

Professor Stephen Lapthisophon

Professor at the University of Texas at Arlington

Interview conducted by

Kayla Gray

On March 21, 2018 in Arlington, Texas

Disability Studies Minor

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Biography

Professor Stephen Lapthisophon was an independent artist and professor for the UTA Art Department. Born in West Virginia, Lapthisophon spent most of his life in Texas. In 1994, Lapthisophon lost his sight due to a neurological condition. Despite his disability, he decided to pursue a career in visual art. His latest exhibition, "Socomma" showcased in Dallas in Spring 2018. When he is not teaching or creating art, Lapthisophon enjoys cooking at home.

Topics Discussed

- Birthplace
- Acquiring disability and the resulting difficulties
- Effect of disability on work as an artist
- Accessibility of museums and galleries
- Daily life with a disability
- Public transportation in Arlington for people with disabilities
- Experience with accommodations at UTA
- Perception of disability in the art world as a whole

Gray

<topic>Birthplace</topic>

This is Kayla Gray interviewing Stephen Lapthisophon for the UT Arlington Texas Disability History Project. Today is March 21, 2018. I am in the office of Professor Lapthisophon. I'm here today to talk with Professor Lapthisophon about his art, his life, and his works. So where were you born and raised?

Lapthisophon

Well, I was technically born in West Virginia, but didn't live there very long. I would say I grew up in Houston, Texas through high school.

Gray

<topic>Acquiring disability and the resulting difficulties</topic>

How did you acquire your disability?

Lapthisophon

It's a neurological condition. It started in about 1994. First, it was my right eye. Then about six months later, left eye. It's a depletion of the coating of the optic nerve. And I don't know exactly. It was at one point thought to be related to MS, but most of my doctors at this point, they don't know exactly what it is, but it's not that.

Gray

Okay. Have you ever faced discrimination because of your disability?

Lapthisophon

I don't know if I would say anything that really comes into my head of discrimination. I think there's a lot of difficulty and there's a lot of ways institutions and...and there's a lot of opportunities that I am not able to get because of my disability. But I don't know if I would say that it's full-on discrimination. I'm sure that there is certainly a lot of minor insults that one faces a lot of the time in daily life, but I guess that I feel like...I don't know. It's hard to say. I'm not sure if the things that one endures in just sort of the interaction with people qualifies as full-on discrimination. But I usually don't see it so much that way. So much I see it as built-in resistance to accommodation. If, in sort of classic disability terms, that falls under the umbrella, then maybe. So, that's okay. I don't know if that answers the question. It's the best I can approximate.

Gray

Well, that's okay. Have you ever had trouble accessing things?

Lapthisophon

Oh sure. Yeah, there are things that I just plain *can't* do. I don't drive. I haven't driven in 20...24 years or whatever it is. I don't know. It's been 20 years. I haven't driven in a long time. There is difficulty getting around. You know, I think a lot of times I experience some of the difficulty traveling when you are in unfamiliar place, getting certain kinds of directions...those kinds of difficulties. And not being able to.... You know, even today, I don't know what form I signed.

Gray

Oh yeah. Sorry.

Lapthisophon

No, it's not a problem. I can sew a lot of things like that. Forms, paperwork, excess...you know. Those things are not easy, so...

Gray

<topic>Effect of disability on work as an artist</topic>

Okay, so you are an artist, correct?

Lapthisophon

Yes.

Gray

So, what kind of art do you do?

Lapthisophon

I make paintings, drawings, make installations, sound art video. I write, I print some things for performance type activity. So, a lot of different activities. A lot of the work, and most of the work, is two-dimensional. It's drawing type work. But a variety type of different things. I have a show that's up now. It's in Dallas where I am able to present it. I show a fair amount.

Gray

Has disability have any impact on your work?

Lapthisophon

You know there...I think sometimes there's a certain.... You know I think most of the art world does really know that I have any difficulty or disability. I think sometimes most of the art community is...you know, there are people who don't know me who are surprised that there...that I'm not able to see as well as I can. I've been... you know I went to graduate school, I have an MFA, and I've been making art for a very, very long time. So, in some ways, a lot of my work haven't changed much since I had the vision loss. But occasionally, there are pieces that I do or references that I might make or...you know, there have been twice that I've done a show that really directly address vision loss. But often more sort of blindness as a metaphor for other things and kind of a play on denial in society and things like that. So, there's...it would be wrong and impossible for me to say that it hasn't affected the work, but I wouldn't say it's disabled my ability to make work.

