

A Conversation with Ness Lee, Toronto's Unofficial Artist-in-Residence

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By Jeremy Freed Date October 3, 2019



If you've walked anywhere in downtown Toronto over the past couple of years, there's a good chance you've seen Ness Lee's work. Between the murals, the gallery installations and the tote bags and enamel pins sold in indie fashion boutiques, her trademark nudes have become a part of the city's cultural fabric. Or maybe they're a lifeline, too: ways for strangers to feel connected and seen, thrown up on a wall or pinned to a denim jacket. And we need all the connection we can get.

"I think Toronto is a hard place to be an artist," says Lee. "I'm very grateful to be supported, but I think it's definitely hard. A lot of galleries are closing down, and in the past two months, three artists died by suicide in our community. That says something about how hard it is." And how important her work is, too.

How did you develop your unique style?

“The style was influenced by a lot of gestural work and shunga, which is Japanese erotic art. I graduated from OCAD [University] in 2012. Strangely enough, it wasn’t until then that it started to develop into what it is now. In school, you’re kind of pigeonholed into these ways of creation, so I think I just needed that freedom.”

Do you think of your art as feminist?

“I do, but it wasn’t my direct intention. I’ve always had feminist ideals, and since I’m a person of colour and queer, my work just turned out to be an expression of those experiences.”

A lot of your art seems quite sad. Is that a reflection of what you’re feeling?

“A lot of the work is sad because it’s me processing emotions and experiences...just unpacking and accepting things and mourning and grieving.”



Does that help you move through those feelings?

“Yeah, it has actually been very crutchlike, which is concerning to me sometimes. Like I wouldn’t know how to say something now unless I draw it. Maybe other people speak to a therapist or yell into a pillow, but this is my way of doing it. It’s a gift and a curse in a way.”

What’s your process like?

“A lot of my work is just understanding myself and my place in this life. My paintings try to put all of that into concise imagery, as opposed to my drawings, which are more

instinctual. With paintings, it's kind of like trying to summarize a whole chapter of a book, whereas drawings are more just a page."

That's a nice way to put it. Has art always been how you express yourself best?

"I grew up in Markham, which is full of immigrants and immigrant families; going to school, everyone had their own language because they came from a different country. My grandma, who I was really close to, doesn't speak English at all, so I grew up learning to express myself in different ways besides language. For me, it's why a lot of people feel connected to my work."

Do you think the totes and pins you make have the same artistic value as your work hanging in a gallery?

"Oh, yeah, I do. I know they're different, but I try to acquire work that moves me; if I can't afford it, I want to support the artist in any way I can. Those things I make are smaller and less expensive, but they take the same amount of effort as a painting. It's a different language, but it's still art."

And much more accessible than something in a gallery, too.

"Yeah, I feel like galleries are spaces that are inherently pretentious. It's really nice for someone to feel the same joys of appreciating art and acquiring art without the judgment that they might feel in a gallery."