Interview Project

For this project, I interviewed six people hailing from six different departments at RISD: Painting, Photography, Printmaking, Sculpture, Teaching+Learning in Art+Design, and Continuing Education. Because of a high level of mutual respect between the interviewees and me, I assume such formal conversations could pave the way for a profound understanding of a variety of topics including departmental values, institutional demands, critique models, and teaching philosophy. Numerous moments surprised and humbled me in this project, and I intentionally wanted to offer an open-ended structure to this writing. Through these interviews, I hope seasoned educators can reinvestigate the significance of sensitivity in teaching, and future teachers can realize maximal potential in the transformation from the *educated* to the *educating*. Ultimately, this project aims to reflect the invisible and the ineffable at RISD, and to promote a safe atmosphere for dialogue and argument.

"It is all theater."

Clare has a background in both art and design, and she attended a design school in North Carolina. The focus of her study was in the arts, but her education also provided her with a strong foundation in critical thinking and problem solving. The first two years of her undergraduate study was devoted, in her own words, "to developing a critical, creative, and adaptive way of thinking with a focus on exploration and experimentation." This education was also paired with a study and critique of who the "masters" were.

Clare studied with one of her most trusted faculty members abroad in Prague, and he was free to express his most genuine emotions, even when discussing difficult, if not at times politically incorrect matters. To her, it showcased his exceptional confidence, and it gave her the sense that he really believed in what he was teaching and knew what he was talking about. Although this sort of persona did upset most of others, it was really exceptional to her. She said that teacher has always been so important to her because he was teaching for the subject, and he was audacious to acknowledge his own positions. In other words, he has his idiosyncratic understanding of his research interest, but he was also attempting to depart that register to sense different priorities of students. That level of sensitivity and care for students, although in a way failing some other students, was instrumental to Clare's formative years in college.

When I asked her why she decided to return to school, she somewhat playfully replied, "because I am an idiot." The initial excitement to leave her rural community in NC quickly waned as she realized that a lack of built-in interest in each other in her department permeated the space. She still did not understand why people had that sort of mentality, but it might in part stem from her "whiteness." She argued for the value of intersectionality, and to reach out should not be interpreted as intervention. She would be more at ease with the idea of being perceived as an ignorant person instead of a "shitty" one. She thought that it might have been a quixotic idea that she would have a supportive community here. After all, she might have wished for some basic respect and interest. And she emphasized the word "basic."

One of the most fascinating and elusive episodes during her RISD sojourn is admissions review. The first-year graduate students (in her cohort) were discussing the candidates, and people quickly turned away from the portfolio of a person who just came back from the army. They sensed violence in the works, and they did not want to invite such hostility to the department. Clare encouraged people to not turn away "too quickly," or not be so "homogeneous in judgment," but her comment was not received well. As a result, she was also called violent by one of the cohorts, and still believed that person did not really know her. It was one of the few times Clare felt it was not important to work something out, and it was okay to not be liked and to have opinions not honored, because it seemed that the foundation of trust was usurped. Because Clare was white, the department head approached her and told her that she might be tagged the "bad white person," and some critical race theory was recommended. Ironically, Clare did not grow up in white communities at all, and student bodies in her elementary/middle/high school were very diverse.

Clare recounted vividly about her first group critique at graduate school. She dedicated a piece of work to commemorate her friend who had just passed away. She found video clips of that person on Facebook, from which she gathered he must have been feeling ill, and used them as inspirations for the sculpture/performance. She subsequently broke into tears as her piece was critiqued. It seemed her vulnerability suddenly opened up conversations, and she felt that things were occurring. Little did she know, in her own words, that her vulnerability paved the way for "micro-aggression," because her emotional outburst was labeled a white woman's privilege. A few critics also suggested resources such as therapy, and she felt such institutional gestures might have, in retrospect, furthered her media image as this person who was privileged. In some way, she also felt race theory was suggested to her multiple times from different people, and she might have been victimized, or at least compromised to showcase departmental values which include multiplicity and political correctness. She did not want to be made "an example."

Because of her own less-than-ideal experience as a student, Clare kept reflecting on her decision to come here. It was much more than as escape from her rural North Carolina, because she also wanted to open the door for teaching in the future. She kept considering what it actually means to be a teacher, and what is "teacher-centric learning" in contrast to "student-centered learning."

Although her subsequent group critiques were always textured by her very first one, she never abstained from it. Clare said she is incredibly stubborn, and to put her in uncomfortable situations is a way to be proved wrong. I asked her what she was attempting to find in group critiques. She mentioned two things: support (at best) and genuine feedback. She emphasized the value of earnest comments, because in her group, she felt the presence of lots of malicious acts. However, she would still prefer such disrespect to nothing, because at least people were able to base their criticism at times on observation. In other words, people had to verbalize where the violence of her work came from. Clare said brutality in critiques did not generate growth. In her case, it was abandonment which helped her survive, because she learned how to take isolation, and thus how to be strong.

