The Great Banana Fish Migration

by

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Abstract

In this reflection, I tell the story of *The Great Banana Fish Migration*, a picture book I worked on throughout my time in the MES program, and I use it as a framing narrative to understand my return to Canada after being away for more than seven years. Having observed a sense of hopelessness pervading Canadian society upon my return, I explore the origins of this way of thinking and how it can act as an obstacle for positive social and environmental change. In my exploration I delve into how art can empower individuals to adopt alternative perspectives that creatively fuel awareness, resistance, and resilience. I also include examples from my ongoing artistic practice creating banana fish character art as examples of my findings on creativity. In an effort to embody the implications that art can have on culture, I recount the conception and creation of the project, *Banana Fish in the City*, where I create 100 ceramic banana fish figurines and place them around Toronto with a message of hope to disrupt the notions of hopelessness that inspired my research. Turning a critical eye to this project, I describe how my intentions may have been misaligned with the understandings of art and hope that my research uncovered. The execution of this project also allowed me to realize that the transformation I sought to catalyze in others was actually ongoing within myself and looking at the imagery in *The Great Banana Fish Migration*, I was able to understand my research on creativity, art, and hope from a deeply personal perspective that summarizes my own subconscious quest for hope, direction, love, and purpose throughout my time in the MES program. This reflection ultimately serves as a diary documenting my personal growth through the program, as a record of how the banana fish as both a concept and art object have grown in tandem with me, and as an example of the kind of thinking that I advocate for as a response to hopelessness in the face of societal and environmental crisis.

Foreword

In my final plan of study, I stated under my learning objectives that "to be a master of creative thinking […] would be to understand the social, cultural, and personal relationship that my artwork has with the world," and although the path to this understanding was not linear, I feel that my work over the course of this program has allowed me to fulfill this objective.

My plan of study and my research proposal describe how I planned to combine character art, artistic practice, and creativity to engage people with a more hopeful perspective on change. In my initial research, I gained a thorough understanding of hope and creativity as elements that shape our culture and I used my findings to describe an alternative perspective to hopelessness that could act as a solution.

To fulfill the engagement objective of my plan of study, I executed the project *Banana Fish in the City,* which sought to introduce people in Toronto to my solution and the ideas of my research through art. Over the course of several months I created 100 ceramic banana fish figurines and placed them around Toronto with a message imploring people to adopt a more creative way of thinking to facilitate positive change. However, the creativity and reflection that went into this project and my ongoing work on *The Great Banana Fish Migration* (see Appendix A)*,* allowed me to see the subconscious narratives that existed beneath the surface of my intentions.

This inspired the next phase of my research where I delved deeper into the relationship between artist and art. In this phase I gained an unexpected understanding of creative engagement that balances on the exchange of subconscious personal tensions that manifest through the act of creation. I now have a better understanding of the social, cultural, and personal relationship that art has with hope because I turned my public-facing project inward and examined the motivations that fueled my own journey over the past two years.

This newfound perspective allowed me to see that the source of hope is deeply personal and cannot be easily promoted as I initially sought to do, but it has reinforced the conclusion from my

initial research that creativity is an important aspect of hope. My experience in the MES program has demonstrated to me that intentions play an important role in how art and activism are received and that an authentic relationship with creativity can be a catalyst for the type of transformation I hope for in the world.

Finally, this led me to tie in the education component of my studies and conclude that the arts can play an important role in education by authentically cultivating the moral backing to an alternative mindset that creativity helps to develop in people. This journey has allowed me to not just theoretically understand the broader implications that art has on individuals, societies, and cultures, but to experience it and feel it first hand.

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The Great Banana Fish Migration

The story of *The Great Banana Fish Migration* was the story that introduced the banana fish to me and started a relationship that altered my entire perspective. I had just moved back to Taiwan for some stability after moving around for a couple years, and I was starting life over once again. I think I was looking for something that I did not know I needed at the time. Then one day the banana fish arrived as a school of hundreds of yellow fish flipping and flapping exuberantly on the waves of a turbulent sea in my imagination. They were all heading in the same direction on a great return to their ancestral homeland. In the story of *The Great Banana Fish Migration*, banana fish from all over the world heed the instinctual call of their migration and put their adventures on pause. From every corner of the Earth they come together to gather in a distant valley where the very first banana fish appeared long before anyone can remember. As the sun sets on their valley, they join hands as the world grows dark. Soon the only remaining light is that of the banana fish themselves as they glow together beneath the stars. The night of their migration is a chance for them to be as banana fish are, all together as one, and when the sun peeks over the horizon the next day, they go their separate ways once again.

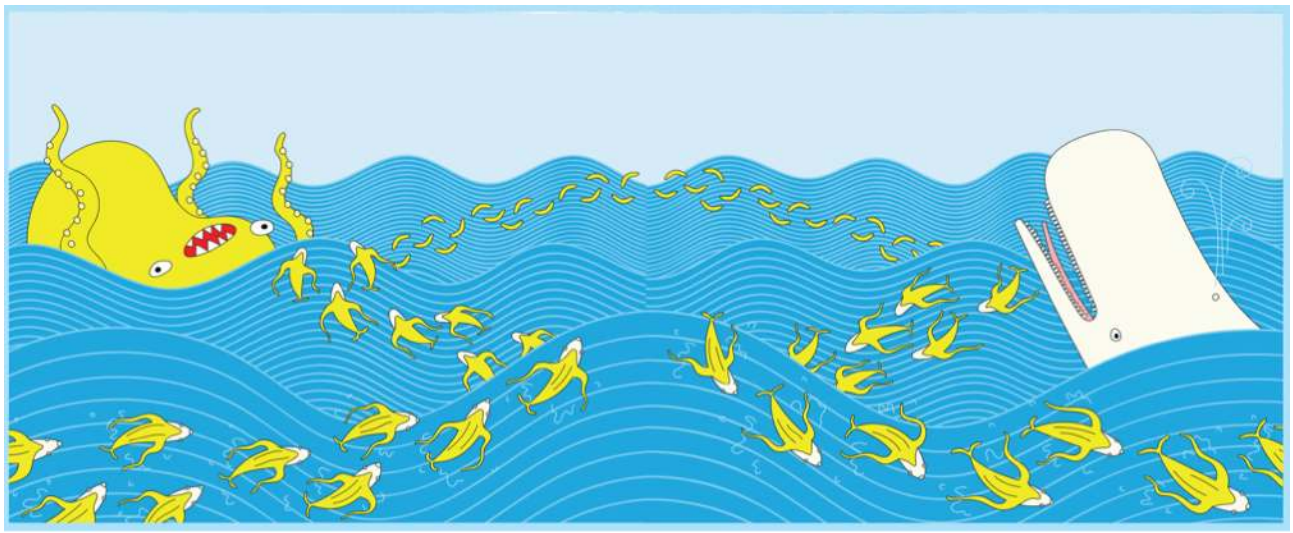

Figure 1

A two page spread from the very first version of *The Great Banana Fish Migration* (2018).

