

# STORYTELLINGS



The work by Peter Kingstone and Lucie Chan in Modern Fuel's latest exhibition ***Storytellings*** gives a voice to stories from communities that might have otherwise gone unheard. Taking up the entire gallery, *Storytellings* presents a major video installation by each artist, putting these stories centre-stage. Kingstone's ***100 Stories about My Grandmother*** is a four-channel video installation that weaves together documentary portraits of male sex workers telling stories about their grandmothers. By presenting these stories, Kingstone subverts some expectations viewers might have about the subjects of his videos, positioning them more as individuals than types. Visitors to Modern Fuel are invited to lounge in the cozy environment created for these videos and listen to the thoughts and memories of an often marginalized community.

Chan's video installation ***Yearning to See*** was created during a residency in Banff where she drew portraits of people that she met while asking them if there was a "personal cultural lesson" they might share. She took the "cultural lessons" that she received from the Canadians, immigrants, and international visitors she met during the residency, along with their drawn portraits, and created several animations that have a luminous and dream-like quality. The mysterious narratives of these lessons, which often deal with loss and longing, and the stillness of the searching faces in the portraits, are meant to cause the viewer to stop and wonder. *Storytellings* raises issues of social/cultural voyeurism at the same time that it bridges the distance between people, creating an intimate space for encounters that play with and displace assumptions.

## See images of the exhibition [here](#)

**Lucie Chan** was born in Guyana and currently lives and works in Vancouver, BC. Recently her work has shown at the Mount Saint Vincent Art Gallery in Halifax, the National Art Gallery in Ottawa, and the Doris McCarthy Gallery in Scarborough, Toronto. Her work is drawing, installation and animation based, addressing cultural loss, personal narrative, and fleeting intimacy between people. **Peter Kingstone** is a single channel and installation video artist. He lives in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. He holds a Philosophy/Cultural Studies Degree from Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, and Masters of Fine Arts from York University, Toronto, Ontario. His single channel pieces are distributed by Vtape.

## Exhibition Essay

**Down in the Park, Friends are Electric** When I visited New York City for the first time as a tourist I was shaken by an extraordinary sense of déjà-vu. That a place in which I had never set foot should seem so familiar filled me with the uncanniest feeling, and a certainty that I had seen these sights before, that I had in fact walked the path around the Lake in Central Park. I attributed this feeling, of course, to the countless television shows and movies set in New York that I had watched throughout my life as if in preparation for that visit. In contrast, my experiences of places I lived in and people I knew were rarely if ever reflected back at me in the stories told in the hours of television and movies that I watched. I sensed a phantom nation in the shadows of the entertainment industry. I began to seek it out where I could, and the closest I got to seeing it was by playing “spot the location” while watching Quebecois television when I was living in Montreal. Though it might be easy to make the mass media a target for criticism, it is truly up to a dissatisfied audience to change the channel.

The popularity of Youtube and other outlets where people can upload their own stories and representations of themselves is a testament to this need to dispel the shadows. The artists in *Storytellings*, Peter Kingstone and Lucie Chan, have done their part to bring the stories of people they have encountered in the places they've been to the television screen or screens in the video installations at Modern Fuel. These artists have sought out specific stories that speak to their own experiences in order to become more able to articulate the lack of their own.