In her opinion, the ideal critiques would constitute the following properties. She would enjoy visual analyses with shortcomings and suggestions for the work only after listening to the intended goals of the artist. The ideal critique situation would somehow loop back to support the original intention of the artist rather than convincing the artist that it could be something else. I did point out to her that her ideal critique model does assume the artist understands what the goals are, and she said that it has been clear to her what she would specifically want from critiques as an artist through all these years of training.

As a future teacher, she would pay attention to the following priorities. She believes in leadership positions, and even if no real investment in the group could be tangible, she would want to make it a requisite that people "fake it" to promote generosity. Also, the structure of the critique could be determined before it actually happens so that mutual agreements between the presenter and the viewers/critics would be clear. She claimed that "it is all theater," so it might prove why she

thinks that the leadership position teachers should assume is ultra-important to guarantee that students do receive feedbacks.

We also had an extensive conversation revolving around the change of Clare's work since she began her studies at RISD. She saw her stay here as a departure from the fabrication shop she managed in rural NC, and she thus did not pursue too much material fabrication at RISD. However, some priorities stayed consistent, such as the exploration of sound and light and the inclusions of such in her sculptural installations. Aided by her difficulty fitting into the group, she, at times, had doubts whether she should be an artist, but she also acknowledged that such identity struggle would be instrumental in shaping her own approach to art. After all, she is happy making art and when she is in her studio, and she finds immense joy when she is working. I find it fascinating and am very glad that Clare continues to enjoy being happy despite her allergy to the larger environment in her department.

Clare also finds an exciting parallel between her compromised position during critiques and her standpoint as an artist, and she is currently investigating the distinction, if any, between content and format. She mentioned fondly about her most recent research on the ineffable, and how her installation can be largely about the resistance to verbalization both for its format as well as content. I find this point radical. Sculptural installations do privilege this investigation because traditional media such as painting and printmaking might not easily foster this examination. Installations are also experienced and are thus environmental so that more possibilities do surface. Her experience at RISD also prompts her to question everything including the pre-established notions about art criticism, and she asserts that in this most recent work she is very interested in "catharsis and internal processing as a way to move past happenings." Ultimately, her RISD experience is an enjoyable break from her past experience in rural NC, and she chooses to stay because the way she takes damage is also a way to further strengthen her own mentality, not only as an artist but also as a person. Also, she remains hopeful that a RISD degree might pave the way for teaching positions.

"I have a burning desire to be intellectual."

Michael went to a Christian liberal arts college and majored in studio art with a focus on photography. He told me because he did not go to art school, he was only marginally exposed to art, and although he did dabble in digital media, painting, drawing, he felt he lacked the community around the arts. Moreover, Michael has a fascination with photography theory, and he was only able to work with one professor who understood this specific subject matter. Unfortunately, it was quite hard to communicate with that professor. A paradoxical situation thus permeated his BA study: that person was the "most helpful" because he was well-versed in photo theory, but he was also the "least helpful" because it was not easy to talk to him. That professor being the only go-to person encouraged Michael to look for an environment of artist communities of actual photographers, where he could receive regular feedbacks with "questions and ongoing comments" regarding both technical and conceptual concerns.

In other words, Michael was interested in access, because his undergraduate institution failed him 150%. As we were almost trying to make a transition to the *now,* Michael revisited his experience as an undergraduate student and pointed out one class which was potentially life-changing. It was a senior seminar on critical theory, and in conjunction with other studio-based courses, it really stood out because of its artistic vision. When asked why that class was so helpful, Michael said that the rigor was set up in the beginning with a preface on the efforts expected as well as a few potential limitations to the pre-existing class structure. Also, the class was self-guided instead of assignments-based, and a very high level of autonomy was salient. More importantly, critique guidelines were spelled out from day one so that every critique had at least a clear structure. Almost everyone really appreciated this class. For Michael, it shaped his artist identity significantly, because it was the first time he understood the potential of non-project-based classes: "If I am not going to re-do any project, why should we critique these pieces?"

Michael applied to graduate school right after college because he did not want to be intimidated by the application process and he hoped to learn to collect recommendation letters. In other words, he wanted to "start practicing applying" early. I asked him to elaborate, and he said that some of his friends, regardless of their age, always regretted not being able to go to school early. Michael did not want it to happen to him, and he had a "burning desire" to be part of a community that would "read the same" and devote to photography. However, Michael also said he longed for such a community not for identification purposes, but so that he could have conversation partners. His only intentions after college included either a Peace Corps fellowship to Nicaragua or photography graduate school, and it all worked out at the end with RISD.

