

ART CALLING FOOL SCOLD: THE DISCURSIVE PEDAGOGY OF ROY KIYOOKA

Henry Tsang

It was a bright sunny day, the prismatic odours of fall strewn across the campus of the University of British Columbia. Thirty students, perhaps forty, had gathered in a classroom waiting for the teacher of the Fine Arts 181 class to begin. There he stood, in the back of the space, his arms crossed, staring at us. He tilted his head sideways to consult the ceiling, then back to us, then to the ceiling again, finally shaking his head and muttering, "No, no, there's far too many." We waited some more. Then he said, louder, projecting, "There are too many of you for this class. Some of you will have to leave." He just stood there, arms crossed, rocking ever so slightly on his heels, waiting. We waited, too, for something else to issue forth from him, some instruction, some direction, but he was finished, he had said all that he needed to say. So eventually everyone left. And when it was time for class the following week, there were four of us.

The other Fine Arts 181 classes taught colour theory, still life drawing, rubbings of found objects, projects involving paint and other obviously artistic materials. In contrast, our classes with Roy consisted mostly of sitting around a table in a near-empty room (because there were only 4 of us), and in the dark (because no one bothered to turn on the lights), attempting the fine art of . . . articulation! We listened to Roy speak about life, the media, the art world, perception, history, personal experience, and occasionally he would read his poetry. Imagine my struggle with this learning process: for at the age of eighteen, I hadn't lived enough yet to be able to offer much beyond my most honest reactionary naïveté. Nevertheless, we all struggled to muster up whatever insight and poignancy about the world that we knew, and place it on the table. As for artmaking, Roy did give us two projects that I remember, one involving sound recording, and the other photographic portraiture.

By the time I was in senior studio, a core group of 3 of us had gravitated towards Roy, with half a dozen others who would drop into his classes now and again. Fine Arts 482 was Advanced Painting, a course of discourse, in which I made no such thing as a painting, although others did but they were painters anyway. We seldom spoke about painting, but rather, engaged and challenged and explored our respective perspectives and perceptions of the world. We grappled with the interstices of the everyday, the minutiae that make up our very consciousness. On the occasion of our graduation in 1986, Roy gave to us BFA students a chapbook entitled, *Heironymus Bosch's Heretical April Fool Divertissements & Other Protestations*.¹ He wrote:

. . . Be indubitably an eye: by which
i mean the least gesture of the least thing underfoot or up in
the air ought to captivate your whole sensorium.

Roy used every ounce of his critical acumen in the production of observation, so much so that his unwavering focus for the subject at hand would oftentimes result in his leaving the material world behind. The omnipresent cigarette clasped between his two bent fingers would be forgotten, as its ashes grew into a smouldering, gravity-defying cantilever. You'd think it'd be a distraction, but no, not even when it collapsed, scattering over the table, Roy's lap, the floor, unacknowledged in his quest for articulation. He referred to the depth of knowledge of the ancients and how, even in our present-day high-tech info-overload society, we know not one iota more than our ancestors did thousands of years before.

Roy spoke about the nitty-grits, like buying groceries, making meals, washing the dishes, and the challenge of finding the balance between the incidentals of living in this world, of having to sustain oneself financially for instance, with that of being an artist. A recurring topic was family, a major source of inspiration in his writing and photography, as found in *Kyoto Airs*, *Transcanada Letters*, and *Wheels: A Trip Through Honshu's Back Country*, to name a few. This was impressive for us as students because, first of all, as young people, we were in the phase of life whereby independence and personal growth (i.e. redefining one's self beyond family expectations) was a common subject of desire, and secondly, to

hear an art professor speak about the importance of family was, at that time and place, surprising. To make art from who you are, where you come from, what you know was, well, intimidating. He spoke of immersing yourself into a process which is and should be a personal exploration, considered artistic but ultimately part of a life-long search, a calling. And that being an artist is not a career but a quest. That the quest is not for the answers, but to articulate the questions:

Don't allow yourself to be mislead by the false/urban
Sophistications, particularly 'those' ideas that come under
The rubrics of our conflated Media. Don't let your own
Psyche dissemble because of its false aggrandizements. Find
Out how small your daily needs really are and then ask
Yourself— what high-tech progress and ambition really means.

(*Heretical April Fool*)

Roy shared his work with us. I pored over his copy of *13 Cameras*, seeing Vancouver in a new dark and light, wondering what we were looking at and why; lost myself in his *Pear Tree Pomes*-in-progress, pulled by his reverberatory oratory into another existence where word, thought, emotion coalesced; scrutinized his copy of *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese & Japanese Canadian Anthology* which contained numerous eye-opening writings and photographs and in particular an interview of Roy by Roy Miki; stared back at his haunting photographic self-portraiture series with mask and television and lamp. In return, Roy expected us to share with him our work, our visions, our ways of thinking:

tell me who you talk and listen to on a daily basis
and who you read among the voices of your own contemporaries
and i'll tell you who i've been attending to and then
let us compare mythologies without the least apology to those
outside of our immediate clasp.