Since that day, the image of the banana fish has never left my imagination. In the years since their first appearance, they have grown and changed with me throughout my life in Taiwan. The original story was soon buried in my archive as these creatures proliferated as artworks, books, drawings, sculptures, toys, and clothing. Piles of sketches accumulated on my desk and my drawers and closets were filled with banana fish. My banana fish were also not the first creative exploits under this name. *Banana Fish* (1985-1994), a celebrated manga by Akimi Yoshida, and J.D. Salinger's *"A Perfect Day for Banana Fish"* (1948), both preceded my own combination of these two seemingly unrelated elements.

Eventually the story of *The Great Banana Fish Migration* resurfaced. I am not from Taiwan originally. I am from Ontario, which is a place I had completely left behind once the wide world of adulthood was presented to me, but I started working on *The Great Banana Fish Migration* again and planning my own return. In 2022, I decided to leave my adventures behind, and return to Canada. At the time I was not really sure which direction my migration would take, but as this reflection will recount, The story of *The Great Banana Fish Migration* was able to shed light on my own experience of migration in really poetic and meaningful ways.

It turns out that my migration would be framed within the Masters of Environmental Studies (MES) program at York University in Toronto. When one is looking for direction, graduate school is a well-traveled path and taking a critical eye to *The Great Banana Fish Migration* in this context would challenge my artistic practice in new ways.

Interpreting life through the lens of an illustrated picture book narrative is not an experience that is unique to me. One of the artists who inspires me is Tove Jansson, creator of The Moomins. Her stories and her artwork offer a light-hearted and engaging visual world that also provides metaphorical understanding of the context that she was creating in. Maija-Liisa Harju explains that "[c]omplex questions dominate Jansson's work for both adults and children as she consistently confronts issues of identity, one's position in the natural world, individual neuroses, antisocial

behavior, the process of time, environmental catastrophe, and the inescapable promise of death" (Harju, 2009, pp. 369-370). Nancy Lyman Huse states that Jansson's stories are "replete with illustrations that suggest a joyful response to cataclysm." (1981, p. 44), and Debbie Hindle and Gita Ingram state that "*Comet in Moominland* was for Jansson, both a way of escaping the horrors of war, and also a way of engaging in thinking about it." (2022, p. 100). The MES program pushed me to consider the banana fish and their story of migration in the way that others have viewed Jansson's works. Over the course of my time in Toronto I continually wondered what clues of the context I was creating in were present in the story and what this story was saying about me as the artist.

Joanne Marie Purcell explains how picture books can influence our perspective. She states that picture books, "have the potential to reflect epistemological positions about being and existence" (2018, p. 357), and that they "provoke inquiry into the ways words and pictures work together to produce meaning"(Purcell, 2018, p. 357). The effect is what she calls "a new emergent understanding" (2018, p. 359). This reflection will explore the process through which I have come to find my own new emergent understanding and it will offer insights about how a perspective shift can be transformational at a personal and societal level.

So How Do You Make Money Doing That?

I did not really like living in Toronto, which is unsurprising. Taipei is an extremely comfortable city with an excellent quality of life that makes going anywhere else very difficult. My reverse culture shock was strong on a superficial level, but the social justice and activist lenses of the MES program pushed me to be extra critical of my new surroundings.

I also think that it may not have been the best time to move to Canada. I was reentering Canadian society at the faltering end of Justin Trudeau's term as prime minister and on the eve of a second Donald Trump presidency in the United States. The housing and cost of living crises seemed to be squeezing people extra tightly, and like in many parts of the world at the time, people seemed to feel like things were bad and getting worse. I remembered the Toronto of 2015 as a city of millennial bliss with a palpable sense of possibility in the air, but there was a much more serious tone in the air 10 years later.

I tried to meet as many people as possible when I first arrived, so that I could get a feel for the city, and time after time I kept encountering really low spirits. The topics of condo prices, insufficient wages, and wasteful government spending seemed to dominate every conversation, most likely in response to the housing and cost of living crises. In general I found Toronto to be a place that was extremely focused on money and property, and not optimistic about either. One of the more memorable encounters I had with this mentality was with a law student. He asked me about what I do, and I told him about the MES program and the banana fish. With a snarl he remarked, "Why would anyone listen to a liberal arts student? How do you even make money doing that?" Of course I was shocked by this rude response. The relationship I have cultivated with the banana fish was always more of an artistic connection than an entrepreneurial one. Though 2022 was a good year for the banana fish as a money-making concept, for years I made no money from it, and there are hundreds of banana fish that no one ever sees because so much of the connection I have with these characters is private. It really struck me as interesting that this law student only wanted to

know how much money it was worth. It was a reaction I had never experienced in Taiwan and a really striking introduction to my new home.

Eventually, I connected this pessimistic preoccupation with money that I noticed in Toronto to what Erich Fromm calls “having mode”. He states that “we live in a society that rests on private property, profit, and power as the pillars of its existence” (Fromm p. 66), and he explains “how the character traits engendered by our socioeconomic system […] eventually produce a sick person and, thus, a sick society” (Fromm, p. 9). I think a lot of my reverse culture shock was from observing how “sick”, disillusioned, and hopeless about the future people were in the new society I called home. Fromm states that social norms mold social character (p.66), and the law student I encountered was a good example of how a single track mindset focused on having was unable to see the alternative value I was proposing as an artist.

Lynne Twist and Teresa Barker bring some necessary dimension to my character analysis of the law student. They describe scarcity as a great lie (2003, p. 61), and detail how this anxiety about what is enough has come to pervade society. They explain that even in places of over-abundance, people’s every waking thought is focused on how there is never enough. This of course applies to money, and power, but also to things like sleep, time, and appearance (Twist, 2003, pp. 61-62). They go on to say that “[i]t is not even that we necessarily experience a lack of something, but that scarcity as a chronic sense of inadequacy about life becomes the very place from which we think and act and live in the world” (Twist, 2003, p. 62). Having mode is not a character flaw, but rather a societal trauma response to potential insecurity. I think the general hopelessness I was observing in Toronto was a reaction to this general feeling of insecurity that the city and the state of the world was provoking.

One might argue that the solution to a perceived lack is to fill that void, but The Harvard Study of Adult Development found that it is likely those things are neither power nor money. Robert Waldinger explores the most recent findings of this decades long study in his book, *The Good Life*.

