

The Power of Mentoring: Up Close With Carol Sun – Artist, Teacher and Mentor

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As a New York City public school graduate whose path led her to a twenty-plus year career in the design industry, then back to the classroom as an arts educator, Carol Sun embodies the full spectrum of arts education. Her accomplishments are a result of her extraordinary talent, tenacity and hard work as well as the encouragement and wisdom of several key players in her life whom she refers to as her mentors. I have had the pleasure of getting to know Carol this year through her participation in CAE's Career Development Program, which connects students and educators to the arts and arts-related industries of New York City through school-to-work activities. Recently, we sat down to discuss her own career development as an artist and our shared philosophy on the power of mentoring.

In The Beginning...

"I think a person chooses someone to be their mentor or there is some implicit understanding in their relationship that is very respectful and very serious." It was Carol's mom who served as her first mentor and role model. Growing up in the Bronx in the 1960's, Carol remembers observing her mother, one of the first women to attend Yale's graduate program in architecture, and how meticulous she was in her work. "She is an extraordinary draftsman and artist," recalls Carol. When Carol applied to the High School of Music and Art, known today as Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School, Carol's mother helped her to prepare her portfolio for admission. In regards to her mother's support and encouragement of Carol's artistic pursuits, Carol comments, "For her generation and her situation coming out of China, the idea that you would become an artist would seem very frivolous... to a great extent, I think she's always lived a certain part of her aspirations through me."

At Cooper Union

After graduating from high school at the top of her class, Carol was accepted into the prestigious downtown art school, Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. As Carol notes, "Cooper Union was the most challenging



Carol Sun in her studio

educational experience that I ever had because the stakes are so high there and it's such a small community." It was a humbling period in Carol's life as she was forced to re-learn her artistic process and discard old habits. It was also during this period that Carol was very much on her own in both an extremely competitive academic environment and at home as her parents were going through a divorce.

Cooper Union in the 1970's, as described by Carol, was predominantly male and very sexist. Of the female professors that Carol came across, few were interested in adopting any younger women artists. The climate was one where everyone had to fend for themselves. Carol relates her commitment to mentoring as a result of this period of adversity.

Despite the circumstances, Carol was able to find a mentor in artist and professor, Niki Logis, who was not Carol's teacher at the time but who provided Carol with the guidance and push that she was seeking. When describing Niki's qualities as a mentor, Carol states, "She was brutally honest and she listened to me when I was upset. She was there and would see me go through my growing pains and she'd tease me or say, 'sit down...stop complaining... do your work'. She was very caring." Niki mentored Carol through compassion but also by pushing her to try harder and achieve her potential. Carol would return to this approach later in life when she

found herself in the role of mentor and teacher to other aspiring artists.

On Teaching and Mentoring

After working as a commercial designer for twenty years, Carol began her teaching career in museum education at the Whitney Museum. She then taught at post-secondary institutions, including Parsons School of Design and even her alma mater, Cooper Union. In 2003, Carol returned to her old stomping ground in the Bronx to teach at the New Visions-sponsored Bronx High School of Visual Arts. As Carol puts it, "Art was something I wanted to use to change people's lives in a positive way."

Carol's students have benefited greatly from her rich experiences in the arts industry. As one of her former students, Kendall, declared, "She knows everybody!" Her students also see her as a role model who came from the Bronx and was able to pursue a successful career as an artist.

Having worked with such a range of creative personalities on a multitude of projects, Carol has developed useful skills in communication and project management, which come in handy in her classroom. She considers the art of teaching to exist in how she is able to engage her students and present the lessons. Carol also knows how to go after the resources she needs for her classroom. To date, Carol has applied for and received \$142,500 for her school, including a three-year grant from CAE. For these reasons, she serves as a mentor to her fellow educators.

For a select few of her students, Carol is also considered a mentor. As Carol reflects, "I think a teacher can become a mentor, but it doesn't mean that just because you're someone's teacher that you're their mentor."

I spoke with a few of Carol's students who look to her as a mentor. Her student Matthew sums up his view of Carol as, "You know kung fu? She's like your master. You look up to her. She's there for you. She cares for you." Another student, Damian, points out his role in the relationship by stating, "With all this help, you can't just be lazy with it. If she gives you that first push, you gotta keep walking."