(*Heretical April Fool*)

In one phase of my student life, I became convinced that my thought process was so clear that to actually produce something seemed a waste

of time and material. He listened patiently to my excuses, and gently asked me to consider him as the audience for my work, if I should decide to realize it:

As First & foremost an 'artist' and 2ndly a 'pedagogue' i can
Tell you this – that i'll certainly look intently at
Whatever you shape with as much curiosity and alacrity as
The . . . News of the World. HISTORY as i practise
It and it ought to be insisted upon that 'you' have a
Hand in its shaping begins with everything you already know
Brought to the thought of the work to hand.

(*Heretical April Fool*)

The core group of we three BFA students revolving around Roy was Asian. Although we came from different cultural, ethnic, and generational places, there developed an understanding and consciousness between us of what it meant to exist, to be defined by, and to survive in a white man's world. We talked about cultural identity before that label became a hot ticket. Skewed by our Asianness, *screwed* by our Canadianness. Classes of consciousness of cultural difference and commonalities, how that affected your process, your product, your relationship with the viewer and the culture at large.

Roy had invested so much of his life in the "White-Anglo-Saxon-English-speaking" world, that the "whole matrix of my life has been bound up with that, and I want to account for that, as I am in it." When he was awarded the Order of Canada, he accepted it for the sake of his family. He felt as if he was some sort of a representative, a mannequin in his spring² green tuxedo, chosen to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Japanese in Canada. From Roy Miki's interview of Roy in 1978:

. . . you have to come to articulateness for the sake of the inarticulate among the world you live in. And that goes for a lot of the Japanese who, in terms of being able to shape in some way how they feel here in this country, they're tongue-tied, they're really tongue-tied. And where they're not tongue-tied, they're afraid to speak their minds

because they've already undergone an adequate humility to – I don't know, make them wary that way.

(Inalienable Rice)

Roy was proclaimed a guru by some, and a self-proclaimed guru by others. He was warm and generous, full of laughter. He was distant and inaccessible, faculty deadwood. He made some people nervous without saying a thing. Perhaps it was because he was observing. Or thinking. There were often long silences with Roy. Sometimes those silences were spaces, punctuations in his search for a word or phrase or analogy. Silence was a part of his syntax, his repertoire.

Once a student asked Roy for a critique of her paintings. I asked her afterward how it went. "He just stood there and didn't say a thing." I asked her to elaborate. "I just wanted some feedback from him. There was nothing." I ran into Roy that same day and asked him how the critique went. He said that it was clear to him that she was already doing what she wanted to do, and that there was nothing he could offer that would be of any use to her.

While securing an enviable reputation with his hard-edged colour-field paintings in the 1960s, Roy found himself increasingly drawn towards writing and photography:

... for me writing is an instrument of gaining my own self-awareness, that's what it is. It's to save oneself from confusion and obfuscation and all those kinds of things simply by sitting down and trying to sort it out.

(Inalienable Rice)

He became multidisciplinary, engaging in music, performance, sculpture, Super-8 filmmaking, small press publications on his home Canon photocopier. He never saw these activities as a departure from his earlier paintings, merely the continuation of an ongoing dialogue. Like his paintings, his new works were often serial. A singular image or perspective was too finite, there was always something beyond the frame, beyond that moment in time. The exemplary and emblematic did not

suffice for him, there were always alternate perspectives.

He didn't succumb to the pressures of the art system, to keep making more of what his name was built upon, which is a testament to his commitment of personal exploration and inquiry. However, he was very clear about his relationship to the mechanisms of what he called, "the fucking art game":

if you don't believe

In your own snapshots of your slice of the world and keel over

At mass media's ideological eye---

You better take a good look at your true place in

The Scheme-of-Things. Museums &

Art Gallery walls tend to fake a silver bromide eucharist of

Photo-glyphic homilies. What's

The view from where you actually stand? DON'T

Don't be a fucken T-O-U-R-I-S-T

Anywhere in the big wide world : remember, its very foreignness

Is an indelible part of your own psyche.

(Heretical April Fool)

Roy's notion of audience was simple and clear; your audience finds you, those who establish a relationship with what you do. In mid-1980s Canada, he figured that about 200 actively followed his work. Given that much of his artistic output of that period involved homemade limited edition chapbooks and prints, hand-delivered or mailed, it is not surprising that he could gauge his constituency in such a de facto manner. He was in control of both the means of production and the distribution of his work. There was a select group with whom he shared his efforts, and he did not expend his energies looking for greater recognition.