He explains that after a household earns the median level of income where their basic needs are met, their level of happiness no longer increases with their level of wealth. In fact it starts to be more about status and pride than about well-being (2023, p. 40-41). He also explains the idea of eudaemonia versus hedonia. He states that eudaemonia is a state of "well-being in which a person feels that their life has meaning and purpose" (Waldinger, 2023, p. 21). Hedonia on the other hand "refers to the fleeting happiness of various pleasures" (2023, p. 22). Using these terms to understand the mood in Toronto, I would argue that in a society defined by hedonic values like the accumulation of wealth and property, the sickness of a scarcity mindset grows stronger. The subconscious yearning for eudaemonia is never addressed in a society that does not value it, and hopelessness, disillusionment, and frustration proliferate from this confused sense of lacking.

The MES program allowed me to contextualize my cultural analysis of Toronto within a wider scope of environmentalism and social justice to see how the hopelessness I was observing poses a threat to our collective future. Maria Ojala explains that "hope about a better, alternative, future could play an important part in motivating people to take action concerning global problems" (2012, p. 626). She also explains that due to hopelessness's ties to inaction finding new ways to instill hope is vital (Ojala, 2012, pp. 625-626). The content of my lectures and classes allowed me to reflect on my reverse culture shock, the law student, and the general malaise I kept encountering. As my classes demonstrated, there is no shortage of innovative solutions to the ills that cause woe in our world, but as I see it, if our woe is too great to adopt them, that unhappiness will be unending. Since this woeful attitude was something that I was personally observing, I decided to make this topic the focus of my research and creative practice over the course of my studies.

One of the questions that guided my research was inspired by what the law student said. Why should someone listen to a liberal arts student? What role do artists and the arts play in making the world a better place and in ensuring a future in which we are well and society is content?

Mikkel Krause Frantzen states that we live in a time of crisis and in assessing what can be done, we can look to academics, activists and artists to understand what kind of attitudes are affective and appropriate in these circumstances (2020, p. 97). I am not immune to the feelings of hopelessness and frustration that these times of crisis produce, but I hoped that the journey of *The Great Banana Fish Migration* would be able to offer some insights in the way that Jansson's works did about the context that she was creating in. This is where my search for these affective and appropriate attitudes that Frantzen mentions began.

Partially inspired by the law student, I also decided that my focus for this migration would be on the banana fish as art instead of as a commercial concept. The banana fish have a poetic way of nudging me in the right direction, and they offered some guidance that informed my decision to take this direction. I had been working with a factory on an order of banana fish stuffed animals even before I moved to Toronto, and after finalizing with the manufacturer, they were finally delivered. When I opened the three giant boxes in my apartment, I discovered that there was an error with the fabric and they were all the completely wrong color. Though disappointing, I realized that maybe this was not meant to be the era of the banana fish as a budding commercial concept. I took it as a sign that, while on migration, I should focus on what the banana fish mean to me without commercial influence and try to uncover their importance beyond financial gain. This moment had already changed the trajectory that the banana fish and I were on, and this focus would open the door for even more changes on my migration.

A Creative Idea

Looking into what a liberal arts student has to offer the world, I began by investigating the notion of creativity. “Creative” was a word that I found myself using a lot to explain the concept of the banana fish to people in Toronto. I repeatedly explained that the banana fish are primarily a creative idea because the work that I do does not require an enormous amount of technical prowess, but as a creative idea, I think the banana fish are the strongest. The challenge was to flesh out what the strength of that creativity entailed.

Creativity as a concept embraces the idea of difference, which is something that the banana fish do well. The American Psychological Association (n.d.) states that “Creativity is the ability to produce or develop original work, theories, techniques, or thoughts. A creative individual typically displays originality, imagination, and expressiveness”. I think the banana fish meet a lot of the criteria set in this very clinical definition. When I created the banana fish I looked at chibi-kawaii characters that have large faces and small bodies. To come up with an original concept, I imagined the opposite qualities in my characters. The banana fish have an expressive body and the face is usually muted and small. By design the banana fish are purposefully different.

This has also been a part of the feedback I have gotten from audiences that I have shared the banana fish with. In 2022, I participated in Taiwan Creative Expo in Kaohsiung. I remember one interaction where a couple was walking through the crowd surveying the hundreds of other characters on display and when they reached my booth, I heard one of them remark with intrigue that, “this one is different”. In my research, I set out to understand what potential the difference that people were noticing could offer the world.

Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson explore the transformative potential of creativity in their book, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People are Changing the World*. They explain that by “thinking outside of the box” (2000, p. 58), creative people have “what it takes to develop and follow values that are decidedly different from those of the dominant culture” (2000, p. 20).

This need to be different despite normative societal values is where they believe creative power lies. They explain that a creative change in values, is often the catalyst for a change in worldview (2000, p. 17), and they claim that this personal change has the power to "change everything" (2000, p. 18). Ray and Anderson reassured me that the difference inherent in creativity has powerful potential, but they also offered some perspective that helped me to understand Toronto on my migration.

Ray and Anderson contrast creatives with what they call "moderns". They explain that, for moderns, "the economy dominates what is distinctive about their lives" (2000, p. 25), and that their perspective is dominated by an acceptance of the way that things are (2000, p. 25). Moderns value money, consumption, looking good, and status (Ray and Anderson, 2000, p. 27). This description also resonates with Fromm's idea of having mode. Both describe a narrow perspective that is confined by materialism. In contrast Ray and Anderson state that creatives "are disenchanted with 'owning more stuff', materialism, greed, me firstism, status display, the glaring social inequalities of race and class, society's failure to care adequately for elders, women, and children, and the hedonism and cynicism that pass for realism in modern society" (2000, p. 17). This comparison helped shed light on why I likely felt so out of place in Toronto. As a creative, feeling out of place is not simply a matter of being different. It is a clash of existential values that are fundamentally incompatible. In the early 2010s I often visited Toronto, and it felt like a vibrant, creative, dynamic place, but returning 10 years later, I felt like the creativity in the air had diminished and had been replaced with a more modern material worldview. This observation may also be an example of how creativity had shifted my own perspective. For years in Taiwan the banana fish allowed me to practice my creativity daily, which ultimately informed my perspective. Even if Toronto had not changed, I think it would feel different to me because the banana fish had impacted how I viewed things. I realized that the difference I infused in the banana fish, was also a reflection of my own values and not simply an aesthetic choice.

This realization and Ray and Anderson's tying of creativity to difference also allowed me to connect how a liberal arts student, like myself, could offer a fresh perspective in a place dominated by modernist thought, but I needed to expand on this perspective to uncover exactly what this power was.

