

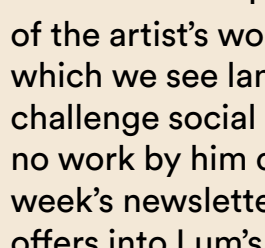
MAY 3, 2024

THE CLOSE-UP: KEN LUM'S MELLY SHUM HATES HER JOB

Melly Shum Hates Her Job, 1989, cemented the reputation of Vancouver-born Ken Lum as an internationally revered voice in contemporary art and Conceptual photography. Here's why.



Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989, Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam.

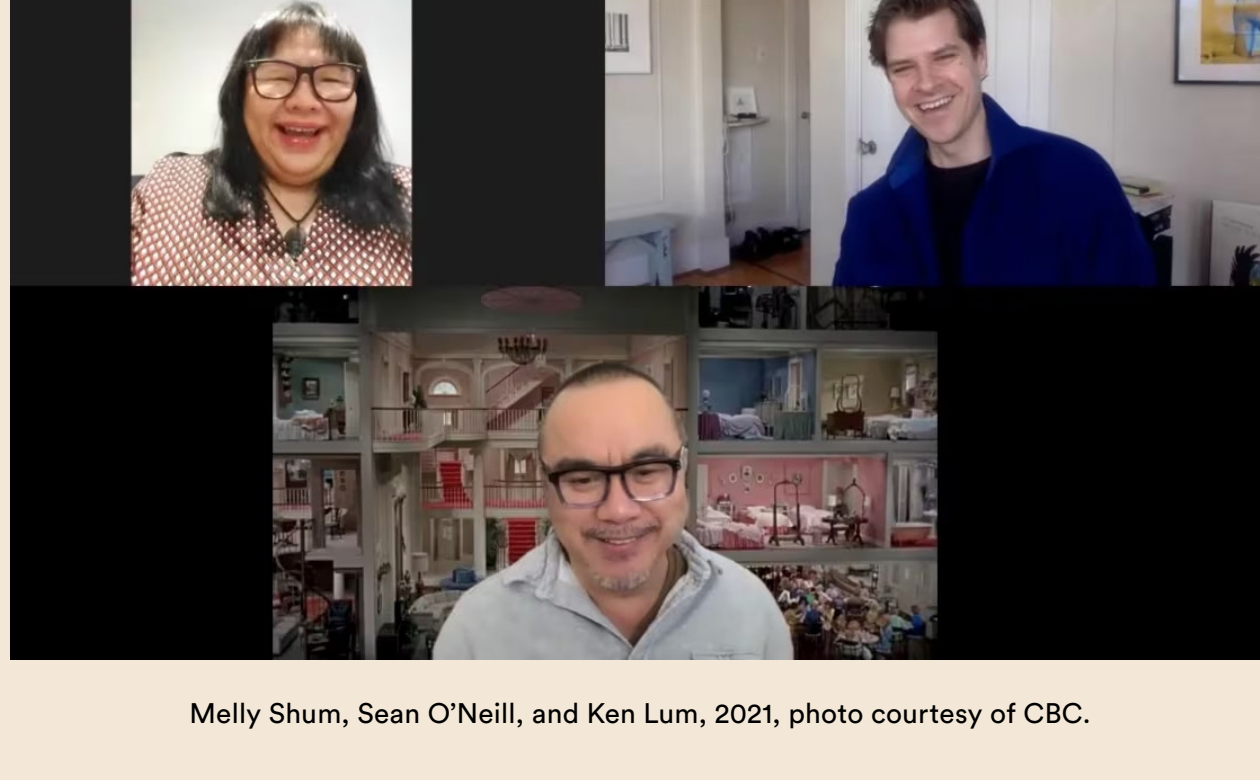


[Melly Shum Hates Her Job](#), 1989, is the most famous work by Vancouver-born Ken Lum (b.1956), the innovative photographic artist and winner of numerous prizes, including the Gershon Iskowitz Award (2019) and a Governor General's Award (2020). Next week, [Scotiabank Photography Award: Ken Lum](#) opens at The Image Centre in Toronto. Presented in association with Lum receiving the 13th annual Scotiabank Photography Award in 2023, the exhibition is an impressive survey of the artist's work and a look at how Lum has continually explored the ways in which we see language and images in public spaces. The artist's powerful images challenge social hierarchies with respect to identity, class, and gender. Arguably no work by him does this more effectively than *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*. In this week's newsletter, we take a close look at the iconic piece and the insights it offers into Lum's wider practice.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE REAL MELLY SHUM



Melly Shum, Sean O'Neill, and Ken Lum, 2021, photo courtesy of CBC.

The photographic half of *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* presents a young Asian woman working at a desk; though she is smiling, her right trumpet her dissatisfaction with her professional lot. In 1989, Melly Shum was a student at the University of Ottawa when Lum, a visiting professor, invited her to sit for a portrait in the school's photography lab. In 2021, for the CBC show [In The Making](#), Sean O'Neill (top right) reunited the artist (bottom centre) and Shum (top left)—who now works at an appliance store in Markham, Ontario—to discuss the work's lasting appeal. Though internationally recognized as a symbol of on-the-job weariness, Shum claims that she has never actually hated any of her professional positions.