Gray

Right.

Lapthisophon

I think the only other thing that comes into it sometimes is I think there...the art world is very market driven in some ways. And I think there are times when...you know, maybe some galleries and museums think of me differently. Even though the work may not be different. You know, but like once they discover there's a difference or something like that it's like of "Oh, how should I think of this person?" Kind of thing. It's that kind of deal.

Gray

Okay, are you working on any current art projects?

Lapthisophon

Yeah, I've always got things, you know, that I'm doing. Working on...let me think if I have...it's on the door also. There's an announcement. That's my current show that's at the gallery where I show in Dallas.

Gray

Oh!

Lapthisophon

And in fact, the title of the show is "Scotoma", which means blind spot, so which is slightly meant to play on the idea of my own vision loss. But also, the things in the world that we neglect or things we can't see. Ideas of denial, repression, you know.

Gray

<topic>Accessibility of museums and galleries</topic>

Yeah, okay. Accessibility is an important topic in the disability communities. Do you believe that museums and galleries should be more accessible to people with disabilities?

Lapthisophon

Yeah, I mean in some ways sure. I think there could be an education thing of some people in institutions. I know, like I've said, I've been making art all my life and I've been going to galleries and museums all my life. And I know how to be respectful of works of art. Sometimes I get yelled at by the guards for trying to stand too close things like that. But what's funny is that I also over the years gotten to know a number of people in museum education as good friends. Excuse me, I need to check on something.

Gray

Oh, that's okay.

Lapthisophon

And, I know that at major museums. I have very close friends at the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan. I went to the Metropolitan in New York. I went to a whole conference on...I can't remember the name of the group anymore. But it's about blindness and visual art. All in honesty, I think there's a lot of people who are very attentive to wanting to address disabilities of all kinds. I know that's a real. I don't think it's universal. But I know there are many, major museums, I know that my friends in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago around, they tell me that education departments think a lot about...

I don't know if it's always successful. And I don't know...some situations can be fixed. But like I said, I do know that the Art Institute in Chicago has a whole room devoted to sculpture that can be touched and handled by people who are completely blind. I do a lot of programming for various populations who might need access or special help in some kind of way. But it's a hard problem to solve. So, you know. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I feel like while there's probably a lot lacking in museum settings. I also think probably those folks are

trying the hardest to fix things as best as they can. It's not as bad as the rest of the world, you know. I mean just now I had to use my magnifier to look at text on my phone. And sometimes, you know, I want to look at a label in a museum and try to use my magnifier to you know look at the date on a label to see when the artist made the thing. And a lot of the time, the guards are like, "Don't get so close!" And it's like, "I'm close to the label." I can't hurt that, you know. But it's the unfamiliar that freaks people out I think. You don't expect...they don't expect to get anything that's out of normative. You know, so.

Gray

<topic>Daily life with a disability</topic>

Okay, now you said you developed your disability about twenty or so years ago?

Lapthisophon

Yeah, like '94 or '95 or something like that.

Gray

What's your daily routine like?

Lapthisophon

You know, nothing very different or dramatic than a lot of folks. I like to cook. I, like I said, I don't drive. I live in Dallas, which has pretty good public transportation. So if it's a day...it's ...but you know. We're in Arlington, which is the largest city in the country without public transportation.

Gray

Right.

Lapthisophon

So, I ride out with colleagues who teach the same days I do. And...so on days I teach, I get up early, so the normal things everyone else does, and I teach all day, go home, make a little food, and collapse, you know that kind of thing so. And then days when I'm not here, I'm generally in the studio. My studio is directly behind my house. Or I just get out and see things, do things. You know, nothing too dramatically different than I think a lot of folks, you know that kind of thing.