Ray and Anderson see creativity as divergent in its rejection of modern values and this quality of resistance is what I wanted to explore further as a possible response to the disillusion I was witnessing in Toronto. Anna Stetsenko elaborates on this characteristic and states that creativity is always about dissent, resistance, freedom, and questioning the status quo to move beyond what is given (2018, p. 431). My friction with Toronto's modern values shows a resistance to the dominant culture and I think this is a quality that I have cultivated through the banana fish.

Over the years I have created banana fish in a diverse array of mediums. Beyond the computer screen as digital illustrations or as pencil doodles on paper, the banana fish have taken form as textile art, acrylic paintings, and sculptures. In Toronto, I widened my scope even further and began working with spray paint and oil pastels for the first time. As an artist, my practice does not exist within the limitations of medium and this quality is also evident in my characters themselves. They defy categorization as people or animals and the ever changing shape of the banana fish speaks to a quality of unrestrained freedom that they possess in their physical form, which matches their carefree attitudes. As a creative practice and creative idea the banana fish are always different, and they push back against normalization. This quality of resistance in the banana fish is something I have learned about them and myself on our migration. I think the banana fish have always been my own private form of resistance. For years the banana fish cultivated my creativity to help me resist the monotony of modern living and they offered an alternative to the hedonistic norms of our cultural conditioning. My resistance came from my imagination, and the banana fish and I have been able to create a lighthearted world of yellows and blues to resist the gray seriousness of our life.

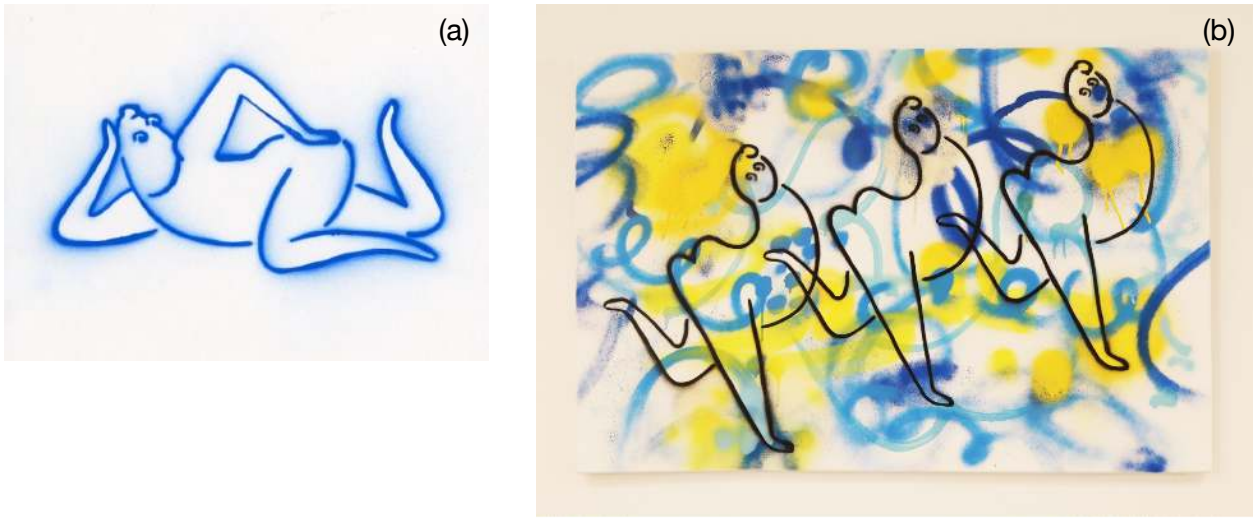

Figure 2

Two spray painted works from my time in Toronto.

(a) Spray paint on paper 22x30cm (b) Spray paint and acrylic on canvas 60x90cm

Stetsenko describes the notion of creativity as an expression of human subjectivity, hope, and purpose (2018, p. 441), which I think speaks to the resistant part of my subconscious where the banana fish came from. My creative practice is a process that trains me to see as an individual, look beyond limitations, and access new realms of possibility that bring meaning to the actions of my life. The idea of purpose seemed to be at the base of what many hopeless Torontonians were struggling with. Due to the housing crisis and the cost of living crisis it seemed people felt like their ceaseless work would always fall short in terms of the financial resources required to achieve the life that they had expected, and therefore their work somewhat lost its meaning. A perspective that is creatively informed could offer an alternative to aimless despair. Creativity emboldens our subjectivity to resist the expectations that modern values impose and by acknowledging these alternatives, Torontonians could feel more hopeful about their culture's "objective" limitations.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also saw the transformative power of creativity. He states that through "creative maladjustment, we may be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man, into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice"(1968, p.

185). He then follows this statement by saying that he has not lost hope (p. 185). King found hope in creativity and the potential liberation that it offers. He states we should be maladjusted to racial discrimination, racial segregation, religious bigotry, “the madness of militarism”, “the self-defeating effects of physical violence", and “economic conditions that take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few” (1968, p. 185). I think the newness brought from subjectivity is what makes original thinking a valuable asset for improving a variety of social and environmental woes. Being “maladjusted” to society creates agency and allows for new possibilities. This type of creative thinking is precisely what liberal arts students are trained in and the possibilities that this type of thinking offers are what liberal artists can offer our collective future.

On possibility, Ray and Anderson state that, “[i]f a culture lacks a positive vision for the future […] its creative power begins to wither and the culture itself stagnates” (2000, p. 341). I think that this creative vision is what hopeless, stagnant times can gain from the liberal arts. Creative qualities like difference and resistance fuel a new mentality, which cultivates a hopeful, positive vision for the future that replaces the old vision. This is likely why Ray and Anderson describe the creative perspective as “a resurgence of hope, of imagination, [and] of willingness to act for the sake of a better civilization” (2000, p. 341). Writing in 2000, I do not think either of them could have predicted the challenges that that creative vision would face in the 2020s, but their faith in creativity as the key to unlocking a better world still holds validity today.

Trying to describe this creative mentality that we need for a better future was what I grappled with on my migration, and exploring the way we think drew me to the work of several psychologists. Lisa Miller talks about her own experiences unlocking the values that fuel well-being. Not unlike what I observed in Toronto, she describes her struggles with “‘dysthymia’—the low-grade feeling that life is unfulfilling” (2021, p. 28). She explains that this overwhelming feeling of hopeless disillusionment is characterized by darkness, isolation, alienation, and futility (2021, p.

28), however she was able to overcome this state of being by developing a perspective that allowed her to see beyond the limits of her previous consciousness.

The hopeful mentality that Miller found is what she calls “the awakened brain”, and the following is her description.

