McMaster Program for Faculty Development (MacPFD)

Spark Podcast

Official Transcript

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Interviewer: Dr. Ruth Chen
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Dr. Ruth Chen (00:02):

Welcome to the MacPFD Sparkle podcast. This is Ruth Chen and in the Sparkle sub series, we'll bring you shorter segments. Released in between our longer Spark episodes. We'll have new and exciting interviews with professionals from across the world, helping you to achieve your personal and professional goals as a healthcare educator, researcher, leader, or practitioner at any stage of your career. Sit back, listen, and enjoy this episode of the MacPFD Sparkle podcast. In this segment, Robin Davisson discusses her transition from senior academic and faculty member running her research lab, to fine artist and painter. Robin reflects on her journey from academia to art and on the importance of holistic personal and professional development.

Welcome to the Spark podcast. This is Ruth Chen and in this episode, I have the pleasure of speak with Robin Davisson, a biomedical researcher, health science's faculty, and artist. I didn't meet Robin in her lab, or at a conference, or on any of the campuses where she has been a faculty member. Instead, imagine visiting an art gallery in Washington, DC, on a sunny summer day. Really liking one of the artists works and when you look up this artist to find out more about them, you discover they were also an accomplished academic making an impact in health sciences research. When you look on Robin's website, she describes her work as dynamic abstract paintings, rooted in curiosity, with threads of scientific inquiry. I knew this was someone I wanted you to meet. <y hope is that this episode inspires us to see the power of serendipity in leading us to truth, growth and discovery. Welcome Robin, thank you for joining me.

Dr. Robin Davisson (01:53):

Thank you, Ruth. It's lovely to be here with you and yes, serendipity, it brought us together and I'm so delighted it did. I'm excited to have our conversation today and also I have to say I'm very grateful to Calloway Fine Art Gallery in Washington, DC, for really being the vehicle for us meeting. It's a delightful discovery of you and your work that you are doing at your university so thank you for having me today.

Dr. Ruth Chen (02:22):

Thank you as well, Robin, now I've provided only the briefest of summaries about you and your background. Please tell us more about you and your journey as an academic.

Dr. Robin Davisson (02:34):

Let's see, I guess I'll start at the beginning. I'm originally from Iowa, from the state of Iowa, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to be specific. I spent my entire, early academic career in Iowa at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. There I got my bachelor's degree in psychology and I went on to get a master's there. I completed a PhD in pharmacology at the university of Iowa. Then I went on to also at Iowa, do a post doctoral fellowship at the Cardiovascular Research Institute and the Center for Hypertension Genomics. I joined the faculty after completing my post-doc and I taught neuroscience, cardiovascular physiology, genomics. To a variety of health sciences, students, medical students, dental students, graduate students, while pursuing my research. I was there as a faculty member for about eight years and then moved to Cornell University in 2006, where I was a professor of molecular physiology.

I actually had two laboratories, one in Ithaca, New York, where sort of the mothership of Cornell. Then also, Cornell's medical school is in Manhattan. I divided my time between Ithaca in New York City for about a little over 10 years at Cornell, before we moved to Washington, DC, about six years ago. My scientific, but also more broadly, my liberal arts education and experience, it began a University of Iowa and I wanted to talk a little bit about that. How it has shaped much of what's happening to me today with my experience in art. The University of Iowa is really an exemplar of an institution, that values the entire range of scholarly disciplines from astrophysics to poetry. Being a young student there, I learned very early on about some of the history of that longstanding tradition of balanced education. In 1922, the university began to accept creative work in lieu of theses for graduate degrees in the fine and performing arts.

Dr. Ruth Chen (05:09):

Incredible.

Dr. Robin Davisson (05:09):

This the birthplace of the MFA. It's the first to offer a master's degree in the writer's workshop, the famous Iowa Writer's Workshop beginning in 1936.

Dr. Ruth Chen (05:21):

Yes.