KUNSTINSTITUUT MELLY



Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989, installation view, Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam.



Kunstinstituut Melly, photo courtesy of Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam.

A work from Lum's Portrait-Logo series, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* was installed in 1990 at [Rotterdam's Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art](#). After the show closed, the gallery received multiple requests to reinstall the piece because, as one person commented, "every city deserves a monument to people who hate their jobs." Thirty-one years later, the centre—which had since moved the work to an external wall—[changed its name](#) to Kunstinstituut Melly (or the Melly Art Institute) as "part of larger conversations on decolonizing, representation, and dissonant heritage in the Netherlands and abroad."

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LUM'S PORTRAIT-LOGO SERIES



Ken Lum, *Ollner Family*, 1986, courtesy of Ken Lum.



Ken Lum, *Steve*, 1986, Vancouver Art Gallery.

The works in the Portrait-Logo series (of which *Melly Shum Hates Her Job* is a part) are among Lum's most recognizable. He employs various strategies—including drawing inspiration from commercial portrait studios and the visual language of advertising, as in the triumphantly typefaced *Steve*, 1986 (above right)—to slyly draw attention to gender, race, and class, and the ways in which identity is performed and power is wielded through images. For example, in *Ollner Family*, 1986 (above left), a harmonious family portrait of what we assume to be a white father, Asian mother, and mixed-race child is visually overpowered by the bellicose wordmark "Ollner," the man's name.

Learn more about Lum's Portrait-Logo series [here](#)

VANCOUVER PHOTO-CONCEPTUALISM



Rodney Graham, *Actor / Director, 1954, 2013*, courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

Lum has played an important role in the Vancouver photo-conceptualism movement—also known as the Vancouver School—which coalesced in the 1980s around a group of artists that also included Jeff Wall (who coalesced in the 1980s around a group of artists that also included Jeff Wall, Stan Douglas, Roy Arden, and Rodney Graham. Each approached photography through a Conceptual lens, meaning that their images were built around embodying an idea rather than focusing solely on visual concerns. Their work fostered a legacy and an influence that has been felt by younger generations of artists in the city and beyond. Lum's attentiveness to everyday moments of conflict and drama in the urban landscape resonate with Graham's ornate self-portraits like *Actor / Director, 1954, 2013* (above).

SCOTIABANK PHOTOGRAPHY AWARD: KEN LUM



Ken Lum, *Lau Hoi Ting Recalls a Poem of Her Youth*, 2023, from the series *Image/Repeated Text*, 1994–2022, courtesy of Magenta Plains Gallery, New York/Royale Projects, Los Angeles.



Ken Lum, *Thanh Thuy Vu, Jänner, Gabi Petrikovic, Februar, Hamila De Souza, März, Manfred Klumpp, April*, from the series *Schnitzel Company*, 2004–2023, courtesy of Magenta Plains Gallery, New York/Royale Projects, Los Angeles.

In celebration of his 2023 Scotiabank Photography Award, Ken Lum is being honoured with a major exhibition at The Image Centre in Toronto (May 9–August 3, 2024) that brings together past highlights and new work. This survey testifies to the breadth and depth of Lum's witty practice, and the powerful ways he uses photography to bring into focus the intricacies of, and dissonances between, language, representation, and power. As [The Image Centre notes](#), what is perhaps most striking about Lum's oeuvre is his vision of the city as a dynamic stage for contestation and dissent, particularly within capitalist and postcolonial societies.

Learn more about The Image Centre's exhibition [here](#)

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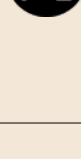
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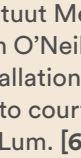
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Image Credits: [1] Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989, chromogenic print, vinyl lettering, 124 x 230.3 cm. Collection of Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam. [2] Melly Shum, Sean O'Neill, and Ken Lum. Photo courtesy of CBC. Photo credit: Sean O'Neill. [3] Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989, chromogenic print, vinyl lettering, 124 x 230.3 cm. Installation view, Melly Kunstinstituut, Rotterdam. Collection of Kunstinstituut Melly. [4] Kunstinstituut Melly. Photo courtesy of Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam. [5] Ken Lum, *Ollner Family*, 1986. Courtesy of the artist. © Ken Lum. [6] Ken Lum, *Steve*, 1986, chromogenic print, enamel, Plexiglas, 203.2 x 138.5 cm. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Courtesy of the artist. © Ken Lum. [7] Rodney Graham, *Actor / Director, 1954, 2013*, two painted aluminum lightboxes with translucented transparencies, 232.7 x 376 x 17.8 cm. Courtesy of Lisson Gallery. [8] Ken Lum, *Lau Hoi Ting Recalls a Poem of Her Youth*, 2023, from the series *Image/Repeated Text*, 1994–2022, inkjet print. Courtesy of Magenta Plains Gallery, New York/Royale Projects, Los Angeles. [9] Ken Lum, *Thanh Thuy Vu, Jänner, Gabi Petrikovic, Februar, Hamila De Souza, März, Manfred Klumpp, April*, from the series *Schnitzel Company*, 2004–2023, inkjet prints. Courtesy of Magenta Plains Gallery, New York/Royale Projects, Los Angeles.