By the early 1990s, that audience number of Roy's, 200, grew. *Pear Tree Pomes*, published in 1987, had been nominated (but not chosen) for a Governor General's Award. In May of 1990 Artspeak and Or Galleries in Vancouver organized a retrospective touring exhibition of paintings, photographs, collages, drawings and prints, and the Western Front screened his Super-8 films accompanied by live music.

Now there are two recent publications on bookstore shelves, one a "collected works" of his poetry (*Pacific Windows*, edited by Roy Miki), and the other, an autobiography of his mother, Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka (*Mother talk*, edited by Daphne Marlatt). His artwork has been included in various exhibitions, both commercial and institutional, and a conference organized on the man himself. These activities signal the time-honoured tradition of posthumous canonization that will no doubt result in the re-creation of desire for Roy Kiyooka within the Historical Canadian Art Marketplace, a process that surely would have provided Roy with great mirth if he were in the audience today.

Roy encouraged, prodded, and challenged us to find ways to articulate, to question, to use our intellect, which we are expected to do in university, but also to listen to our heart. He placed utmost importance in the ability to access one's intuition. Not by shutting down one's brain and feeling warm and fuzzy, but by tuning into what one can understand on a far deeper level. INTUIT, he would say.

Admonition/s

Dear B.F.A. Graduates:

... there's more than one way of carrying on a Discourse. for instance --- 'you' have all in your own way carried a discourse on with your works-in-progress. furthermore, you have in that act (that subtle, oftentimes tremulous act) carried on a dialogue with other artists past and present. then when the thing to hand has a shapeliness you can stand up for and you let it out into the world 'it' will all by itself further dialogue. . . . every time I look at your work s i bring the whole of what i know as an artist to that occasion and i speak my feeling/knowing. if I may hazard a guess--- art is more like a quest than it is a vocation . . . believe me the 'quest' is literally endless. it's not a matter of putting what you know out there / as much as astonishing yourself. i go on thinking

that each thing I shape knows more than me. i mean an ongoing dialogue with callit the whole 'cosmos' enfolds my very ignorances.

"art is a calling a fool & a scold: an actual speaking out"

(*Heironymus Bosch's Heretical April Fool Diverti-mementos & Other Protestations*)

1. from *Heironymus Bosch's Heretical April Fool Diverti-mementos & Other Protestations*:

"a Gathering of some recent Writings for my 4th year BFA students on the occasion of their graduation. March 25/March 31, '86."

"written copied, 30 times

collated stapled & signed at 648 Keefer St. Vancouver, B.C.

between March 25th & 1st of April

86: under the sign of The Blue Mule

Roy Kiyooka"

2. Interview with Roy Miki in *Inalienable Rice*, Vancouver: Powell Street Revue and the Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop, 1979, p. 63: "It was really green, a beautiful green, but it was also spring"

All Amazed For ROY KIYOOKA

Copyright © 2002 by the contributors

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any form by any means—graphic, electronic or mechanical—without the prior written permission of the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may use brief excerpts in a review, or in the case of photocopying, a license from the Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency.

ARSENAL PULP PRESS
103-1014 Homer Street
Vancouver, B.C.
Canada V6B 2W9
www.arsenalpulp.com

MORRIS AND HELEN BELKIN ART GALLERY
University of British Columbia
1825 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C.
Canada V6T 1Z2
www.belkin-gallery.ubc.ca

Collapse: the new from here

a publication of the VANCOUVER ART FORUM SOCIETY
4629 West 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, B.C.
Canada V6R 1L2 jobrian@interchange.ubc.ca

Arsenal Pulp Press gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the British Columbia Arts Council for its publishing program, and the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program for its publishing activities.

Book Design Judith Steedman
Editorial Assistant Christine Wallace
Copy Editor Cindy Richmond
Proofreader Deanna Ferguson
Conference Transcription Grant MacLean
Printed and bound in Canada

Images provided by Art Gallery of Ontario; Catriona Jeffries Gallery; MacKenzie Art Gallery; Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery; National Art Gallery of Canada; Vancouver Art Gallery; Fumiko Kiyooka with assistance from Henri Robideau; and Glen Lowry.

Michael de Courcy's *Voice: Roy Kiyooka* (1999) is distributed by Video Out Distribution
The Estate of Roy Kiyooka is represented by Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA:
Main entry under title:
All amazed

Copublished by Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery and Collapse.
ISBN 1-55152-117-2

I. Kiyooka, Roy. I. Kiyooka, Roy. II. O'Brian, John, 1944- III. Sawada, Naomi, 1963- IV. Watson, Scott, 1950- V. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. VI. Collapse (Vancouver, B.C.)
N6549.K5A85 2002 709'2 C2002-910492-0

Front Cover Image From: Roy Kiyooka, *Four Generations/Three Occasions*, 1985. 3 Type-C prints, 38 x 35 cm each. Collection: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.

Back Cover Image Roy Kiyooka. Photo: Rhoda Rosenfeld, July 1970.