Dr. Robin Davisson (05:21):

Iowa has always been a pioneer in recognizing the role that creativity and the imagination play in all types of learning. I really value that. I was steeped in that tradition. Also I have to say that Cornell University, being a land grant university, a very similar sensitivity to the value of sort of the reciprocal and mutual benefit of the sort of two cultures, STEM disciplines and the arts and the humanities. I'm very much of the tradition, but also just extraordinarily fortunate to have had those experiences of finding myself in academic environments, both at the University of Iowa and at Cornell, that really foster a very balanced approach and acknowledge the benefits of the arts and humanities in addition to the importance of the STEM disciplines, of course, in making us better thinkers, and better citizens, and better people.

Of course, I've spent my professional lifetime working in the biomedical sciences. I certainly recognize and celebrate the extraordinary contributions of science to our lives, our prosperity, our promise for the future. Based on a life of science, I have come to really firmly believe that science is not enough to solve the world's thorniest challenges. We need the broad and the deep value of the liberal arts for two big reasons. They hold inherent value as the best way to understand ourselves, first of all. Also, it helps us to understand what it means to be fully human and practical contributions to solving our difficult and persistent problems. That's very much part of my journey and what has influenced what might be said to be quite a significant transition in my professional life these days.

Dr. Ruth Chen (07:28):

Our paths crossed because of your artwork and through your artwork. You've had several incredible exhibitions now, how did you start painting?

Dr. Robin Davisson (07:39):

It's an interesting story, I think. I have to say that, and I maybe gave a taste of this, but to expand on it a little more, throughout my life, both professionally and personally, I've benefited from having interests in a broad range of areas. I was encouraged by my parents and my teachers to pursue both my scientific and my artistic interests as a kid growing up. I was always very, very, very taken with science and math and of course pursued that quite vigorously. I also was always a maker. I loved to make things. My grandmother was a very, very accomplished seamstress and she taught me to sew when I was about 10 years old. I spent my teenage years sewing many of my own clothes and then learned to knit and I learned to spin yarn. I became very curious about how yarn is made so I learned to spin animal fiber. Became engaged in sort of fiber art, knitting, weaving, organic dying of those fibers.

Although very, very focused on STEM for much of my life, it was always this pull toward other ways of discovering. I will say that one of the things, and I think it'll be important for our conversation to note, is that despite having those, what I would call hobbies. That were very enriching in my life, I just, because of the life of a busy faculty member. First as a young assistant professor getting tenure and then running to huge research laboratories in New York, I just never really had the time to pursue those things. It was always on the fringe. About three years ago now, coming up on three years ago, I found myself at a little bit of a professional and kind of personal crossroads.

As I said, we had moved from New York to Washington, DC, and I was continuing to commute back to New York, both Ithaca and New York City, to continue my work there. We had moved to Washington for my husband's job. I was doing this really crazy thing. I was triangulating between DC, Ithaca, and Manhattan, twice a month. It involved planes, trains and automobiles-

Dr. Ruth Chen (10:26):

Literally.

Dr. Robin Davisson (10:28):

Literally. And I realized after two and a half years or so of doing this, that it wasn't going to be sustainable. I really found myself at a place where I knew I needed to think differently. I needed to really spend some time reflecting. What happened, was I, to mark some time I decided to take a break and I decided to mark that time by signing up for a course. I didn't have any particular course in mind. I sort of almost randomly picked something out of the catalog offering because it lined up

with the timing of my break. I went off on this course. It was a week long course. I kind of thought it was out one thing, but it really wasn't. I got there and it was a course on creativity and the creative process. The teacher happened to use paint and mixed media as the medium for teaching the much bigger topic of the creative process. It just Sparked something in me, that in some ways was always there, but had not been fully embraced for sure.