His expectations of RISD already eluded him "except for the ones which were not met," and Michael was interested in elaborating on what his original "burning desire" was. After contemplation, he claimed that it came from his formative years, and he still has the same desire here. He thought that most of his peers here do have profound technical literacy, but they could have done more in photography theory and the philosophy of photography. Michael then posed

the question about the relationship between being anti-intellectual and a lack of interest, for which neither of us had an instantly clear answer.

Michael also felt most of his peers here are interested in the humanist approach to photography which is based on social awareness, but he is more excited about the "incredibly complicated and poetic power of photography." He would like to situate his own practice in the ability of photography to inform other disciplines which could be both conceptual and theoretical, whereas others might be a bit too practical for him.

Michael looked forward to his first group critique at RISD a lot. However, he got the following feedbacks: "Your photos are boring." "What do you expect us to understand?" "Please explain to me like I am five." "My mother would not understand it." He was shocked by the lack of intellectuality, and this first formal conversation revolving around his work greatly disappointed him. Michael also told me that "to have the artist present is a privilege," but many people's broad concept of art criticism and interpretations fell into the "intentionalist fallacy." He cited Monroe Beardsley for this term, because firstly, "most criteria for interpretation are given to the intention of the artist," and secondly, "it is an exaggerated emphasis on the artist rather than the art object." He was also surprised that people always asked him whether things are intended, because Michael said although he was indeed here, but he might not always give the viewers what viewers want. Michael was eager to advocate for the value of looking closely without taking anything for granted, and he wondered whether critiques actually prevent means to talk about art *in general.*

Because Michael intended to gain from critiques, he has recently decided to change his strategy as well as ways of speech. He did think he was always clear for critique, but many people told him that his way of explaining things actually prohibited access. Furthermore, he was perceived as ungenerous. Michael said that he was willing to accept that he was "handicapped," so he must radically adjust his own style to receive future feedbacks. He did also say he was labeled "malicious," "overly confident," and "pretentious," and he wanted to change. Michael said he has been attempting to be softer, calmer and clearer.

Due to his shift of style, Michael's reception changed significantly. But so did his work. He also tested creating works specifically to provide accessibility, but despite the fact that it was so overt, his gestures were still not always acknowledged. Michael said that it might be the nature of critiques with the same people over and over again, and he was unsure whether his peers were just tired of his work.

The question of the ideal group critique condition eluded Michael, and he contemplated in front of me for a while before he rejoined the conversation. He found it necessary to set boundaries and limitations to promote the structure of the critique, and he thought that "prescriptive" things such as "You should…" "I would like…" should be avoided. In contrast, he preferred "descriptive" comments with formal observations to emphasize what could be seen, and consistent references to the history of art with some theoretical emphasis will situate the

presented works in a larger context. Also, Michael wished for a high level of critical thinking even if people are not well-versed, and he thought that critiques could provide a significant chance for people to find conversations partners.

As we segued into a discussion on excellent teaching, he found it important to set the tone for every course he is to teach from day one. He emphasized the clarity of the syllabus, and he would make three texts mandatory (even for studio/critique classes) so that peers share some theoretical resources. Also, he considered it important to offer freedom to students, and he would like to offer self-guided projects just like his senior seminar in college. On the other hand, since Michael is fascinated with the power of conversations critiques foster, he would want his students to familiarize themselves with formalized methods of criticism so that students could always "acknowledge the radical positions they assume and later be ready to question." Most importantly, Michael would love to, together with his students, discover the union between photography and theory.

Regarding the development of Michael's work since he began studying at RISD, he said he realized his previous bodies of work might be naive, and that they are now highly critical because of his more well-rounded understanding of the discipline. He talked about "style," which to him is the method of execution, and his styles now entailed abstraction and deadpan situations ("dull," "mundane," and "the lack of aesthetic flourish"). Through his research on photography and theory, which he hoped to manifest in actual photos too, one thing which really increased in intensity for Michael was the interest in the self and the immediate world, and he is laying emphasis on the power of imagination at the moment. He enjoys exploring what it means to be personal, and he intends to only make work where he is. He believes it would be "an act of ingratitude if he said he needed to go elsewhere to find something worth responding to and photographing." He wants to be "thankful for the things in the immediate midst, which is the most important place" and the one where he is.

In other words, his imagination lies strictly in the self as well as in the immediate, and he usually sees no need for travel to produce work. He says that the "space of the every day" is where he collects "the excess of intention" which showcases the fascinating aesthetic of the world. In this sense, he also prioritizes his approach to photography instead of his subject matters as a way to more readily capture both the "arbitrary" and the "rational." For instance, he used the wall holes in his studio as a metaphor, and he explained to me if he would take pictures of such, he would be less interested in where they came from but more so in the potential shift of meanings. He believes that photography can highlight such code switch.

