artistic inspiration. How curious, for me, that my *muse* might be *music*.

As Adorno (1995) argues, “If painting and music do not converge by means of growing similarity, they do meet in a third dimension: both are language” (p. 71). To take this analogy further, I often embed text in my works as evidenced by *Lounge Lizard*. The text is inextricable

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from the visual much the same way I perceive the music and lyrics of *The Low* to be. Through the processes of abstraction, poetic metaphor and illusion, rich layers of meaning are constructed. Songs can be replayed and replayed with different nuances heard each time and fresh interpretations of the lyrics. A painting, by its very nature, is static, yet, the formal elements and principles can give the illusion of movement and rhythm. I strive to use text to give an added dimension: to transcend the temporal.

My canvases tend to be large and for me there is a physicality of painting that is supported by the music of *The Low*. Much of their music has a driving beat; fast with heavy drums. The other pieces are much more sensual either in the tempo or lyrics. As I paint, it becomes a dance between how the music inspires me to move and the subject of my work. *Iconography of Grave's I* (40" x 40"; acrylic on canvas) is a piece in which the music, more so than the lyrics, became embedded in the canvas. The softer *Bleed a Little While Tonight* is the song deeply-rooted in the *Iconography* painting. I love the lyrics in this track as well, but there is long segment of guitar and drums that I always played when painting the larger sections of the canvas. The riff ends with the lyrics "damn, damn the circumstance" a phrase that is repeated 12 times throughout the song.



In 1999 I was diagnosed with Graves' Disease (a hyperactive thyroid). *Bleed a Little While Tonight* is about an ill-fated relationship, which resonated for me in terms of the relationship between myself, my body and ultimately my body's rejection of its own tissue and cells. *Bleed* is about loss and *Iconography of Grave's I* is also about loss, both sudden and gradual. My thyroid issues had been a source of infertility. After numerous failed treatment

attempts (with temporary stabilizing of my thyroid) against doctor's orders, I became pregnant. When I returned to my endocrinologist 4 months after my daughter was born I had "super hyperthyroidism". Numerous treatment attempts were tried until I finally underwent radioiodine therapy after which I had to endure "post-treatment isolation". Going in for the procedure, I did not know "post-treatment isolation" would be a necessary component. Shortly after undergoing the treatment, it was explained to me that the isolation would entail my use of disposable cutlery and plates, sleeping alone on sheets that were to be washed daily and separation from my then two-year old daughter. At the time, my child was waiting outside the hospital for me and we had a two hour car ride to get home. Quick and hasty plans had to be made. My husband took my daughter to a cottage for week. I slept in the spare bedroom for another month. We were given a sentence of six-months of abstinence. I felt like a pariah and the lyrics "Damn damn the circumstance, Yeah, my bad luck's just beginning" encapsulated my inner turmoil.

The *Iconography of Grave's I* again reflects the geometric segmentation and fracturing found in other pieces of this time period. The underlying image is from a CT scan image of a thyroid with Grave's Disease. Surprisingly, to me, the colours are relatively cheerful. Variations of the three primary colours are the foundation of the piece. Where geometric shapes and line intersect and overlap, the muddier tertiary colours are evidenced. The larger "nodule" in the upper third of the piece is seemingly cartoon-like with almost a derisive grin emerging under a yellow ochre "nose" and magenta "chin". Perhaps subconsciously I gave my disease a face. As the song lyrics go,

I don't know much about you,
 Not more than a smile or two can say,
 And everything I learned about you,
 I learned through the pit of my stomach anyways,
Bleed a Little While Tonight (Hawkins, 1991)

Ironically, *Iconography* is one of my daughter's favorite paintings and hangs in her room.

I think the music and lyrics of *The Low* sits in the back of my mind, dormant, waiting for some illusive spark. I hear the song first, seemingly from out of nowhere, and am compelled to set up my easel and get the tune going on the device of the day – from cassette player, to CD player to iPod. I don't always think of *The Low*. I am not a follower of the band (although I did see them play Lee's Palace in the '90s but it was purely a fluke). I only own the one album. I never play *Shakespeare My Butt* while I'm doing anything other than painting (except write this piece, I must confess – it felt curiously appropriate). But when the songs start in my mind's ear, I know there's a canvas waiting to be painted.

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