> *The awakened brain is the neural circuitry that allows us to see the world more fully and thus enhance our individual, societal, and global well-being. When we awaken, we feel more fulfilled and at home in the world, and we build relationships and make decisions from a wider view. We move from loneliness and isolation to connection; from competition and division to compassion and altruism; from an entrenched focus on our wounds, problems, and losses to a fascination with the journey of life (2021 p. 13).*

This type of awakening is the change that I think Ray and Anderson connect to cultural creativity, and I think it is the type of creative awakening that allowed King to find hope by looking outside of the confines of our cultural norms. Miller also sees it as a way to move past what holds us back in our culture. She states that she has “come to see the problems we have in leadership, education, social justice, the environment, and mental health as different emanations of the same problem: unawakened awareness” (Miller, 2021, p.14).

As I have come to see it, creativity is ultimately the gateway that awakens our brains to the possibilities of hope that our culture has trained us to be blind to. Miller states that this awareness is like a muscle that needs to be strengthened (2021, p. 14), and I think that my time spent in reflection while on migration has allowed me to engage in training this muscle for myself. Miller explains that those who have found this awareness see themselves as seekers of their own path and that they look for what life is showing them, which “allows us to perceive more choices and opportunities available to us, feel more connected with others, [and] understand the relationships between events in our lives” (2021, p. 143). This description resonates with how I have come to see my relationship

to the banana fish, and the more I reflect on my creative practice, the more I can see how it affects my worldview.

In 2022, right before I began my migration, I decided to organize a large collection of rough drawings that I saved as references. As I chronologically pasted these into notebooks, I was able to relive the journey of the banana fish since their appearance, and for the first time I was really able to see myself in my work. Although I did not realize it at the time, the characters and stories that I had started with were slowly fading away as the story of the banana fish became more about my own experience. As I examined these drawings I was surprised to relive many moments of joy, loneliness, frustration, and darkness from the past several years. I realized that this entire time the story of the banana fish was actually my own story and for me, this insight was the kind of awakening that Miller outlines when she describes looking for what life is showing you on your path (2021, p. 143). This is also what I continued to look for from the banana fish as I explored the ideas of creativity and hopelessness in the context of Toronto.

On my migration, I coincidentally found myself watching *The Matrix*, which was a movie that had somehow eluded me up until that point, but which illuminates the difference in mentalities that I felt like my research had made clear. Do we choose the red pill and embrace the wealth of creative subjectivity that is available to us, or do we choose the blue pill and accept defeat to modern despair. Suzi Gablik describes the “mindless waste and greed” (1991, p. 2) of modern culture as a “paradigm”, which “influences the way we think, how problems are solved, what goals we pursue, and what we value” (1991, p. 2). I think the paradigm in Toronto was the obstacle I was struggling with. The paradigm is what cultural creatives resist, what King implores us to be maladjusted to, and what Miller hopes we can awaken from. The liberal arts train us to have a creatively informed perspective, which allows us to look beyond the tyranny of this paradigm.

To be the storyteller is to be in control of the paradigm. Just as Jansson told stories as a response to the cataclysm of her time, my characters and their stories reflect the tensions I am

navigating in my time. Assuming this role also gives me the agency to be resilient in my navigation. My failed order of stuffed animals is a good example of how having a relationship with the story you are telling can alter its trajectory. The stuffed animals, though technically a failure, felt more like a success because I was able to see the unexpected value it brought to my research and the story of my migration. I think this ability to see things for more than what they are is the power that a lot of my research has been honing in on. It is a practice that art intrinsically evokes in us, and it is what the banana fish have allowed me to creatively express. My challenge on migration has been to look beyond the banana fish and see what lies beneath these silly characters.

In Toronto I constantly created new banana fish in search of this new understanding. I hoped that the banana fish would offer their insights on what was going on in my life in the ways that they had in the past. My reflections from this stage of my migration have allowed me to explore the dimensions of my creativity and to better understand what motivates my practice as an artist. I am not an expert at resistance, awareness, or resilience, but I have come to better understand how the banana fish influence how I see the world. In many ways, I think the banana fish and the virtues that they infuse my character with have helped me to find hope on the turbulent seas of life, and this might also be how the banana fish could help Torontonians to creatively find a hope of their own.

Banana Fish in the City

For the MES program I had a choice of what kind of work I could do to embody what I had been exploring artistically and with my research. I wanted it to be something that would allow me to engage people with my work directly, but for an exhibition to do this I would have to get people to attend. I do not have a big network in Toronto and even if I did, the people who I want to reach with these ideas are mostly outside of my own sphere. I decided that instead of bringing people to my work, I would bring my work to them.

I decided to create a series of 100 ceramic banana fish and to leave them around the city for people to find as public art. I wanted to try and make each work a tiny embodiment of the beneficial relationship that I have with my own creativity to hopefully inspire others to cultivate their own. Each one would be accompanied by a small card explaining the project and my intentions with a QR code linking to a video version of the same explanation that I posted on social media. The message states that the goal for this project was to inspire hope and encourage people to seek goodness in the world. This was my way of encouraging Torontonians to be resilient, resist, and embrace difference as a pathway to alternative sources of awareness, fulfillment, and well-being. I decided to call the project, *Banana Fish in the City*, which describes the physical scope of the project and is also a reference to the fact that the culture of the city is what inspired the exploration of creativity that this project represents.

Figure 3

The backside of the card that accompanied each banana fish ceramic.

When I shared my idea for this project with a friend of mine in Toronto, he mentioned that it is similar to a project that took place in 2014. *Lovebot* is an initiative by Toronto artist Matthew Del Degan where he placed two foot tall concrete robot statues around the city with each one "dedicated to a person or group that performed a powerful act of kindness in their community" (Del Degan, 2025). Del Degan explains that…

> *Lovebot lovingly disrupts our robotic routines to remind us that there is love in our cities and kindness around every corner. Lovebot reiterates the fact that we all have the privilege of being human, and that we are not restricted to the algorithms and programming of our tech driven counterparts (2025).*

As *Lovebot* makes evident, I am not the only one who has sought to creatively disrupt the parochial culture of Toronto. Del Degan understands Gablik's idea of the paradigm as a robotic, preprogrammed response to our existence, and contests it by adorning his robot characters with a vibrant red heart. This is an image that he placed in the path of Torontonians to remind them of their humanity as they go about the mechanical routines of life in this city.

My goal with *Banana Fish in the City* was similar. I wanted to tangibly share all of the virtues that the banana fish, as my creative practice have informed my character with, I wanted to impress upon Torontonians that a creative perspective is an asset in navigating the crises of our time, and I wanted to infuse hope into the society that I thought was lacking it. By the end of November 2024, I had finished firing my 100 banana fish in the studios at York University. Each individual banana fish was about 5 inches long and was as unique as the banana fish of my imagination are. I also wanted to access a quality of multiplicity that I think creativity guides us to in terms of perspective.