I was really taken by surprise by this. I mean, I was thinking I was going to go away to the mountains for a week, and have a nice week, and maybe do a little something in this course, and no idea that this was going to change my life. I came home and I told David, my husband, I said, "I'm going to carve out a little place on the end of the dining room table and keep doing this." Pf course he said, "Of course, that sounds like fun." I started and pretty soon the dining room table was filled and the living room was filled and the kitchen was filled. Eventually, about a year and a half ago, I converted one of our spare bedrooms to a studio. Then, this all was kind of beginning to happen and then the pandemic began. That also had really a major impact because suddenly, during that time, when I was kind of over that year and a half before the pandemic, I was taking mostly in person course, I was doing a lot of learning. I was taking in person courses here in the Washington, DC, area.

Then suddenly that went away and you may know that the online art education world really exploded in a really wonderful way during the pandemic, is one of the silver linings. I've had the opportunity then to really immerse myself. Yeah, one thing has led to another and I expanded my bedroom studio out during the pandemic, I needed more room because I wanted to paint bigger and I wanted to let the paint fly and I couldn't do that upstairs in my little studio. I converted our out DOR terrace into a studio. Then now, this summer, I'm painting at a very nearby artist studio space called the Jackson School here in Washington, DC, and that's been a real joy. That's how it started again, back to the topic where we started of serendipity.

Dr. Ruth Chen (10:28):

Yes.

Dr. Robin Davisson (13:55):

It was pure serendipity that happened. That's kind of what happened and I have recently, in the last, about a year ago, right now, decided to really put the stake in the ground around being a professional artist. I started my business last summer. Spent some months developing and establishing my website with being able to sell online in that way. Then also, as you say, I connected with a few galleries locally, and I mean, to me, it's nothing short of amazing. I have just recently become Professor Emerita at Cornell, so that's an exciting development. I'm really honored to have that designation. I look forward to, while I've closed my research labs, I will continue to work with faculty and staff at Cornell on some special projects related to graduate education, and mentorship, and those sorts of things and so I'm excited to continue to participate in academia, but just in a very different way.

Dr. Ruth Chen (15:08):

I definitely want to ask you more about that. Before we move into that bridge between academic life, and art, and that whole connection, I'm so curious to hear you describe the way that you set up your studio at first. I'm just picturing you starting with just a room in your house and then moving to the terrace. Because the pieces that I have seen are large. I'm just envisioning, and I know that one of your exhibitions featured really large pieces as well. I didn't know the evolution in terms of the spaces that you were using. What is the process that you have, or maybe I don't know if you have clearly defined in your mind, but how do you develop an idea for a new series of works? Does

something come to you and then you expand on that? You grow into these other directions? How does that process work for you?

Dr. Robin Davisson (16:07):

It's really interesting. It varies, so far for me, I begin work truly with a blank canvas and with no preconceived idea about what's going to happen on that canvas. Now that's not to say that some, what I call laboratory investigations don't happen before that. I spend a lot of time using my years of skill and experimentation to help me to understand and learn for example about the materials. I'll spend a lot of time, for example, experimenting with paint viscosity. That's one of the things that I've been working on recently, is using different mediums to mix with my paint, to make it thinner or thicker, giving it different finishes. Whether it's a glossy finish or a more matte finish. Investigating how those different paint viscosities interact differently with different substrates. When you're working on canvas, versus on paper, versus on wood substrate, it's all different.

I put my best science cap on when I'm at that phase. I know that in the laboratory, when we run experiments, there are multiple variables and the best experiments you hold everything constant, except the one variable. Then, you change that variable in a controlled way. By doing this over and over, you find some answer. I do spend time in this sort of what I call study phase of doing that. When it comes to beginning a new piece of work, that has been led by those experiments, I never start with any kind of a preconceived notion. It always develops as it goes. One color will lead to the next color. One way the paint moves will lead me to the next move. There it goes over and over again. There's a lot of intuition involved. I've come to understand that those ideas and those instincts, those intuitions, those perceptions are as true as any scientific measurement.