We ended our interview with a quote Michael shared. "All of our actions have unintended consequence." For Michael, the content is the construction of meanings, and the subject matters as vehicles are just mark-making. Michael will be more than ready to discuss what it means to have meanings when he encounters meaninglessness.

"I will back you up."

Chris has an engineering background and focused on UI and UX for her undergraduate study. For her thesis project, however, she made leather bags. She talked very passionately about how "function, creativity, and design can all come together for men in the form of a bag." Her bags were entirely hand-sewn, and her thesis project entailed a full wall of bags of different functions (backpacks, handbags, messenger bags, etc.). I commented that it must have been such a spectacular project, but she told me that she was never sure about reception—she is unsure whether people were merely flattering her or actually appreciating them. I found this comment exceptionally interesting, and I did revisit this piece of information regarding the reception in different contexts with Chris throughout our conversation.

She applied to RISD's TLAD department because she believed in the role of an art educator, which "is greater than that of a designer" in the sense that she could influence and inspire the next generation. She was also accepted at another school for its world-class industrial design program, and she decided to come to RISD because she believed in education.

She was eager to arrive at RISD because she wanted to have the courage to try new things. She also said she expected to see a lot of weird art world people. Regarding the TLAD curriculum, she knew little before she arrived, and the biggest surprise for her was the graduation requirement of a complete thesis project. Another shock for her was how some of the undergraduate students in her elective classes lacked motivation. She commented that they were most likely not forced to come to art school, but why were they not paying any attention to class?

Chris appreciated the size of Providence because she enjoyed walking. The close relationship between her housemates and neighbors was something she never experienced before. Moreover, the care and respect from professors at RISD really impressed her, and it was much more indifferent in her college.

Chris mentioned one specific example of excellent teaching at RISD. She told one teacher that she might have socialphobia, and her teacher allowed her to not speak for the whole semester. She would email and text the teacher, but seldom talk to the teacher. She felt her request was honored, and she received immense respect. Such kinds of mutual understanding prompted her to work even harder, because for her college years, if she told people she did not want to talk because of socialphobia, people would force her to "be tough." In other words, the lack of verbalization in class actually generated motivation and growth for Chris.

Chris said teachers in her department were very knowledgeable, useful, and helpful, and she felt they genuinely cared for student growth. Also, they emphasized "students' aesthetic development." She remembered vividly about one assignment where she was encouraged to visit numerous places on campus to find the an "aesthetic" place, and she chose the piano in the basement of the MET cafeteria. She said that it was because of this assignment that she was able to locate the "shelter of the dying romantic." I was fascinated by this choice of wording and I

said her peers must have loved her presentation on that piano and its spatial conditions. She said, again, that she was unsure about reception, because it was usually ambiguous and she did not have to interpret. She mentioned that this level of unclarity did make her wonder what it meant to have precision for reception. She currently has no answer.

Chris also made a distinction between the reception of art and art theory. She believed that a fundamental difference would lie in what is objective and subjective for both disciplines. For her field of art education, she would like to emphasize the significance of evidence and the necessity to base arguments on concrete examples. In other words, discussions on art theory are more down-to-earth than art critiques which she thought constituted too many "likes" and "dislikes."

She had limited exposure to art school critiques because she could only take a few electives for her program. Because she only took introductory art classes, she thought critiques were mainly for discussions on technique and craft and were not too focused on concepts. If people mentioned that it was well-done, she would think it was "well-done technically." She said because she did not have an art background, she made art for self-satisfaction and actually cared little about what other people thought. However, she did think critiques influenced her in one specific way, and it was to get things done. Besides that aspect, she did not want to comment too much on critiques because she claimed she was not experienced.

I asked Chris what she would emphasize if she were to lead a group discussion/critique, and she said she would prefer to have one-on-one conversations with her students because of the value of sitting "face-to-face." Of course, the size of the class would play a role on the feasibility of this strategy, because she said if her class had more than 20 people, it might be too much to always have individual critiques or discussions. In this sense, class size mattered for her. Also, she would explore new ways of non-verbal conversations, because some people such as herself would be reluctant to speak in public because of the social contract. In other words, creative indirect methods could be implemented so that "all 'voices' could be heard."

If Chris had a choice to teach a variety of subjects, she would choose to teach electives instead of mandatory major requirement classes. She would hope to foster self-motivation and self-growth, and she would free students of unnecessary administrative burdens so that they could actually learn. Also, she would like to make sure students understand she would not force them too much, and self-guided student projects might promote profound ways of learning if students could keep communicating with her what they would aspire to achieve. Most importantly, she believed in the everyday aesthetic, and she would like to explore alternative methods in pedagogy to achieve unexpected effects.