For banana fish as vessels of hope I looked to how Barry Schwartz suggests hope functions. He states that "getting people to think about success and failure in the right way should engender optimism and hope" (2000, p. 404). I intended to interrupt people's lives with my characters, get

them to think differently, and see the world and its possibilities through a creative lens. “Hope anticipates a happiness to come” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 181), and in trying to shift people’s perspectives, I hoped that they would be able to anticipate a happiness that is as unexpected as their encounter with my artworks in the city was.

Figure 4

Four banana fish ceramics placed on the streets of Toronto.

In her book *Emotional Resiliency in the Era of Climate Change*, Leslie Davenport explores mindfulness as an important tool that we can leverage as we face the major crises of our time. As I dispersed my banana fish around the city, this mindful practice allowed for important developments in my understanding of this project to take place. Davenport says that, “[w]hen we pause mindfully… [w]e can identify the origins of our thinking habits” (2017, p. 47), which is what this project originally sought to do in others, but as I slipped banana fish on to ledges and sills

across the city, I found my reflection turning to myself and the intentions I had with this project. I began to question which part of *The Great Banana Fish Migration*, *Banana Fish in the City* represented. Davenport describes how being aware of the connections between individuals can allow us to "perceive differently, [and] new ways of living will naturally emerge" (2017, p. 45). I initially interpreted this to refer to the people of Toronto that I was trying to influence with this project, but as I considered my relationship with the banana fish and the relationship the banana fish in this project would have with those finding them, a new perception of *Banana Fish in the City* was beginning to emerge.

Everything that I have described that went into *Banana Fish in the City* is very well-intentioned, but I do not think it represented the power my research was honing in on. With the best of intentions I was using my skills and creativity to try and do good in the world. I was trying to brighten a gray city and lift the spirits of my fellow citizens. It was all very *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, but I realized as the last of my ceramic figures found their way onto bus stops and crosswalks that my intentions in this project may have been misaligned with what *The Great Banana Fish Migration* was trying to show me.

The banana fish do not affect me in the way this project would be affecting Torontonians. I was essentially giving out 100 gifts, each with a note telling the recipients how to feel and how it should affect them. The banana fish are never so direct with me. The story of *The Great Banana Fish Migration* does not tell me how to feel about my return to Canada with a nice little bow put on it. It is a companion story that ebbs and flows with my experience and offers insights that I am inclined to decipher as I progress.

An exploration of the idea of gifts helped me to see this part of *The Great Banana Fish Migration* in a different light. David Cheal states that, "beneath the great variations in […] gift behavior there is an underlying system of meanings" (1988, p. 94), and that even altruistic behavior is a part of a moral economy (1988, p. 87). What this means for *Banana Fish in the City* is that

although my intentions are clear to me, the process of giving away these banana fish artworks as gifts can distort my intended goal. The method of a gift is more dialectic than instructional, and my meaning is not guaranteed. Lewis Hyde describes the nature of a gift quite clearly. He says, “the way we treat a thing can sometimes change its nature” (1983, p. 26). Essentially, “[i]t is what we make of it.” (Hyde, 1983, p. 26), and the people who found my banana fish around the city will interpret them however they see fit, regardless of my intentions.

I received quite a few messages on social media from the people who had found my works. I heard many times that I had brightened someone’s day, and that they loved the gesture. One of these messages was from someone who found a banana fish on Wilcox Street near the University of Toronto. She explained that for a multitude of reasons she had been struggling for the past couple months, and that finding this banana fish genuinely shifted her perspective. I can only imagine the details of this perspective shift and I hope that whatever change she experienced, it will allow her to see the world more creatively as I had intended, but the potency with which the banana fish affect me is not guaranteed in that transmission.

One of the most important qualities of the banana fish that was left out in this project is their whimsy. In her discussion of yarn bombing in public space, Joanna Mann describes whimsy as a type of joy that can “restimulate the senses and instill a mood of possibility” (2015, p. 69). This quality would certainly be at home in *Banana Fish in the City*, but my intentions may have cancelled this potential. Whimsy is by nature light-hearted and without motive, but when intentionally put to service in the name of a cause, those qualities are compromised (Mann, 2015, p. 70). The example Mann gives is of the Big Breast event, where knitters decorated the streets with knitted breasts to challenge notions of what is sensible and have public discussion about disease. Detached from a political motive, knitted breasts hanging from fences in the park would certainly stimulate senses and evoke open-ended questions, but as a political statement they are a protest with

highly-motivated, serious intentions. In *Banana Fish in the City*, the whimsy of my characters was superseded by the resistance of their purpose and the effect of that whimsy was ultimately dimmed.

Figure 5

Five of the one hundred ceramic banana fish created for this project.

Del Degan and I will probably not be the last artists to try and engage Torontonians with creativity by leaving artworks as gifts in the city, but *Banana Fish in the City*, like every other creative endeavor that I have engaged in, has provided useful insights that guide my practice and bring meaning to my life and the story of *The Great Banana Fish Migration*. Although in retrospect, this project may not have transpired in the way that I intended, it is exactly those intentions that a creative perspective implores us to be flexible with. The public outcomes of *Banana Fish in the City* are questionable, but it was ultimately an exercise in personal development. I have learned that the creative resistance, resilience, and awareness that I have found through research, reflection, and creation are not qualities that are easily transferred, but their importance to me as an artist remains the same. I mistakenly saw this stage in my migration as a public project, but in reality I think this was a process that was incredibly personal and it was integral in deciphering exactly what the power

of the banana fish is. As artists already know, the outcome is likely not going to look exactly like the vision, but pursuing the outcome is a process that takes on new meaning as the process unfolds.

Transformation

I think that the gift of importance during my time in Toronto was not the 100 ceramics that I left around the city to inspire hope. My intentions with *Banana Fish in the City* tried to engineer a connection that is by nature spontaneous. As Hyde explains, the gift "is bestowed upon us. Thus we rightly speak of 'talent' as a 'gift,' for although a talent can be perfected through an effort of the will, no effort in the world can cause its initial appearance" (1983, p. 25). According to Hyde, the gift of the artist is a type of vacuum where by creating, one gives the gift of inspiration to someone else and as that gift passes from you, the emptiness is replenished as the chain reaction rewards your creation with a gift of inspiration for yourself (1983, p. 61). I think this is the relationship with the banana fish that I have been trying to understand throughout this migration. This exchange of generosity was what I hoped to accomplish with *Banana Fish in the City*, but I mistakenly thought I could recreate it for others of my own volition. The gift of talent "moves the heart", "revives the soul", "delights the senses", and "offers courage for living" (Hyde, 1983, p. 25), and although I wish for people to be inspired in this way, and I now understand how beneficial to our world that inspiration can be, I think it is a quality that might be beyond my own well-intentioned meddling. I think what I wanted to accomplish in Toronto was transformation. I wanted people to see how things are now, and feel like they could change them, but I was looking in the wrong places. I think the transformation that exemplifies my research findings was actually taking place within myself, and I did not need to look any further than that to have a better understanding of how creativity has transformative potential.