Peter Kingstone embarked on a project in which he solicited 100 male sex workers to tell him stories about their grandmothers so that he could create a composite portrait of a grandmother he never knew, and fill in a gap in his own identity. All he knew of his grandmother was what his mother had told him: that she had immigrated to Canada from London, England when his mother was two, that she had disappeared when his mother was seventeen, and in the interim she had worked numerous jobs, including sex trade work, in order to support her family. The project thereby satisfied a two-fold desire to elucidate an unknown: Growing up queer in the suburbs of Ottawa, Kingstone also never saw or knew any prostitutes other than ones in stories or in stereotypical media representations of them. Watching over six hours footage of interviews with sex workers from Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Miami and London, England (places Kingstone was told his grandmother had visited), any viewer of *100 Stories About My Grandmother* (2008) will meet a widely diverse group of people, some who remain anonymous and some who make sure to identify themselves. This group is bound to outstrip any preconceptions viewers might have while simultaneously connecting with them on a subject with which everyone can relate: their grandmother. The intimacy established is reinforced by the environment of the installation that conjures up a parlour room tête-à-tête. The stories told, and the grandmothers, are as diverse as the interviewees, some mean some generous. Encountering these people and inferring from them a portrait of the artist and his grandmother, a viewer will find that his or her own sense of self and knowledge of relations with others will be tested.

The second video installation in *Storytellings*, Lucie Chan's *Yearning to See* (2008) is another portrait gallery of sorts that also functions as a self-portrait, and it forms a kind of unconscious or subconscious to the exhibition. Chan has been pursuing a practice in which, like in Kingstone's project, she has solicited strangers to tell her stories about their lives that she then transforms into video portraiture. Interviewing people in a number of cities across Canada, she pointedly asks them to share a “personal cultural lesson” which she draws and animates. Connecting with strangers from diverse backgrounds she hopes to be influenced by and incorporate their diverse and specific experiences. *Yearning to See* was completed during residency in Banff, and five of the stories she got from the Canadians, immigrants and international visitors she met there are being shown at Modern Fuel, along with their animated portraits.

Unlike the frankness of Kingstone's portraits, where the specific details accrue to disrupt a stereotype, Chan's sources remain largely anonymous and the stories private or coded through her drawing style and animation techniques. Superimposition, fluidity, and a wavering focus render her subject matter dreamlike and mysterious. By doing so, Chan wishes to further the idea that individual perspectives and histories are fleeting in nature and transformed by the interpretation of others. Ironically, the most legible of the personal lessons, from someone identified as

“Humberto,” includes a piece of text that reads “Integrate more,” which appears to, like the often supine and faceless figures in Chan’s other animations, detach itself and drift off out of the frame. Viewers that heed that message and try to integrate what they see will reveal as much about themselves as if they were interpreting their own dreams.

By the late '30s and amongst the rising tide of the information age, the great philosopher of art in the age of technological reproducibility Walter Benjamin had already perceived that the tradition of storytelling was on the wane. If storytelling is incompatible with the need for plausibility and exposition in the dissemination of information, then its pulse can still be felt in the work of Kingstone and Chan. By virtue of their ambitious projects that present only a fragment of a whole that needs to be filled out by a viewer, Kingstone and Chan betray the allegorical impulse of much post-modernist art, manifesting a collapse of the grand historical narratives that have left little but the commodity standing. Benjamin too had adjusted his forms to the new age, adopting a patchwork, appropriational approach to projects that were as totalizing as they were fragmented.

One such work left unfinished at the time of his death was enigmatically entitled “Central Park,” a place he saw only on a map of Manhattan. Perhaps filling out that fantastic gap of the park in the centre of the metropolis with acts Benjamin could only imagine, the text obsessively cycles around a few recurring motifs: the poet Charles Baudelaire, selling out as an artist, male impotence, and prostitutes. Sigmund Freud notes in his essay on the uncanny that repetition takes on significance when a pattern is identified. In that same essay, he relates an anecdote in which he is walking in a city only to find himself repeatedly if unintentionally drawn into the red-light district. For Benjamin, prostitution was a limit experience of the commodity form, “an obstinate and voluptuous hovering on the brink” (“A Berlin Chronicle,” *Reflections*, 11) beyond which lied a dark void. Both Chan and Kingstone raise questions about the ethics of interpersonal relations in art and the power dynamics between the self and the other at the same time that, especially if we think of the gallery as a cruising spot, they give expression to a desire that gets its best response in the shadows.

**By Michael Davidge.** *Michael Davidge is the Artistic Director of Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre.*