"I will back you up" was the support Chris received from her peers a few minutes before a final presentation. And she would like to always do the same for her future students.

"They are what they are."

Since I always enjoy conversations with Mary, my interview with her was largely unpredictable prior to us sitting down. I had understood it could have the tendency to become dry because we knew each other rather well and our previous casual chats might have already touched base on some of the issues I would like to formally focus on. In this sense, I found this interview challenging, and I hope to acknowledge this aspect before transcribing the exact content.

Mary had a background in studio art during her undergraduate study, and she mainly devoted her time to two disciplines: sculpture and printmaking. She mentioned two professors who had immensely influenced her artistic vision, and her appreciation and respect for both teachers were grounded in different dimensions. Mary really liked the sculpture teacher's work as well as his class structure, and class discussions were thus usually inspiring. The printmaking professor, on the other hand, always critiqued Mary's works but never attempted to change anything, and Mary found this aspect particularly encouraging. These two teachers also prompted Mary to apply to graduate school right after college, and she did. As she was hunting for schools, she wanted to apply to places which did not limit artistic directions because she would like to take classes in numerous departments. Very interestingly, Mary went to a few portfolio review events and stayed in line for graphic design graduate programs, but professors all seemed to encourage her to apply to fine art graduate programs. She had thought that she would be able to excel in graphic design and perhaps find jobs easily after graduate school, but she was also quite sure she "would find it boring."

Before arriving at RISD, she had the expectations that "things are going to be what they are." She thought that because it is graduate-level study, professors might not be that involved. As she visited campus prior to accepting the offer, she was surprised at the printmaking building which she thought was quite "old" and not that "up-to-date." She was also intrigued by the boundary of RISD during her first visit to Providence because she did not find a RISD campus. Since moving here officially, Mary really enjoyed the city and the distance from the printmaking building to the graduate center. Although it was very easy to walk/drive between these two places, the displacement offered her some insights into the contrasting culture embedded in different locations.

She quickly found graduate school to be less rigorous and time-consuming than her expectation, and she thought critiques were quite much more benign. When we discussed a few specific critique scenarios, Mary called attention to how shocked she was that the first group critique with the graduate printmaking students was not harsh at all. People would not "face any consequences" if they did not have enough work to show. In other words, that first group critique was too encouraging, and she had assumed works would embody higher quality and that professors would have higher standards. She commented on how brutal some critiques were during college, and she remembered very vividly that her sculpture professor in college might call out people who he thought did not meet the standard of the institution. Mary also shared another incident in college where she had a drawing teacher who was consistently checking in on

her drawing during one open studio session. As she made one superfluous mark, the teacher told her that she had "ruined it." She found it funny that the teacher was paying so much attention to that particularly drawing, but she did agree that she failed the drawing because of that specific mark.

Mary's first group critique experience at RISD, which constituted for the most part positive comments, made her reflect on the different academic environment both in college and at RISD. For her, she would prefer to receive straight-forward critiques of the work "based on honest analysis," and she would have no problems with judgmental comments. Also, she would like to know how successful "viewers think the work could achieve what the artist intends to do," because at the very basic level, if "a traditional figure drawing reminded people of a house," something might have gone astray. Offering students/professors/critics clear frameworks regarding art criticism, in Mary's words, will help students track their own growth. Moreover, she also believed that "if you do not try, nobody would care what you do." On the other hand, she recounted that mostly second-year students discussed works with professors during the first group critique, and she "might have appreciated feedbacks from all students." She did also acknowledge it might not be a RISD-specific problem, but institutional hierarchy between professors and students, and perhaps among students, was clear.

Mary also commented on the culture identity of the critique room, which seemed to be existing in its own vacuum. She found it disappointing, because she also would like to imagine her works existing in places outside school. "How do I know what my work will be like in a gallery or in a children's museum?" In this sense, Mary already knew what the work would look like in, for instance, Fletcher 203, and she would find it more exciting if works were able to occupy unfamiliar and unknown spaces. "The switch of location" might make critiques more unpredictable.

Mary emphasized the significance of honest feedbacks again, because genuine comments are "self-generated and not forced." She remembered a student who said during critiques that somebody else was crazy and Mary did not mind it at all because of that person's "resistance to indifference." In other words, that person felt it was necessary to express certain ideas. Although Mary did suspect that person did not care about the relationship with the artist (because "the bridge was already burned"), she appreciated such "real" conversations. After all, even positive feedbacks are not always honest.