Hyde discusses how a gift is a companion for transformation. He states that it is, "a sort of guardian or marker or catalyst. It is also the case that a gift may be the actual agent of change, the bearer of new life" (1983, p. 90). Since my migration began and I landed in Canada, a quiet transformation had been taking place and it was not because I was able to connect all the dots of my research and explain to myself what the problem was. There is a villainous darkness in my life that I

am always in contention with and when I left Taiwan in 2022, I was struggling with the darkness in ways I would only come to see in retrospect. My own strength and conviction were faltering and I think my exploration of hope in the MES program was actually a personal quest. My time in Toronto was a gathering of more banana fish than have ever existed before. Hundreds of paintings, drawings, ceramics, and toys filled my small apartment as I constantly created more and more. This may be the real gathering of banana fish that the story of their migration tells about. This gathering was also a gift that moved my heart, revived my soul, delighted my senses, and most importantly offered courage for living. These banana fish came from my creativity and they brought with them physical, psychological, and emotional transformation in really powerful ways. In Toronto, I fully embraced my creativity and it proved that it is an agent of change by changing me in the ways that I needed.

Figure 6

My banana fish home studio. Toronto, Ontario (November, 2024).

One way that this transformation can be observed is in the pages of *The Great Banana Fish Migration*. I completed an illustrated dummy book version of the story in November of 2023, which offers insight when compared to the most recent version of the story in May 2025. One and a half years later, the composition of the story has deepened and my illustration style has become much more impressionist. I have relinquished control of the perfectionist lines and block colors and I have allowed for a more carefree confidence to be expressed in my illustrations. This humanity is an important element of the banana fish and it is one of the qualities that I think my work was missing. This period of focus while on migration has allowed me to push past self-imposed, restrictions and embrace a looser, more spontaneous quality in my work. Working with mediums like spray paint and oil pastel trained me to embrace this and it has allowed me to embrace the power of this same quality in my personal life.

Audre Lorde's description of "the erotic" resonates with how I see the creative power I have found on my migration. She explains that it is "a resource within each of us […] firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (1978, p. 2). Regarding her own experience she states that it "colors [her] life with a kind of energy that sensitizes and strengthens all [her] experience" (Lorde, 1978, p. 8). The great gathering of banana fish that filled my life in Toronto allowed me to express the feelings that were unrecognized before and I feel the strength of this change. The erotic strength of this creativity is what I wanted to convey to Torontonians with *Banana fish in The City* and not unlike whimsy, I think it was altered by my intentions. The erotic is deeply emotional and personal, and I can hope to inspire it in others by sharing the banana fish as my gift, but overthinking that inspiration diminishes its erotic power.

Lorde's erotic is also closely tied to hope. She explains that when, "we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering, and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like the only alternative in our society" (1978, p. 9). Furthermore, she explains that "[i]n touch with the erotic, I become less willing to

accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, [and] self-denial" (1978, p. 9). To summarize she states, "recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world" (1978, p. 10). The hope and agency that erotic empowerment evokes is probably why I was trying to harness it with the hope of transforming Toronto. Hyde talks about teachings as transformative gifts and says that you cannot try to pass along something that you yourself have not yet received (1983, p. 91), and I think that at the time of creating *Banana Fish in the City*, my transformation had not developed enough. The power of the erotic had not yet appeared to me how it has now as I write this reflection.

Bell Hooks understands the erotic with love as the core emotion. She describes how "commitment to a love ethic transforms our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by" (2000, p. 64), and how this is conducive to a life that is joyous and fulfilling (2000, p. 65). This understanding of love evokes the difference and resistance that I uncovered in my exploration of creativity, but I think love also is an important aspect of *The Great Banana Fish Migration*. At many stages with this story, I questioned if it was about nostalgia or kinship, but I think one of the values it implores is collective self love. The banana fish do not unite to love each other, they are loving themselves in unity. When the morning comes and they part ways once again, they bring that love with them to fortify their spirit on the journeys to come. The gathering of banana fish that filled my Toronto apartment, was a product of the love I was accessing to transform myself. This period of concentrated creativity affirmed it as an important value in my life, partly because I researched it so thoroughly, but also because I allowed myself to commit to it, feel it, and live by it. This emotion is what transformed the illustrations of my book to convey not only the actions of the migration, but also how the migration feels.

Love is also present in my personal story during this migration. I had not been in love for several years when I began my migration and based off of my impressions of Toronto, I was not

expecting it. Similar to how my illustrations of the migration became more relaxed and focused more on emotion, so too did my love life. The love that I surprisingly found in Toronto exemplified a lot of the values I sought to promote in my exploration of creativity. It was an unconventional romance that was aware of reality and open to the alternative possibilities of the future. I have to thank the banana fish for the work they have done to let this love in, and I think it is an excellent example of how the creativity I channeled on my migration allowed me to access the power of emotions that were previously untapped to live according to different priorities.

Figure 7

A painting that reveals the connection between these characters and my own darkness.

(50x40cm), October, 2024, acrylic on canvas.

Regarding the love ethic that I have found on migration, Hooks explains that, "those of us who have already chosen to embrace a love ethic, allowing it to govern and inform how we think and act, know that when we let our light shine, we draw to us and are drawn to other bearers of light. We are not alone" (2000, p. 72). When I look back on my history with the banana fish, they have always had a luminous quality about them and this quality is also present in *The Great Banana Fish Migration*. Together at last, the banana fish glow beneath the stars with the power of their

migration lighting up the valley. However on their migration the banana fish are not just running to the valley, they are running from the darkness as the night closes in around them. Many of the other banana fish stories that I have written have a similar dynamic between light and dark. As the world grows dark on their journey, the banana fish gathering together in the valley are the only remaining source of light. Lorde describes the erotic as a "guiding light" (1978, p. 6), and I like to think that the lights that shine on the night of The Great Banana Fish Migration are what will guide the banana fish when they depart the next day. Their light is what transforms them on their migration. It is the gift that offers them courage for living and offers them the hope that as with every evening, the morning will come.

