

EMILY CARR CONVOCATION SPEECHES MAY 10, 2023

President Gilliam Sidall's Speech

Paul Wang is a media maestro, making art for site-specific spaces and screens of all sizes. He is an award-winning artist and curator known for pioneering early visual and media art in Canada, founding several artist-run groups, and organizing events, festivals, conferences, and public interventions since the 1970s. Paul has produced projects throughout North America, Europe, and Asia.

Now, in his 40th year as a creator of events, performances, videos, pictures, sculptures, and cultural institutions, Paul has made himself a virtual intersection of activities—both solo and collaborative, affirmative and critical, stoic and ludic. Paul was the winner of the Bell Canada Award in Video Art 1992, the first recipient of the Transforming Art Award from the Asian Heritage Foundation in 2002, and the inaugural winner of the Trailblazer Expressions Award in 2003. Created by Heritage Canada, National Film Board, and Chum Limited in 2005, he received the Governor-General's award in Visual and Media Art in 2008. He was awarded Best Canadian Film or video at the Toronto Real Asian International Film Festival in 2016. He was awarded the Audian Prize for Lifetime Achievement in Visual Arts.

Paul recently completed the multiyear interdisciplinary project called Occupying Chinatown, inspired by hundreds of letters and familiar artifacts of his late mother, Sook Fung Wong. Paul Wong created intimate exhibitions, public art pieces, artist talks, events, workshops, and a website called Occupying Chinatown. Occupying Chinatown was a public art project commissioned by the City of Vancouver Public Art Program, in partnership with Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese garden. The Occupying Chinatown book was a finalist for the 2022 City of Vancouver Book Award.

Now, in its 50th year, the Satellite Video Exchange Society was co-founded by Paul. For the first 25 years, he was a driving force involved in making this a vibrant and important center, pioneering video art in Canada. He is the artistic director and curator of On Main Gallery and On the Cutting Edge Productions Society, established in 1986. Paul has facilitated hundreds of arts projects, most recently as the producer and artistic director of the Pride and Chinatown Festival 2018 to 2022. This annual event focuses and claims and makes a safe space for pan-Asian queer communities to come together and celebrate being out loud and proud in Chinatown.

Chancellor Thomas, on behalf of the Senate of this university, I now ask that you confer upon Paul Wang the degree of Doctor of Letters Honoris Causa. Paul Wong, by the virtue of the authority vested in me and in the Senate of Emily Carr University, I hereby admit you to the degree of Doctor of Letters Honoris Causa.

Dr. Wong will be hooded by Dr. Trish Kelly, Vice President, Academic and Provost.

Paul Wong's Speech

Well, good afternoon, everybody, excited to be here. President Siddall, esteemed members of the board, graduating students, staff, faculty, my family, and colleagues. Thank you for inviting me to be here today and for awarding me this honor. And thank you, Henry John, for the nomination.

What makes this day extra special is to be able to share this honor with Dr. Glenn Lewis. You are an artist who I've admired and respected from when I first came onto the scene in the early 1970s. Thank you, Glenn, for shining a light.

I grew up on Main Street in East Vancouver and never had the opportunity to go to college or university. So this honorary degree is meaningful to me in ways I can scarcely find words for. I am humbled by this recognition. It is fitting that this first honorary degree should come from Emily Carr. Although I never was a student here, over many decades, I have been a guest lecturer, I have mentored, employed, and have collaborated with dozens of grads. More recently, as an MFA thesis external reviewer and a mentor for the Shumka Center Art Apprenticeship Network. Many of my best friends and favorite artists are all graduates. All of you have worked hard to get to this day. I'm thrilled to be sharing this moment with you. And one of my best friends, Claudia Fernandez, who has taken 15 extraordinary years to formally get her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, is here today. Congratulations.

Many years ago, when I was in high school, I wrote an essay about a famous painting. That painting was Guernica by Picasso. This was my way, and this was way before the Internet. I had not seen the painting in real life; it existed only as a smart image in a book. But it touched me. And when I graduated, I was lucky enough to travel to New York City, where I saw it in real life at the Museum of Modern Art. I was not much younger than some of you when I first stood in front of that stunning newspaper-toned masterpiece, and something inside me broke open. In fact, I often think that this experience at that moment understood I wanted to be an artist. Guernica has since moved to its permanent home in Spain, and just days ago, 50 years after I had first seen it, I was given the chance to see it again for the first time since I was a teenager. In fact, I just returned from Spain, where I would likely still be had I not been surprised by a wonderful phone call from President Siddall asking whether I would accept this great honor.

For those of you who know my work, it might sound strange that a Picasso painting was what set me on the path I've been walking this past half-century. I make videos, I make projections, I make events, I make experiences. And I do so with the aim of reflecting the world back at itself, of exploring the beauty and adversity of the everyday. But looking at that painting reveals something to me. It brought me to a place I'd never been before. It stood me toe to toe with the anguish and fear of people I've never met. It showed me their hope and courage, and it convinced me that their pain and their promise were real. And Guernica does all those things without moralizing. It holds its grandiose themes in a poignant ambiguity. This is the mark of a great work of art—

ambiguity. It doesn't tell you how to feel. It doesn't send you for not doing more, but it does bring this reality to your very doorstep. It makes that reality impossible to ignore. And it does all of this to an indelible, aesthetic experience. Art.

And I'd like to remind our graduate students here today that you didn't travel to a foreign country and see a masterwork to have this experience. Guernica was a spark, but the flame that I conjured, that I've tended now for half a century, has been fed by what I've found in my own backyard here. This is something I've said before, but truly community has been my mentor. Community has been my greatest and most enduring source of inspiration throughout my career. The people and places and events that happen right here in Vancouver have fed my curiosity, and never once has it gone.

Each of us gets involved in creative practice for unique reasons. Some of us dream of traveling to far-flung places and will do so. But if that's not what you hope to do, doesn't make your dreams or your practice any less profound. The world by necessity turns inward. The small and the immediate are what will occupy you most days, the people around you, the things at hand. I believe that you can find great inspiration in these, your local sources. There is much to be gained from an encounter with something so large and heavy and time-traveling as Guernica. But your own community is a treasure trove of powerful, important subjects and experiences. Find what it is in the world that sets you on fire and make it.

So today, my message to you is to trust your own spark. Cultivate it, feed it, tend to it daily, find your Guernica, whether it's in your own community or in a place that you visit, and make it real for you.

Congratulations, graduates of 2023. Thank you.