If Mary were to lead a critique, she would focus on a detailed visual analysis of the work. She would encourage "opposing opinions" so that no one "loud voice" would make the artist believe it was the overall reception whereas in reality it might not have been so easy to determine. More importantly, she would also foster private one-on-one conversations between peers because she would like to respect people who would be more comfortable to discuss art privately.

Because of the lackluster academic expectation at RISD, she had the tendency to spend less time on working because no pressure was there to force her to finish. Such mentality did influence her

work, because it seemed that "nobody was expecting to see finished works during critiques." Also, Mary was very surprised that "it might be okay to not have any work." Since coming to RISD, Mary has only finished a handful of print projects, and she said the same time in college would have "resulted in much more work." This contrast in the environment did make her contemplate ideas such as quality, quantity, ambition, completion, as well as autonomy.

As she adjusted her work habit at RISD, she did think that work-in-progress critiques would eventually "kill her motivation" to finish, because it felt like "it did not have to be finished." It was precisely because of her one experience of showing still in-progress prints that she told herself she would like to show mostly finished works for subsequent critiques so that she can gain more helpful comments.

Regarding the change of the content of her work, Mary said her source of imagery has not changed, but she is starting to incorporate the idea of over-simplification for her usual subject matters as a method of abstraction. In a way, her much-used imagery is now becoming more flexible in the sense that it can embody the action of zooming in and zooming out. On the other hand, Mary also starts to meticulously design spaces which are "contextless," because she would like to pose this seemingly unanswerable question: "Could personality/identity of an artist not matter?" Ultimately, Mary believes in the possibility of getting to know her through her work, and she hopes artworks can successfully influence the *image* of the artist rather than using the experience of the artist to guide understanding of the visual.

"Art has the potential to channel."

Wu came from a creative family with a deep-rooted appreciation for art, and Wu started the interview with me by exclaiming "it was not a choice to become an artist." I found this statement very powerful. As she explained to me that her majors in college were marine biology/ neuropsychology/ethnographic studies, and I suddenly realized what she meant was probably much more than I had understood. Maybe it was not necessary to study art to become an artist or to make art. I was fascinated with Wu's determination.

Wu began painting extensively when her grandmother passed away, because she believed that she could "re-capture the essence of a person through the materiality of the paint." Her college years in a liberal arts college encouraged her to consider different ways of "combining inter-connectivity," and her dedication to "materials instead of words" helped her gain interest in the ineffable. After earning a fellowship to attend Yale Norfolk and a professional life in set design after college, she gradually understood that her passion was in painting. She thus "cut off ties with other disciplines" and dedicated most of her time to painting.

Wu stated that her experience at Yale Norfolk was very important for her artist identity. The critics discussed a wide range but in particular "looked at the importance of content, labor, and the politics behind the act of painting." One of the painter friends at Yale Norfolk explicitly asked her "how it felt like to be playing with the boys," and she was exceptionally aware of the sexism and exclusion salient in the painter's community. She was interested in the status quo in the art world, and it was precisely this inquiry that prompted her to investigate "whose narrative was really relevant." Wu said also that critiques at Yale Norfolk were brutal, and conversations largely revolved around "labor." She did, however, gain many insights, and she learned, for instance, to approach the same topic by "asking questions in slightly different and thus diplomatic ways." After a few residencies in both the U.S. and Argentina, she decided it was time for her to go to graduate school.

Since Wu came from an artist family, Wu was conscious of her mother's repeated hesitation for her to go to art school because it was widely believed in her family that "art cannot be taught." Also, her family of artists greatly doubted the efficacy of critiques, because they did not believe it was always necessary to "have a sword in the stomach." However, Wu thought that she would be interested in an intense two years of dedicating herself to painting with a close-knit community of artists, and she thus came to RISD.

Wu chose RISD because the school's ethnic included a belief in the making. She liked the interview process where she was able to pose questions to a room full of painting faculty, and she asked about "the definition of painting." One person responded it was to "collaborate with materials and to at times let go of ego," and this answer gave Wu enormous inspiration. She decided on RISD because she saw herself able to expand her visual vocabulary as well as to use the time and space to inform both artistic and theoretical practices (Wu enjoyed theories/art history very much). On the other hand, she was very excited to take on the TA position, because

for her, "it would be a privilege to teach and to influence people." Most importantly, she was eager to situate her practice in a group of artists who could be similar-minded, because she did not have any artistic community in college. Wu claimed that "magical things might happen if other people around you could value the world in the same way."