On this migration the banana fish have been the guides that I needed. Their light has allowed me to see the darkness with more clarity and they have gathered loved ones around me to remind me of the power and possibility that is available when we allow ourselves to feel our experiences. On the other side of this migration, I feel really empowered because I feel more committed and connected to my art and life as an artist. In Toronto, I often thought about how the hopelessness that inspired this exploration was a symptom of how we have neglected the art of living. I have realized on this migration that the thing that will transform our world and allow us to anticipate future security, well-being, and happiness is not just understanding it, but feeling how important the important things are. My creativity allowed me to access this realm of possibility and the banana fish led the way.

Conclusion

Returning to the questions and ideas that guided my exploration on migration, I can see how the light of the banana fish was central this entire time. Hyde explains that for artists, "[t]he labor of gratitude accomplishes the transformation that a gift promises." (1983, p. 103), and for the banana fish and I, our migrations are the labors we endure to enjoy the benefits of the gift's transformation. The light of The Great Banana Fish Migration could represent a lot of things, but for me on this migration, I think it represents a type of creative hope. Sarah Ahmed explains that hope involves imagination and that "[h]ope is a wish and expectation that a desired possibility is becoming actual" (2010, p. 182). In my experience, the banana fish allow me to feel like I am bringing a project to fruition, whether writing, drawing, making ceramics, or painting. This mentality is also helpful when finding one's place in the world or one's self in the dark. My creative practice has trained me to be more hopeful because for all of the moments where the world does not meet my expectations, I can imagine a world that feels like it does.

This creative hope is what I endeavored to spread during my time on migration. I now realize that the hopelessness I observed in Toronto was actually people struggling with the darkness in ways that I am all too familiar with. My exploration of art and creativity in relation to hope was an attempt to understand the light of the banana fish, and to package and promote it nicely with *Banana Fish in the City.* I then realized that the transformation that I wanted to catalyze is actually an elusive personal quality. Hyde states that "we nourish the spirit by dispersing our gifts" (1983, p. 226), but he also explains that "the transformation is not finished until we have the power to give the gift on our own terms" (1983, p. 93). The "our", as it pertains to my situation, is the banana fish and I, and although I was eager to share my burgeoning transformation with the wider society, the banana fish knew that the fruits were not ripe yet. In fact, I am not sure they are even ripe now. If I were to do a project like *Banana Fish in the City* again, I think I would make it a personal pursuit. This would allow me to share my gift through the gift exchange without muddying the power of the

banana fish with my intentions. I think this is actually how art affects people. We pour our erotic power, our love, and our light into a creative labor and when it is ready and others can experience it, that power is passed on.

Living the story of *The Great Banana Fish Migration* on my return to Canada has been a part of a transformative process, and I am not comfortable with chopping that process into finished segments to give away as gifts. The erotic cannot be bought and sold, and it cannot be purposefully given away. The banana fish have taught me on our migration that the role of art and artists in making the world a better place does not work as deliberately as science or policy does. Authentically sharing yourself and your journey of creative development inspires others to do the same, and then things begin to change in the ways that I hoped for at the beginning of my migration. The nature of the gift exchange will propagate the power, values, hope, and potential that your art entails. This is what Tove Jansson did with The Moomins. She, "did not write to educate with cautionary tales, but rather that she wrote for herself (Hindle and Ingram, 2022, p. 100). Her gift and the gifts of many other artists created the banana fish and as this reflection details, I have benefitted enormously from this unintentional exchange.

I think the reenchantment of art that Gablik discusses is its transformative potential. She talks about the artist's work in embracing myth to "reconfigure our intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual orientation in the world" (1991, p. 93). Ray and Anderson also see myth as a crucial element in allowing a society to function coherently and as a tool for "educating the individual, giving clues to the stages of life from infancy to maturity" (2000, p. 299). Miller believes that artists "play a key role in prioritizing awe, beauty, and wonder, not just as an aesthetic bonus, but as a catalyst for an awareness that helps us to build a better future" (2021, p. 199). I would assert that our creative imagination therefore plays an important role in the function of our society at an individual and collective level. This is likely why Gablik sees a relationship between personal

creativity and social responsibility (1991, p. 6). This connection is where I believe the liberal arts can make an impact.

I envision a world where people do not feel subjugated by invisible systems that darken our perspectives and dim our lights. In this world the changes we seek are attainable because we can look beyond wealth to prioritize well-being and justice among other powerful and fulfilling motivations. Is there a way that we can work towards societal transformation without dictating that transformation? In the MES program I was exposed to Jenson and Schnack's action competence approach to environmental education. Not unlike the cyclical nature of Hyde's gift exchange, they believe that "[e]xperiences are the results of actions performed on the basis of previous experiences which are the result of other actions, etc." (1981, p. 465). The aim of building this experience "is to make students capable of envisioning alternative ways of development and to be able to participate in acting according to these objectives" (Jenson and Schnack, p. 472). Based off of my research on creativity this type of education would pair well with the arts and a creative approach to experiential learning. The ability to act combined with the moral backing that creative process produces, could invoke the type of power that we see in the erotic or a love ethic. A creative education that allows people to orient themselves to the enchantment and awe of their own subjective experience could be what the world needs to combat modernism, apathy, and hopelessness regarding the major obstacles we must overcome as a society. I advocate for this because *The Great Banana Fish Migration* has opened my eyes to what this shift can be like. Outside of the world of the banana fish, I am a teacher and I think this role is a good place for a liberal arts student to make a difference. As a model of transformation and alternative, creative thinking, I can teach others to seek their own courage for living by simply sharing mine.

At the beginning of 2025, I left Toronto behind and moved back to Taiwan. One of the first friends that I saw commented on my transformation. "You don't have this gloom hanging over you anymore," he said. I think my compulsion to help others in Toronto was just as much of a

compulsion to help myself, which might explain why I imagine *The Great Banana Fish Migration* as a communal event, even though it happened as a personal transformation.

One text that I found myself returning to during my migration was Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning.* On the topic of art during times of unimaginable horror, he states that, "a very trifling thing can cause the greatest of joys" (Frankl, 1984, p. 64), and I think the trifling nature of the banana fish is what hides the power of their joy. This journey back to Canada has brought new dimension to the relationship that the banana fish and I have, and I now know that the transformative joy of these characters that guide my path is why I create. Uncovering the ethos behind the banana fish will also help me going forward in my journey as an artist. I began this migration looking in many directions, and the banana fish showed me that the only direction that I needed to look was inward. I think this is where the power to transform our world ultimately lies. This is where this story ends for now, but the transformation will continue until the banana fish and I once again heed the call of The Great Banana Fish Migration.

Figure 8

The banana fish and I on migration. Toronto, Ontario, Canada (December, 2024)

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Appendix A

Full Picture Book: “The Great Banana Fish Migration”

The full version of the picture book referenced in this reflection can be viewed at the following link.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zTFBuIiASruuQb48utJCAWbnfH_4M7MX/view?usp=sharing