Gray

<topic>Public transportation in Arlington for people with disabilities</topic>

Yeah, okay. Cool. Let's see. It's interesting that you mention the public transportation in Arlington because I was recently...recently went to a board meeting for the city of Arlington. And they're installing a new Via system. Do you know anything about that?

Lapthisophon

No, not at all.

Gray

Well okay, this new system is where...it's basically a public transportation for Arlington. And it's interesting how you get from Dallas to here.

Lapthisophon

Right, I know that there used to be no transportation system to campus at all. Now you can take the TRE from Union Station in Dallas and take it to Center Port. And then there's the Max bus that goes from there to campus, but that's been like this shuttle. And, I mean, it runs occasionally. What's the Via thing? Is it going to be a full-fledged bus system throughout Arlington or...?

Gray

It should be. And there's also going to be a HandiTram for people with certain disabilities like people who may not be able to move around as much.

Lapthisophon

Sure. Yeah, and a lot of cities do that. I know that Dallas also does that. It's usually more like a direct, small, kind of bus-van type thing. The other thing is that I do know this from disability world in both Chicago and Dallas: while the special accommodations for that. You know, where they often pick people up directly and you know take someone directly where they're going kind of thing. Here, I will say that I've never known anyone whose been happy with that.

Gray

Yeah.

Lapthisophon

It's like...it's one of those things where you're...you know. Have to go through a bureaucracy to arrange when and where you need the pickup. If there's...a lot of times let's just say someone goes to the doctor. You know might have an exact time. And I've always heard those things are always late. And you know it's funny. I know...you know people have tried with those things, but I've...I don't know exactly if that system is right. That there's often been a some unhappiness with some people who've used some of those... It's like the auxiliary. It's like the thing that is on top of the special public transportation.

Gray

Yeah.

Lapthisophon

And a lot of time to even qualify for such takes like forever. And you know whenever I used to in Dallas get the disability discount and it would take...you know I had to use the Social Security to blah, blah, blah then you go and wait in the office. It was just, you know. Even to get the reduced fare thing was...it was a pain. And I love Dart in Dallas. I'm a very big supporter and admirer. I think they do a really good job, but I do know in the Dart system, every time they needed more money one of the things they cut is they raise their reduced fare for

disabled people. So, it's been a problem. You know, I think that for example to talk to you, and I can talk about transportation a lot. Forgive me for going on too long, but...

Gray

You're fine. Take your time.

Lapthisophon

...but you know, I mean I'm a big admirer or proponent. I like the idea of like Uber and Lyft and things like that. But I... because I don't see very well, I just use a dumb, old flip phone because I don't see the screen of the thing. And every time I even use something that has a large screen or blown up, the keyboard is too small. And once I'm using the magnifier to see the letters, I'm bumping the wrong letters. So I don't...it's not worth it for me to spend hundreds of dollars on a smartphone because I can't see the screen very well. Or use it very well. So that means all the stuff like Uber and Lyft I can't use because you have to use that on an app or a thing. So it's kind of a funny catch-22. You know for something like Lyft would be fantastic for me, but now I wouldn't have the technology that would allow me to get to it where I can see very well. So I don't know if...I wouldn't call that discrimination. It's a pain, you know there's nothing that's there to be done for. Does that make sense?

Gray

That makes perfect sense. So many of the people we've interviewed have been involved in disability activism. Are you active in the disability community with that sort of thing?

Lapthisophon

No, I'm really not. Like I've said, there are times when I'm asked to do panels for certain things. I participated happily. And I think it's something I'm willing to take a stand or make a stand for. But I never felt compelled to get out and organize for particular types of rights or differences or anything like that.

Gray

<topic>Experience with accommodations at UTA</topic>

Okay. So, you're teaching this semester. Which classes are you teaching?

Lapthisophon

I have two drawing classes. I have class that is kind of intermediate we call Drawing Concepts. And then we have an advanced drawing class. And then I work with a few students in an independent study. I work with a lot of the graduate students at UTA. So I'm working with a few graduate students also and I'm on some committee for their thesis completion also.

Gray

Okay. Now is UTA good at accommodating for your needs in the classroom?

Lapthisophon

This is where we close the door.

