

Professor Stephen Lapthisophon Professor at the University of Texas at Arlington

Interview conducted by

Kayla Gray

On March 28, 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 was blinded by a neurological condition. Despite his disability, he decided to pursue a career in visual art. His latest exhibition, "Scotoma" showcased in Dallas in spring 2018. When he is not teaching or creating art, Lapthisophon enjoys cooking at home.

Topics Discussed

- Scotoma exhibit
- Response to exhibit
- Previous and upcoming projects
- Artistic process
- Talk given at conference at the MET
- Applying for grant money

Gray

This is Kayla Gray for the Texas Disability History collection. I'm in the office of Professor Stephen Lapthisophon. This interview will be posted in the Texas Disability History Collection. Today is March 27th...

Lapthisophon

28th.

Gray

<topic>Scotoma exhibit</topic>

...28th. Thank you. March 28th, 2018. Okay, and we're picking up from the last recording. So your latest work

"Scotoma" alludes to your disability. What was the thought process behind this piece?

Lapthisophon

Well it's...it's just the title of the exhibition as a whole. It's that kind of a gallery where I've shown since 2003. It's my eighth show with the gallery. Just a solo show of...I think it's sixteen, seventeen pieces. Most of them are paintings. There are a few drawings. A few works on paper. There's no particular theme. Unifying theme or linkage between them. There all very improvisatory and spontaneous pieces. Many of them refer to other artists or other historical moments, but that's something true in all of my work. The title refers to a physical blind spot. So, it is a piece. That's the title of one of the smaller paintings. And I just used that title from that one painting to title the whole exhibition. It is, I'd guess you'd say, that title is one of the times I do make a reference to vision loss. But it's meant to be both an allusion to partial vision but at the same time talking about as blind spot. Things in society that might be in front of us are obvious. Or things that are denied or things that are repressed. Things that are metaphors for places that we are blind to something that is around us.

Gray

Okay. So, what materials did you use for the project?

Lapthisophon

Well, so the paintings are made from both traditional painting materials, just acrylic, ink... sort of art materials, and then there's a lot of...I use a lot of things like from everyday life. There's a lot of collage elements. There's things like coffee and tea and there's...I use a wide variety of materials. Spray paint, charcoal, ink. There's also stuff that's been picked up from the floor of the studio. There's bits of hair in them. Things like that that are meant to be just to give the surface a kind of disruption. I like there to be a lot of texture in the paintings. So there's a wide variety of material. Some like I said, some more traditional, normal art materials. And some that are more just the stuff that's around us in everyday life.

Gray

Okay, cool. So many of your works in this project, like *Revolution*, *Blues*, and *Scrawl*, contain letters and symbols. What do all these symbols mean?

Lapthisophon

There not so much symbols. I like using words and letter forms because I do write a lot. I like the reference to just actual signage. Like the kind of things that happened in the public dimension. Signs and posters and things like that. It's a way of referring to stuff from everyday life. And the other thing about words and letter forms is that it sort of blocks the space-making thing. It's a traditional part of painting often. Like I said, if the sign is a very flat thing, it just sort of turns it into just the object what the painting is. I like things that refer to their materiality, their objectness, realness. So, it's not so much that they're not symbolic. They're not symbols or anything. But their just more assuming that gets into the nature of the relationship between text and surface.

Gray

<topic>Response to exhibit</topic>

Okay. So, what was the public's response to your work?

Lapthisophon

The typical thing that happens in an art gallery. There were a lot of people at the reception. There's always the opening. There's a lot of friends and folk and people. And there was a lot that attended. And I've had some attention and nice feedback and things like that. It's always that think that you have a lot of stuff happen at the beginning. But I've had nice response, I mean there aren't a lot of critics and things like that that are writing now. So, there isn't a review or things like that. And you know the works are available for sale. So we'll see what happens at the end of the show.

Gray

Interesting. Has anyone actually purchased your work?

Lapthisophon

Yes, there are two pieces that are sold.

Gray

<topic>Previous and upcoming projects</topic>

Oh cool. Do you have any upcoming projects?

Lapthisophon

I've got two things that I'm working on. Just proposals and things, but it's far off. Nothing that's immediate.

