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Water born

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SHEILA LEVRANT DE BRETTEVILLE caused ecstasy and outrage in 1990 when she became director of the Yale University Graduate Program in Graphic Design and the first woman to receive tenure at the Yale University School of Art. It was not the first time she made waves and certainly not the last. For the last six months she has brought her exceptional talent to HKDI where she led a student-based project designed to help Hong Kong appreciate its unique environment. DANIEL JEFFREYS reports.

In the science fiction novel *The Hydrogen Sonata* by Iain M. Banks, set thousands of years from now, 300-kilometre long ships consisting of pure intellect move like huge drops of water across galaxies under the control of “minds”, which are descendents of today’s human beings.

There is something about Yale University Graphic Design professor Sheila Levrant de Bretteville that reminds me of these spacecraft.

To begin with, her polymath intelligence and insatiable curiosity strike one as being made of just the kind of DNA that might help humanity evolve from earth-bound beings into a dewy star-hopping consciousness.

And then there’s her planet-sized imagination that seems to never stop coming up with new ideas and fresh

variations of something she mentioned five minutes ago.

A conversation with de Bretteville is exhilarating and exhausting, making lesser mortals feel like their minds have become conceptual hockey pucks hurtling around an ice-rink, with each of her insights being like a slap shot that sends another earth-bound brain hurtling toward the boards.

Apart from capturing de Bretteville’s unique presence there is a method in all these similies for one of America’s foremost graphic artists. Each one has something to do with water - or moisture (huge drops, dew, ice); and these are the elements that have been the focus of the artist and designer’s sojourn at HKDI during the second-half of 2013.

“Hong Kong has such a profound relationship with water, through the sea, and moisture, through its tropical humidity,” she says. “I find that inspiring and I wanted to create a multidisciplinary project that addresses the presence and absence of water.”

The school’s principal Leslie Lu, who did his Masters at Yale, invited de Bretteville to HKDI. During her tenure she held a public seminar that attracted 600 people.

“My being here represents Leslie’s desire that I enhance the design programs by opening the minds of students, by using prompts to their imagination, instead of setting problems to be solved,” she says. “The students were asked to go to places where water and land overlap and look, listen, touch, smell and see what catches their attention - and then start a visual project that represented the inspiration that occurred to them.”

The locations chosen by de Bretteville for the student’s work were Tolo Harbour, Victoria Harbour, Junk Bay and Tai O. Her husband, Peter de Bretteville, an architect who has also been teaching at HKDI this autumn, informed her choices. He suggested selecting sites at the cardinal points of the globe and at each of these the profile of where the earth meets water is different, which has a profound effect on the potential for inundation and flooding. Junk Bay was appealing because of its proximity to HKDI and Lu encouraged her to consider Victoria Harbor because it’s so well known. De Bretteville refers to the margin where the land and water meet and interact as places that have “always been a source of creativity” and she encouraged students to approach the sites with their minds open and ready to be inspired.

“I shared with them a quote from Susan Sontag,” she says. “It goes, ‘Do stuff. Be clenched, curious. Not waiting for inspiration’s shove or society’s kiss on your forehead. . . . Pay attention. It’s all about paying attention. It’s all about taking in as much of what’s out there as you can, and not letting the excuses and the dreariness of some of the obligations you’ll soon be incurring narrow your lives. Attention is vitality. It connects you with others. It makes you eager. Stay eager.’”



PREVIOUS PAGE WAVES IN VICTORIA HARBOUR
LEFT SHEILA LEVRANT DE BRETTEVILLE SPEAKING AT HKDI
BELOW HKDI STUDENT KK WORKING ON HIS WAVE-INSPIRED MAKEUP PROJECT

« ONE STUDENT NOTICED THAT JUNK BAY LOOKS LIKE A HUMAN LUNG AND THAT HER BREATHING IS A METAPHOR FOR THE TIDES COMING IN AND GOING OUT. »



That de Bretteville should cite Sontag is not surprising - the American writer and filmmaker was an inspiration to a generation who battled for women's rights during the 1960s and 70s and de Bretteville was among those fighting for the cause.