As Wu arrived at RISD, her student loan hit her really hard. She was surprised at the cost of everything as well as the reality of debt. Such reality check forced her to navigate how to offer generosity and trust to her peers, and to "find people to resonate with." However, she was surprised at the painting department, because it seemed people were quite "cynical." In contrast, because of her consistent encounter with death, she realized "the immense potential of art not restricted to the medium of painting," and she was at times guilty at RISD because of the privilege of painting without having to think about the world. "There has not been a moment in the studio that I have not had the world and its weight as the foundation of my practice. Wu thought she may be one of the few people in the program who felt this way and has thus attempted to challenge herself by making art with the politics of life, relationship, and gender dynamics. In her own words, such "elitist approach" of painting just to paint was not helpful to make the world a better place, and she thought that artists should have the potential to implement change. She also told me "dictators always tried to get rid of artists first, because they could change the consciousness of people." Unlike her peers who would strictly pay attention to beautiful paintings, she was very much interested in "art as a dialogue which does not have to generate specific and pre-conceived modes of readings." She was therefore experimenting with different media like assemblage and immersive installations. Wu also commented on how we were all living in the "post-modern computer screen era," where art needed to be "instagrammable." She would like to fight against this convention because "meaning is dictated by the materiality of reality instead of virtuality." And that resistance could be a way to call attention to the ineffable.

Regarding her first critique with the painting department at RISD, she was literally trying to be "armed for the battlefield." However, what surprised her was that technicality remained the lead of the play throughout the session, and discussions on content and the underlying messages were largely lacking. Wu found it "funny" that some of her peers were not interested in "what the work was about," but rather paid excessive attention to the painter identity. In a way, everybody accepted it too easily that "painting is painting." More importantly, Wu also realized people did not intend to verbalize about their work, and in contrast, she found it quite important to "talk about reality instead of merely moving paint around the canvas." For instance, one painter depicted a fascinating scene of a dying father, but feelings were not talked about. Wu wondered whether it was actually possible to avoid such discussions, because that work definitely "started a dialogue." All in all, conversations revolved around the technicality and facility with painting, and Wu found them at times disappointing.

Wu said the second departmental critique was more exciting, because people were interested in being more direct with art criticism. For instance, a landscape painter was advised to "use his brain and to go to the library" so that he could anticipate profundity, and Wu thought "exactly;" it

was necessary to have a "civic relationship with the world instead of merely paint." In other words, artists need to not only "connect with materials" but also "see the potential in that exchange."

Regarding the critique structure, Wu hoped to see a higher level of diversity in the context of conversation, because she would be interested to hear more voices. Moreover, because artist statements were usually not required and it was usually a "cold read," she was unsure how "bridges could be built" besides the visual if the artist intention was left uninvestigated. After all, Wu believed in the fluency and potency of artistic visions, and since life is so complex and layered, art has "the potential to channel."

Besides these critiques, since the painting department had a rotating roster of visiting artists, Wu also thought it was necessary to call attention to studio visits with invited artists. Because of the wealth of people coming in, Wu started to consider how "materials and conversation" could translate. She learned to prioritize some people and used experiences with others as practice sessions.

If she were to re-imagine graduate school critiques, she would place emphasis on the content so that artists could consider the question of "what it meant to be a person in contemporary life." In a way, the deep specificity of individual experience could prompt life-long dialogues and inquiries, and painting could extend beyond the materials. However, Wu also re-iterated that material is indeed a language, and she would not leave this conversation unattended in any critiques. Furthermore, Wu said her intention to prioritize "the visual poetry" was based on her dyslexia. Previous life experiences also encouraged her to consider the inefficacy of words, and she saw "more relations and potential between colors" because they capably generated more sense perceptions.

When I asked Wu how her worked has changed since RISD, she told me she has been prioritizing the idea of "living contemporarily," because it is "our responsibility as artists to ask actively and continually what our civic duties are and how we could use the privilege of having a physical space as a studio to implement tangible cultural and political changes." She did acknowledge it sounded cliche, but it was a genuine quest for her for the past year: she saw her position of an artist as a way to "facilitate and hold spaces for human spirit and even humanity." She intended to use her female portraits to fight for gender equality, and various symbols in her paintings infused narratives into the canvas through "signification." Although Wu thought her narrative might not be obvious, and that she did not want her paintings to be "overt statements," she found it crucial to include "keys" such as greek busts and cigarettes packs from the 1960s. When she showed me a painting of an advertisement of Budweiser in 1963 which said "when you need to get her drunk," she told me "there is not one day on the street that she is not hassled." Essentially, her paintings attempt to address this precarious moment in American history now.

"Keep eyes wide open."

For this interview project, I also intended to look beyond the RISD bubble. Can art school critiques help people who are not in the field of art and design? Simon is a gymnastics and CrossFit coach in Providence, and he enrolled himself in a graphic design class with RISD Continuing Education. I thus wanted to include his voice because it had the potential to be *different.* It, indeed, was, because our conversation largely revolved around the structure of the critique and the environment of the community, instead of the actual effectiveness.