Gray

Okay. So, you've said you've, correct me if I'm wrong, you've had your works here at UTA.

Lapthisophon

Well, only really. I did organize one show at the gallery downstairs. It was a group show of I think like ten artists both from the area and then across the country. And it did...that show did address the notion of disability. And then I had work in the gallery downstairs during the faculty exhibition, which happens every couple of years. It's just everybody across the department has a piece and so it's that kind of thing. Well that's what I've done.

Gray

<topic>Artistic process</topic>

Oh. So, what was your most challenging work? And when I mean challenging, I mean like which one took the most time?

Lapthisophon

You know...I work all the time. I'm in my studio everyday trying to get something done or whatever. And I work a lot, but I also work quickly. I don't actually...I'm not somebody. I think a lot of times there's a common perception of artists who kind of toil over a thing over and over again. And many do. I actually operate very quickly, immediately, and very spontaneously. So even some things that I think are very successful happen very quickly. Sometimes I might sit on it for a while and I make sure it's something I'm happy with and things like that, but I'm not somebody who ponders for a long time. And then I make a plan and then I spend months

doing the thing. And then it's not like that. I operate on much more immediately and much more spontaneously.

Gray

Oh, okay. So, in the last interview, we discussed your other exhibitions. You have connections with the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Do you still maintain connection with them now?

Lapthisophon

<topic>Talk given at conference at the MET</topic>

That was a conference actually. So that was somebody I knew that worked at the museum. There was a conference there. What was the name of that? It's an organization in the disability world you should probably know. Something like "Something Beyond Sight". I can't remember. I could go back and look. But it was a national conference that was held at the museum. But I certainly did not have a show at the Met.

Gray

Oh wow.

Lapthisophon

But like I said, it's just a conference. And I gave a talk. Which you know I do when the opportunity happens, but it's something that just is happenstance when somebody invites me.

Gray

Oh, what was the talk about?

Lapthisophon

It was about...it was a conference that revolved around artists with disabilities. So the whole conference was about that. I don't remember what the name of the organizing group was. So I just, yeah it was a while back.

Gray

Yeah, I understand. Do you remember any key points in your talk?

Lapthisophon

You know, I did address places that their pieces have addressed disability issues and I talked about how I made things and what...you know, just my how I go about making what I do. It was really just about my own work. But it wasn't...you know in some ways I was talking about the fact that my approach to making art has been pretty much the same sort of before I lost vision and after. That was kind of the main thing I was saying. So actually...

Gray

Oh, okay. Well, I guess that's all of the questions. Anything else you would like to add for the interview?

Lapthisophon

<topic>Applying for grant money</topic>

No, I mean, I can't think of anything in particular. I mean, like I say, I work all the time. There's the life of an artist. You try to get opportunities for things. So a lot of it is sending out examples of your work, writing a lot of letters, and proposals for things and applying for grants and money and opportunities. And then you don't hear anything for a while. Then you all of a sudden floods in. So the moment I say the show is up, I'm very happy with it. But we'll see what the next thing where it takes me.

Gray

You said about grants. How do you...is that how you fund your projects?

Lapthisophon

No, no. I mean that happens every once in a while, but I don't have a lot of sort of projecty type things. It's more just exhibitions. And if there's something that's out there, but I'm not the best for applications and things like that. You know that's just occasional. I'll run across bits when I'm doing. I did win an award and again you're in that disability world. You might check out. And they just announced the new winners this year. But there's a thing called the Win New House Foundation. And I think it's maybe 15 or so years old, but it's an award given to artists with disabilities. And I did win that one year. But you know, I'm not somebody who is...there are a lot of people who are really proficient at grant writing and applications and all that. But no, I just...I get supplies and keep going by just my own funds or whatever. That sort of thing.

Gray

Well, I mean that's all the questions.

Lapthisophon

'Kay.

Gray

And we asked you the basic questions like your job and your life. But thank you so much for interviewing with me.

Lapthisophon

Sure, my pleasure. Happy to help.

Gray

Thank you.

Lapthisophon

Okay.

Gray

Okay. This is Kayla Gray interviewing Professor Laphisophon. Signing out.

End of Interview