

How being a Chinese Takeaway kid influenced my life as a Scottish Contemporary Artist

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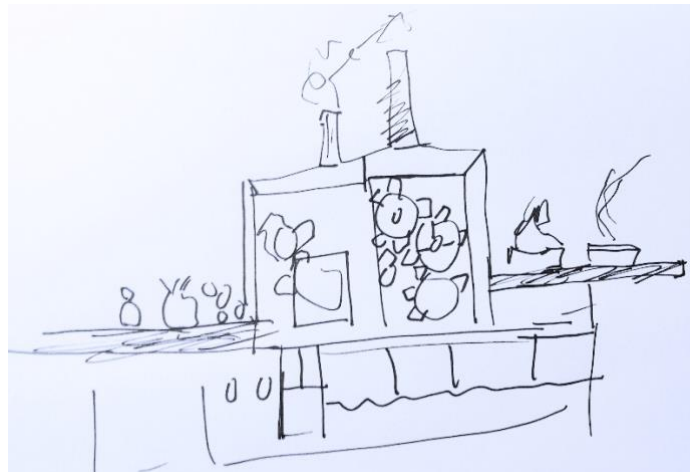
For those who don't know, my mum owned a takeaway business for nearly 3 decades. It's weird that after many memorable years, my mother's takeaway is now closed. She has finally retired at the age of 69. And with that I now have several kilos of steak and duck meat in my freezer.

I can honestly say that I had a love-hate relationship with the family business. It's no secret that I was one of the 'Takeaway' kids in the 1980s, 90s and noughties. For most of my life, I was raised in the kitchen of my parents' restaurants and takeaways. I used to play with my Transformer toys in the customer waiting areas.



Early childhood in the Chinese Takeaway Business

In some ways, it can be noted that my early artistic aspirations were born from the family catering business. My mother, before she met my father actually applied to Glasgow School of Art as an international student in 1978. She eventually never went to GSA as she had me and was helping my father in the restaurant in Grangemouth as this was the only source of income. To keep me entertained whilst being in the restaurant, my mother taught me how to draw accurately with pen and paper. This could have been the beginning of my artistic journey. I even attempted to create blueprint drawings of weird machines that would help my parents cook faster in the restaurant.



Recreation of an early childhood drawing designing a cooking machine

When my parents separated in my early teens, my mum suddenly went from a housewife to an owner of a small takeaway business in Newton Mearns. At that time, my mother had to harden up persona-wise. She couldn't simply be a single mother

and a woman, in the misogynist business catering environment of the 90s. She had to be strong-willed and sometimes emotionally disconnected to ensure she could bring enough money to raise her three kids and to ensure they had a somewhat normal upbringing.



The kitchen staff in action.

In an honest reflection of that time, it was difficult. I did not enjoy that period of my life dealing with these sudden changes. The most unusual thing looking back is how this period in my teens influenced the art I was making; especially my Higher and CSYS art portfolio in the late 90s. The constant intense hostile environment (at home and at work), influenced not only my subject matter, but my personal colour palette. I was experimenting at school with a lot of intense fiery colour and tones. Although the works I was producing were 'immature with teenage anxiety', they were in a lot of ways a prelude to what my visual repertoire and practice would later be during and after art school.



CSYS Expressive Prep Piece 1999

After graduating from DJCAD in 2005, I continued to help as much as I could at my mum's takeaway. This wasn't to say that my time helping was pointless to my art practice. As I was working front-of-house (aka the counter), I got to converse with some helpful customers who knew that I went to art school. This would range from the man-with-a-van (whose usual order was chicken curry with no onions fried rice) offering discounted rates for couriering my artwork to a local joiner who could make my stretchers for free. By reflecting deeper on my time at my mum's takeaway, most of my early collectors were her customers as well.



Selfie with a Blackberry Pearl in the family takeaway 2010

As is usually the case with most art students who graduate after their degree show, the biggest dip in your mentality is the dread of moving back home with zero or very little cash to start your own practice. Although I did not win any awards or sell any work at my Master's Degree Show in 2005, I did have offers from a few London galleries wanting to show my work and a place at WASPS Studio in Glasgow (I took the uncanny initiative of applying to be a studio lease holder whilst in my first year at art school; my time as student seeing me through the four year waiting list. To deliver, however, I needed capital. Whilst many would have applied to the Scottish Art Council (now rebranded as Creative Scotland), I chose a different approach. This was due to a regular customer of my mum's takeaway who gave me the contact details to the Prince's Scottish Youth Business Trust who could support me financially in becoming an artist. It took one phone call to the charity and all of a sudden, I was given a *very* low interest business loan of £2000, an additional £2000 Business Gateway Grant and career

marketing advisors from PSYBT. All this gave me the finances to kickstart my art practice without the added pressure of doing additional shifts at the takeaway or in another job.



2009 Meeting HM King Charles, Head of the Princes Youth Business Trust

Out of loyalty to my mum, I would try to help as much as I can in her business and eventually, I was given roles beyond the counter. Often, I would be helping her resolve disputes regarding business rates and the energy supply. There were also times such as in 2018 where my mum needed a triple heart bypass that I would be placed as manager, controlling staff and handling quality checks on produce. Although I did hate the extra responsibilities, what I learnt fed into my practice significantly. I learned things such as how to budget for the best materials at a favourable price and mastering the technique of selling artwork to potential buyers. What I do find funny is that the experience from the takeaway which influenced the business aspect of my practice has

now made me be the leading expert and module leader of Professional Practice at the university where I lecture.



Exhibiting at the Royal West of England Academy in 2022

More importantly, the years of helping in my mum's business has had a major impact on the work I make. As the nature of the catering business moves with the times so does the notion of innovation in creating new dishes in which my mum excels greatly. This inventive and adventurous form of play has been instrumental in how I create artwork. It is common knowledge that I use gunpowder and explosives to make refined representational drawings, however, the method that I use is the result of many trials and experiments (you can't just go and read a book on how to use gunpowder to make art). In a way, the process I undergo to create new methods of using gunpowder and

constantly pushing the boundaries of the medium is very much like a chef trying to get that Michelin star.



Pushing the boundaries with gunpowder medium with recent work

If I was to advise young aspiring artists who might be in a similar situation, I would say Yes, I get it. It sucks that you need to do it. You may feel that every day is an absolute struggle with no end in sight. You just want that one lucky break to make the difference but believe me there is value in what you will learn from the hard graft. Grab every opportunity no matter how big or small; achieving them is a step in the right direction. No matter how difficult the situation is, turn every opportunity into a win, and try not to be embittered.

So, to my mum's takeaway, thanks for being my weird companion for 30 years. We have had our difficulties but in the end like every hard teacher you taught me so much.