Simon has a background in finance and business, and when asked why he wanted to take a graphic design class, he said he "simply wanted to." He really enjoyed listening to podcasts on design, and he was thus always curious about the design field. He also knew he was "a visual person," and visual culture always worked better for him than reading. He went into the class with a few specific questions: "What does it mean to be a designer?" "Does design have to incorporate tools and softwares?" "What does it mean to design successfully?" In essence, Simon's coaching philosophy has always been to "learn without necessary outcomes" so that people can focus on the action of learning. He attempted to achieve the same for his graphic design class.

He did not know specifically what he would do in the graphic design class at RISD. Nor did he know the class size would be so big. What surprised him also was the big age gap in the class: they had many older women and just a few students who were in their twenties and thirties. On the other hand, group activities were planned throughout the six weeks, and trainings on design thinking were largely collaborative instead of individual.

Because the class met once a week for six weeks, the instructor usually had critiques for each session after the first and the second. Each student would have five to seven minutes to explain what they had done with the assignment and what some of the challenges were. Simon thought that "because of the friendliness of older women," the general critique climate was "encouraging and at times fluffy." People liked to be nice to each other and "there really was no point to hurt." Moreover, critiques were also much more "question-based" than Simon had expected, and at times the instructor had to "pull back voices" which were not focusing on design strategies.

Simon really appreciated the first design project where he was encouraged to think about one specific object. It was a blind pick and he was requested to research on the history, business, and theory of the standardized pencils in elementary school. Simon selected this object to focus on because of his fascination with gymnastics, and his professional life as a coach constituted encouraging people to understand their body. In every sense, drawing with a pencil could be perceived as "using one's extended body," and to flow with a pencil could make people realize what it meant to have the pencil as "part of oneself." With this project, Simon really liked how he was able to start from a simple and mundane object and to infuse intellectual thinking in the process of deconstructing it and interpreting it.

Simon always went first when it came to group critiques, because he thought people were more generous for the first hour. While his peers sometimes said things which were too "fluffy" and students thus indulged in mutual "back-patting," he felt the instructor always had insightful things to say because of her emphasis on the philosophical side of design. But he was also at times disappointed by the short amount of time available for his critique session. Also, the teacher always "concluded and wrapped up" each critique, and she never steered the conversation too much. In a way, she was more like a "time-keeper" for the group and acknowledged each individual voice (unless it went too far away from the design register).

Very early on when Simon's teacher was discussing the idea of a group critique, she told people it was not necessary to always "let other people stand in your shoes." In a way, Simon recounted that she was encouraging people to really process other people's remarks and to use them "through your own eyes." Also, it might be significant to understand where one is coming from and to not always suggest based on "what you would do." Trying to understand each other's design strategy might be the first step to offer insightful comments.

Simon mentioned that this class on graphic design opened many doors to him, because he learned to emphasize going through an actual process with constant reflections. Since he found having a notebook exceptionally helpful for his design course, he started carrying one around wherever he would go. He treated it as a way to look around for information and to jot down ideas, and he would not be worried about the formal aspect of drawing or writing. In essence, Simon learned from his graphic design class that it was okay to "just write and to reflect."

I then posed the question of what he would do if he were to lead a graphic design class, and he said with no hesitation that he would prioritize "the act of seeing," because it would be such a privilege to be able to "keep eyes wide open." Moreover, he would emphasize the ability to "process information," and he found this aspect to be key to a profound way of design thinking. On the other hand, "to internalize, to reflect, to brainstorm, and to approach different perspectives" would all be important lessons he would like to offer to his students. Regarding what he would change for the critique structure, he would opt to do critiques on different days instead of on one evening for the whole class so that "conversations could be more in-depth." He would also encourage people to discuss the theoretical side of design to "offer a significant context," and he would try to figure out a way so that critiques would not remain "as fluffy as they were." Also, to combine theory and practice could make critiques "more interesting and less predictable." Another key point for Simon's teaching philosophy would be "to teach from a very empathetic standpoint" so that he could understand who people really were; he could then help people "create through experiencing."

In a very curious way, Simon's brief encounter with graphic design has already informed his own teaching in the sense that hopes to be a coach who "designs experience" for his clients. He appreciates the similarity of being both a coach and a teacher, and his arsenal of skills and knowledge prompts him at the moment to understand "when to insert himself and when to stay quiet." He hopes to "create a platform" for his students to learn so that he can honor situations

when "learning happens individually." At the moment as he coaches, he intends to design his own workouts so that his trainees can "expand their physical vocabularies." As he continues to enjoy gymnastics and CrossFit, he also attempts to find a common thread through different sports and disciplines, including design. Ultimately, Simon has gained an important insight from his graphic design class at RISD, and it is to "broaden perspectives and relinquish one-dimensional thinking."