In an Artist's statement for the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Feminist Art Base she wrote, "I am a feminist who believes there are many more ways to be a woman and to make feminist art than have been acknowledged. I believe that we should still be questioning the category named woman much like the way I questioned the meaning of the color pink... I continue to feel a nourishing pleasure when among those gutsy women who came to make artwork at the Los Angeles Woman's Building, publish in the early issues of our feminist journal Chrysalis... if that equal balancing of contributions I found in those conversations were the model for relationships in the world we live in, perhaps our world would not be so lacking in acceptance

of one another as it appears to be right now."

De Bretteville says she stands by everything in her statement, and especially the last of the three propositions. Her work with HKDI has been fiercely devoted to breaking down barriers, escaping from the "silos" that educationalists are fond of and which separate disciplines (and people), stirring students to look beyond the functional aspects of their work to reach for authentic sources of inspiration. All these efforts are designed to engender creative conversations that accept the strengths and limitations of those around us.

Driven by de Bretteville's energy, 32 students from a variety of disciplines have been involved with the 海角天涯 (border of the sky/corner of the ocean) project. Victor So has been designing a 100 metre long bridge for Junk Bay that would give people a chance to linger and experience the flow of water between sea and land. Marco Leung has worked on a partially submerged floating room that would be open to the sky and with a view under water. Billy Chan has been working at Victoria Harbour to create a film that captures the way water calls to us all, even if we are too busy and preoccupied to hear and his images capture the water's

anger at our indifference. Freda Chung has focused on debris in the water of Victoria Harbour to use typography to create Chinese characters against the backdrop of the water and high rise buildings. At Tai O Molly Chan has been developing typography derived from Periophthalmus Cantonensis, a local mudfish.

Recently the Fashion and Image Design department has engaged with the project with KK using innovative make up techniques to create wave forms in hair and upon the face, Joby exploring ways to use fabric to show how a sea nymph is pulled between calm and dangerous waters and Sumo creating a photo shoot that depicts an aquatic fantasy.

The students were given November 27 as the deadline for completing their work but the evolution of the project is set to continue. Not least because de Bretteville has seen her commitment to the issues raised by the 海角天涯 project become more intense. To raise awareness of the challenges posed by global weather patterns de Bretteville invited Professor Emeritus Wwys Yim to give a talk at HKDI last October. In December 2012 she had read Yim's article "Future sea level rise in Hong Kong and possible Environmental Effects" in a book called Climate and Sea Level Change that she found at the Yale University Library. Yim's work focused on Junk Bay and in his talk he provided an informed understanding of what causes sea surges and contributes to inundation - and what does not. This kind of myth-bunking, let's-sort-the-truth from the tittle-tattle is typical of de Bretteville's approach and helped students to pay attention to aspects of their environment that they had missed.

"What has been most remarkable and unexpected is that so many of the students identify with the water and personify it's feeling of being disregarded and dismissed," she says. "One noticed that Junk Bay looks like a human lung and that her breathing is a metaphor for the tides coming in and going out. The video she created as a result pairs that similarity between her and the water with the

replacement of water by land reclamation with endless numbers of residential towers and new towns. Another student realized that people walking the promenade pay no attention to the water even though there are sturdy stone steps down to its surface. He sat on those steps for quite awhile videotaping and did not notice a ship passing by and became drenched by its wash. He thought about that disregard and his video embodies the anger the waves must feel."

The students who worked on 海角天涯 are between 17 and 19 and they took on the project voluntarily, in addition to their programme work. Their dedication to de Bretteville's venture - despite their heavy course-load - has impressed her.

"Even though almost everything about the way they are working is new to them they have chosen to be inspired by 海角天涯," she says. "Those students whom we meet regularly have been disarmingly candid, receptive and open. Little by little they are each developing their own idea, translating into visual terms a new relationship to water and its value"

And that's as much a summary of de Bretteville's career ambitions as of the project's goals - to translate new relationships into visual terms has been a driving force for her and the creativity that engenders has brought a fresh perspective to the HKDI students she worked with that few of them will forget. (D)



ABOVE SHEILA LEVRANT DE BRETTEVILLE'S WORK 'STEP(PE)' 2006, YEKATERINBERG, SIBERIA
LEFT DE BRETTEVILLE'S WORK BIDDY MASON - TIME & PLACE 1989, LOS ANGELES