



Mike & Vincy

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The story of **Mike Perry** and **Vincy Cheung** starts at school. Mike taught ‘Language and Letterform’ at Parsons New School for Design. He was frustrated by the nonchalance of most of his students, but remembers one girl who “every single week brought in killer work.” She was quiet but expressive on paper and, according to **Mike**, displayed “mad skills.”



Mike and Vincy at Mike's Crown Heights Studio

The girl, of course, was Vincy (then a sophomore). For the fourth class of the semester, her class was asked to retool an existing font and talk about the process. When it was Vincy's turn to offer her explanation, she said she didn't have one. "I was like, 'oh, that's just how it is,'" she says. "And [Mike] threw my project on the floor. This was my first semester into my major! I was so scared, I froze. And he yelled at me for not making the effort to explain my work."

A few seconds passed, and she picked up her work and started talking. Later in the semester, she asked Mike if she could intern for him. "I'm always trying to step outside my comfort zone," she says. "I like to work with people who are difficult to work with. I thought he would be difficult to work with."

He offered her a place at his sunny Crown Heights studio: three days a week, 10 to 6, free lunch. Vincy spent the following June and July learning how a working artist spends his day. Mike was a better boss than teacher, she says.

Mike Perry's art has no bounds. He's collaborated with *Nike*, *Milk Studios*, and *The New York Times*, brand names chosen only

because they sound nice together – his complete list of clients is long and varied. To any young design student, he's an example of "making it", of surviving on originality and tenacity. His studio is filled with old projects and paints, and, as you might expect after looking at his work, it is like sitting in a tie-dyed wonderland. I came to the interview bearing pink-iced, rainbow-sprinkled donuts; had we tacked them on the wall, they would have fitted in perfectly.

Mike went to a school for graphic design at Minneapolis College of Art and Design, taking time to be an artist's intern in Brighton, England for six months during his junior year. He was ready to make a life change. "When I went, I was this really shy, quiet kid who just looked at this as an opportunity: I get to blossom as a human being."

Though he didn't end up finding his voice abroad, Mike resolved to speak up when he got home. "And now I talk way too much!" He says cheerfully. His former self relates to Vincy, who is shy in person but brave at work. Mike wishes she'd ask more questions. To him, an internship is useless without an intern's initiative, something that should be calculated. »





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"I don't want to talk while we're working," he says. "I don't want you to ask me stupid questions about how to use Photoshop. I need you to figure that out. But I want to have a bond where we can talk about why we're doing what we're doing. Why do we make stuff? Why are we artists? Why do we live in this city? Why do we strive for clients?"

Mike wants to be a mentor more than a teacher. "For the most part, who gives a shit about how you make a drawing?" he says, frankly. "I'm going to do it my way, you're going to do it your way. It's about sharing what little knowledge of the universe I have with someone else."

Mentoring inevitably changes the pace of productivity, which is partially why Mike isn't currently accepting interns. "I have one employee who is full time. He and I, we have our studio flow. It's so awesome and comfortable that I've been needing more space in general," he says. "Plus, I don't get applicants like Vincy all the time." When it comes to the internship value exchange, Mike says, "I don't pay interns because, for the most part, I don't totally need one. In theory, it's more of a learning opportunity. That's what I hope for. It's more about gaining access. "Doors swing open for all parties as a result of internships: skilled interns get access to Mike Perry's studio and rolodex, while Mike gains a sense of the wider, younger world. Though he loves getting older, Mike recognises he could easily fall out of touch with the contemporary culture his art relies on. "I love having a youthful energy in here", he says. "It brings all this knowledge and interest and culture; things that I don't want to lose as I get older."

Beyond this exchange of positive energy, Mike calls the current internship environment a "bummer." Though he believes interns should commit to four days a week to get any real responsibility (and thus benefit), he recognises that "in order for people to exist, they usually have to have jobs that pay money." The majority of his interns have come from Europe with the intention of spending their summer solely making art in New York. "They come and they get in deep."

Vincy was lucky to live in a friend's apartment over the summer in New York, foregoing the expense of rent. She was also dependent on her parents' financial support.

Vincy screen-printed tote bags and helped prepare for Mike's upcoming exhibition, 'Wandering Around Wondering,' (for which she painted a huge rainbow canvas) but more than anything, she got to see the inner workings of a successful studio. As opposed to one specific learning moment, Vincy

remembers, "I used to sit opposite Mike at that table and would eavesdrop and think, oh, that's how you do it. That's what the process is."

