Learning the Arts at University

BY RAQUEL RIVERA

The Mock Turtle went on.
'We had the best of educations.
Reeling and Writing, of course, to begin with...
and then the different branches of Arithmetic –
Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision...
there was Mystery...Mystery, ancient and modern...
then Drawling – the drawling master was an old conger-eel
that used to come once a week:
he taught us Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils.'
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll

This article describes some of my experiences as a woman student studying the visual arts. It's about good things and bad things, and it's about my development of a more conscious feminism during my four years at university.

I went to university to study photography, but I dropped the subject after the first year. There was only one professor teaching black and white photography, and I felt that, if I continued to study under him, I would develop a life-long dislike of the medium through association. The man was a sexist in the extreme. Studio sessions for the introductory class were wrought with personal trespasses on women, both verbal and physical.

Shirley, a classmate who dyed her hair blonde and tangled it into spikes was told that she looked ridiculous and asked, "what does your father have to say about it?" Shirley said pointedly that her father loved her regardless of what her hair looked like. And that seeing as she was supporting herself and had been doing so for quite a while, both she and her father considered her hair nobody's business but her own.

Cindy brought in portraits she had shot of her sister and was asked by the professor if she and her sister would care to model nude for him. She confided in me she didn't know how to say no to the proposition without making the rest of the year awkward.

Anne, a graduate student in photography and sculpture, told me about her encounter with this professor in her admissions interview. He declared to her and to the admissions committee that the university "should only let virgins into the graduate program."

I had more than one disagreeable encounter with this professor. Not long after the beginning of the school year, I was told —

HOUSEDRAWN, Raquel Rivera, mixed media, 1988

when I came to class after getting my hair cut — that I looked like a dyke. He did not mean this to be a compliment. Once, when giving me directions regarding my darkroom equipment, the professor started hitting my arm with a booklet he was holding. I retaliated by hitting his arm, in the same abstracted manner, with some prints I was holding. He was outraged: "I'm the teacher, and you're the student!" As an afterthought, he added, "Besides, you're a woman, and women are supposed to take it."

Our photography instructor had a condescending and oppressive attitude towards all introductory students. He justified his rude bossiness and his frequent and long absences during class time by saying that if we were meant to be photographers we would do so despite anything he might do. If we weren't meant to be photographers, then there was no point in bothering with us anyway. His attitude was contemptuous and hostile towards all who knew less — all new students. But the women got the worst of it. He enjoyed baiting us and regularly making offensive comments about our appearance. It seemed as if, in his eyes,

women could never move from this lowly first-year status. As men got into the more advanced classes he would give them a certain amount of respect. But from reports of friends who continued in photography, a woman's experience in the field did not change the attitude he projected toward us — that we were better suited to be subjects than to be photographers.

In contrast to this, I had very positive experiences with two other professors in the fine arts department. A professor I shall call the Doctor, a celebrated art historian, taught me African art and, two years later, twentieth-century sculpture. Her teaching method was collectivist. She taught by encouraging dialogue, an anti-patriarchal method compared to the usual lecture format. The Doctor was not always in charge of the direction of conversation, and she did not always have the answer. She made it clear that this was also the case with other authorities in her field, even when they were presenting themselves as experts. She insisted that we always question and if necessary reformulate theories about art. We learned that much about artists was contradictory, their schools of thought were not always wise and enlightening, and that critics and art historians are not always right. In this professor's class, knowing something only had value if you could analyze it, form an opinion and back that opinion up. Common sense was more prized in this class than erudition.

As a woman in a powerful position in the university, the Doctor was the only role model I discerned in the visual arts department for women students. She was confident and gracious, she commanded respect from everyone, and she gave respect back. Both in class and out, she was empowering, encouraging me to be the most active rather than the most passive force in my education.

My printmaking instructor also taught in a way that empowered his students. Rather than seeing students as beginners — not worth the bother until a few years down the road — he made it clear that we were colleagues. He respected our work. When I asked for specific help with technical problems about a piece I was working out, many instructors would give gratuitous advice about the piece as a whole, rather than assisting me in making what I had already decided to make. Too many times I would listen, mildly offended, to my instructor's vision of what my work could and should be, and then, trying not to sound too defensive, I would redirect the technical assistance to aspects of the work that I perceived to be problematic. In these situations, even though I consciously felt that I had a right to disagree with the instructor's criticism and create my own work, and even though I managed eventually to get the help I needed from the instructor, I was always left feeling insecure about the piece I was working on.

In my printmaking instructor I encountered, for the first time in a studio course, someone who valued my imagemaking more than what he could do to it. When I asked for help he would look at the offending print and say something neutral such as "Ah! you printed it." This allowed me the freedom to express my own uncertainties, without having to defend the basic conceptualization from his incursions. I would then objectively respond: "It's absolutely disgusting; I hate it." He would then try to help me discover what it was about the image that was bothering me. If we figured it out together, he would give technical suggestions as to what might solve the problems. If it was a case of "it's doing everything I want it to; it just didn't turn out the way I envisioned it," he would tell me to ignore it, start something new, and maybe it would grow on me. Once in a while, it did.

Both my art history and graphics professors gave me real assistance and from them I learned — not pet theories and favorite techniques— but to understand what I saw in other people's art and what I wanted to see in my own.

In the last two years of university, I began to shape my prints and sculptures with more consciously feminist themes. For a basic education in feminist methodology, I had to go outside the visual arts department.

In my last year at high school I took a women's studies course, which heightened my awareness of issues that are of traditional concern to women. We participated in seminars on subjects such as rape, abortion and midwifery. During the first couple of years in university I began to integrate this type of issue into a larger context. "Concepts of Male and Female in the West" and "Mass Media in Canada" helped emphasize for me the widespread system of cultural values and symbols in our society that reflect and regenerate the subordination of women.

In my fourth year I took a course called "Anthropology of Women" that gave me insight into women's condition without conveying the impression that the white western well-to-do woman's experience was the norm, as had been the case in my previous women's studies courses. This course consciously taught what the Doctor had taught by example. My anthropology professor focused on the anthropology of women; my art history professor focused on the anthropology of art. Both used feminist methodology, emphasizing a more wholistic understanding of the subject, and the need to understand the subject within its own set of values rather than imposing a personal, arbitrary set on it.

In art history, I learned that African art cannot be separated from village ritual and religion. Early ethnographers, using western standards, judged African art by purely aesthetic standards which were also western — thereby misunderstanding its meaning within its own context. In anthropology, I studied women's lives within the context of their various cultures, attempting to understand the terms in which people make sense of their lives rather than imposing a set of values from my own life experience.

This perspective began to appear in my sculptures and prints. For years, I had collected Marilyn Monroe memorabilia. Now, instead of just collecting, I started to read about her life, and I began to develop a picture of this woman who had very few choices and who worked hard to make a life for herself in a world that taught her about a woman's place at a very early age. I took images that exploited and objectified her and tried to highlight the humanity and the humour that I saw. I attempted to bring out the creative artist that oppressive circumstances tried to destroy. I placed images of myself, as a child and as a woman, in some of these works, to claim a common experience with her— personally and as a representative of my generation — in the struggle to transcend the limits of our anti-woman culture.

My university education in visual arts was a positive experience overall. Being a sensible person, I gravitated towards what was good for me and rejected what was not. Even the worst experiences sometimes produced good results: when I decided to stop taking photography courses, I looked into photo-etching as an alternative way of expressing my interest in photography. It turned out that not only was the teaching stronger and more useful in printmaking, but the medium also suited me better.