Gray

[Laughter]

Lapthisophon

You know, in some ways. I mean I use some software on the computer that magnifies and then they put it on my desktop. And there's generally a lot of what I can't do. Or sometimes things like small forms and stuff like that. And usually you know we have a great department in that way. You know everybody, we have a very close department I would say. And very helpful. And I know folks. There's forms that I need help with and things like that. I think everybody's really very helpful. I think most of the things. I think that...probably a lot of...you know a lot of art schools would generally just assume that I couldn't do any. So I think that in light of what I would say in the conceptions of a lot of people in the big world I would say no. I think the department has been very accommodating. You know I think...again I will just mainly say mainly I don't...I feel very meshed in the art department, but I'm not...I don't feel like I have a lot of draw or cause to interact with the UTA community at large. As much as the art department represents UTA, I would say yes.

Gray

Oh, okay. Welp, let's see. How many more minutes do we have left? Okay, a few more minutes left. Is there anything else you would like to add or anything else you would like to include for the interview?

Lapthisophon

<topic>Perception of disability in the art world as a whole</topic>

No, like I say, I'm very...I did teach one class with Sarah Rose's invitation. And I was an interesting class I did on Film and Movies and Disability. It was an interesting class. I enjoyed it a lot. I liked it. I also have taught an art history class that's on Film Appreciation. And for the class I did for the Disability Studies Minor was an outgrowth on that. And I enjoyed teaching that class and I'm glad the minor is here. And I also organized an exhibition that was downstairs in the gallery here. It focused on the subject and the question of disability in kind of everyday life reflected to art. It wasn't so much that. It was...it was more kind of just artworks. It was about half of the artists were disabled, about half not. They were all artists who made works about the idea of otherness and difference and disability. It wasn't some...a lot of the times art exhibitions are sort of art exhibitions made by disabled artists. And it's like, "Oh well, it's amazing that they can do this. Even though blah, blah, blah, blah, blah..." This was less about that. This was more about just about the subject of what an other is or does. That kind of thing.

Gray

Yeah.

Lapthisophon

Trying to reframe how we think about each other in that way. So I'm glad that people like you and you know students who are active and interested very...really passionate about pursuing the issues. I mean that's fantastic. And you know I think someone's talking about the exhibition. I think sometimes...I think sometimes in the art world they don't...I don't have an activist strength. I used to be involved in a lot of direct political type things and I feel like we live in a strange time. And also I feel like sometimes in cultural work as it relates to disability things. A lot of...the responses are somewhat patronizing. Or it's kind of like, "Oh, the heartwarming struggle of so-and-so to do such-and-such." And it's like, "Wow! For so-and-so they did this." Kind of thing. And

sometimes probably why...I don't feel like I hide out or run away from being a visually impaired person. But at the same time, I don't often foreground it because I feel like I want somebody to deal with things I do on it's own. That kind of thing. I don't know if that helps or make any sense.

Gray

Oh, that makes perfect sense. That's one thing we talk about a lot is pity. And how we should avoid pity. In fact, even in the questions I ask, I should definitely avoid that.

Lapthisophon

I don't know. I don't know how official this is, but I'll say no. You did a...I feel...I felt fine to me. I know sometimes there's been weird moments where people. It's very obvious that they don't know how to do an interview. So, you did a good job.

Gray

Oh, thank you. [Laughter] Well...

Lapthisophon

I hope this helped.

Gray

Absolutely, thank you. Interview ended up being really short, but that's okay.

Lapthisophon

If there's more you want to ask, I'm happy to go on. You just have to tell me what you want to hear. I just don't know what to say. [Laughter]

Gray

Would it be possible to have a follow-up?

Lapthisophon

Sure! Absolutely.

Gray

Okay. Well thank you.

Lapthisophon

I think I put my number on one of the e-mails. So, feel free to call me to if you just want to chat. If it's Monday or Wednesday, come by. I don't mind.

Gray

Oh, okay.

Lapthisophon

Maybe after you listen to the tape and go through the interview and thought, "Oh yeah, maybe I would have asked that." That's fine. I wouldn't mind at all.

Gray

Well, thank you. Well, this is Kayla Gray interviewing Professor Lapthisophon. Signing out.

Lapthisophon

[Laughter] Over and out.

End of Interview