"It's great to see how an artist works and can be motivated by themselves. I think it's really important that you know what you're doing..." She turns to Mike: "And you definitely do." After her time with Mike, Vincy found an internship at *Nickelodeon*'s Product Design Department through another professor at Parsons. There, she worked on a slow computer in a cubicle, mostly pasting Spongebob drawings on band-aids, cookie boxes, and Christmas cards. Again, she was unpaid. Vincy's professors are big on setting boundaries, asking their students to consider what their time and talent is worth. Still, Vincy says, "I think I've done a lot of stuff that's past my boundary." She asked her boss at Nickelodeon about her drawings, whether she might see any money if they were featured on a product. "I asked, 'What do I get out of it?' [My boss] said, 'Basically you get nothing out of it. You get a portfolio piece, right?'" Vincy couldn't disagree.

While Mike gave her assignments spontaneously, *Nickelodeon* provided deadlines and directions. Vincy says she felt more comfortable with specific benchmarks, probably because that's how her academic world operates. Still, she enjoyed her time in an independent artist's studio more. Instead of staring at grey dividers, she witnessed Mike at work. She experienced the culture of Crown Heights instead of the mindless milieu in Times Square, where *Nickelodeon* resides.

After witnessing Mike's client calls and project execution from start to finish, Vincy knows more about how the industry runs. Parsons has a class for senior-year students called Professional Practice, but its practicality is limited. "I don't think the school teaches you how the industry works at all" Vincy says. Parsons used to have two classes that are now combined into one: Digital Presentation required students to make a website and promote themselves online, while Professional Practice demonstrated how to behave with a client. Google search "Parsons Professional Practice class" and you get not a course description but a professor's »







blog post consisting of a dollar bill with breasts. Vincy will take this course in her final semester of senior year.

Academics find fault with the internship system partially because it disrupts their curriculum, requiring students to forgo classes on certain days or cram to keep up. But as professors, they exist in a utopian world where academic merit is enough to survive and prosper; of course it's hard for them to understand the reward of unpaid work experience, especially when internship assignments tend towards menial, not intellectual.

Mike says he'd love to teach Professional Practice, focusing on the finesse of client relationships. He recounts how *The New York Times* would call and ask him what he was up to at that moment. Mike would respond, "nothing, um, working." They'd offer him a job and ask for sketches within 45 minutes, the full project done by 3:30 that afternoon. "They say, 'So, can you do it?'... And you say yes."

"That's a metaphor for how everything works," Mike continues. "Because clients want things immediately, and they don't care what schedule they agreed to, they don't care about the process in which you work." That efficiency is what young artists should practise in school, Mike thinks. And if not productivity, at least awareness of our current aesthetic environment. Mike remembers teaching a course at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia. It seemed like every student was creating work from the 1980s, a time when many of their professors experienced a creative heyday (and were thus forever recreating it in class). "I'd just be like, do you not have your own voice, or opinion, or grasp of the world? Do you look at this work and think, 'Yeah, this makes sense for the world we live in?'" he grumbles.

Mike has high expectations, but "those high expectations stop mostly at just trying. Just fucking try, just do something." He also admits teaching is complicated for him, probably because he's so used to doing it, and doing it well. But he took the academic offers at various institutions because, he says, "teaching jobs are the most coveted of art jobs that exist."

It seems a bit backward that Mike would feel more valued as a professor than an in-



studio, hands-on mentor. What if we shifted our covetous attention from teachers to young, able mentors? Rebranded students as collaborators and everyday creators? It seems silly that student work would ever be relegated to a classroom, lowering the collective bar due to lack of audience or monetary compensation. Sure, school is a valuable practice arena, but an internship is a test run on a real world battleground. Guess which form of preparation makes the better warrior.

"I don't know if school prepared me to be anything, like being a professional in any career," Vincy says. "At an internship you kind of learn what to expect when you graduate, an approximation of what it'll be like if you get a job like this. [Those are] things the school didn't really mention. Hopefully they'll talk about them this year."

As she enters her senior year at Parsons, Vincy is uncertain about her ultimate career, but knows she wants to keep trying internships until she finds a path that fits. "I want to try working at a magazine, just to see how different it is," she says.

Mike nods. "When you want to do that, just let me know. I know exactly where you should go; you just have to ask" **i**