They really are. It's just a very different way of thinking about it. Just like in science, if you follow the data, like back to the preliminary experiments that I do, leading up to working on a piece, it always leads to the truth. One thing that I think has been so interesting to discover about this process, and the comparison of making art, and doing science, is that in the scientific laboratory, we do this controlled experiment and we do it over and over and over again, in the exact same way, in order to get to the truth. In my art, when I'm making a piece of art, the realization that this experiment is only going to happen once. It will never happen again. It cannot be repeated. For me, that is really exhilarating. Both ways in my life have been exhilarating. Exhilaration of discovery, but it's just two different ways of getting to discovery. It's been just really a thrilling thing to kind of understand that and it's been quite a journey so far.

Dr. Ruth Chen (19:46):

What a great contrast you're describing. Repeated experiments, controlled environments, and replicating or aiming towards replication of results in one environment. Yet equally exhilarating on the other side, is the creation of something that cannot be repeated, or even the process of creating that, won't be repeated again, and how that can be equally exhilarating. That's a really interesting dichotomy that you're describing.

Dr. Robin Davisson (20:18):

Right. Yeah and I think that if I hadn't had those experiences of science in the laboratory, and the replication and reproduction, as you say, I wouldn't fully appreciate how exhilarating this is. The one time only kind of idea. It's led me to the idea that paint never behaves the same way twice. I mean, truly, it's amazing. There are always material surprises. I find myself, I've been placed under the spell

of paint you might say for that reason. Is that you just never know how it's going to go. That's not to say that it always results in a fabulous painting, because it doesn't. There are things that don't work out, but then you go back in and you keep responding and eventually you find your way. It's just been really amazing.

Dr. Ruth Chen (21:17):

Do you find that this whole process of you being more and more immersed in your art, has changed you, or has shaped you as a person, or shaped your perspective, or worldview, in a different way that perhaps when you were less immersed, you didn't have those insights or you didn't have a certain perspective?

Dr. Robin Davisson (21:39):

I do. I believe I've become, first of all, a more keen observer and really seeing the world around me. Really looking carefully, taking the time to do that, and really being present, and being in that moment, I get lost. I really get lost in that. It's also, as I said, I grew up, I had the great fortune of having parents who loved to travel. I grew up, especially in Europe, later years, when I was an adult, did sort of Asian and Southeast Asia. As a kid growing up, going to Europe, and seeing all the great art that there is there, all the greats. I was in Florence and I saw Botticelli's Birth of Venus and Michelangelo's David, and visited The Louvre, and went to Oslo to see the monk museum and so on. I've been looking at and appreciating art my whole life. I find now, that I am looking in a very different way. I almost, I was saying to somebody the other day, that I see looking at other artists work now, whether it be in galleries or in museums, it's like going to the library. Investigating and not just how was that brushstroke made, or how did they accomplish that with the paint. There is that, I'm very interested in the technical parts. It goes beyond that, it's really seen in a different new way.

I really have been thinking a lot about. Because I've been so impacted, this change in my life and immersion in art in a different way. You know, on the heels of a career, a very, very busy academic ... The life of an academic, it's a very busy life and especially in a different discipline like that. I've been thinking a lot and talking with people a lot about what we can do as professional students of life and also as citizens to promote the value of a balanced life. To really embrace the richness of a full and examined life.

Dr. Ruth Chen (24:01):

Yeah.

Dr. Robin Davisson (24:03):

One of the things, just in the context of our educational institutions, I think we can really be advocates. We can really argue for the benefits of a liberal education, and what that involves is a sense of social responsibility, and open-mindedness, and interest in other cultures, as well as the practical skills of communication, and problem solving, and the ability to apply knowledge in our lives and our careers. We can support our libraries, and our museums, and our live performances, and cultural activities. Some of the things that I've noticed in my own life, as I've made this transition, is I've been reading even more. Reading requires our full attention. Especially when we give ourselves the time to do it, when we're fully engaged, it stimulates our thought processes and encourages us to come up with new ideas. It inspires creativity, listening to others. That's become so important in these times we find ourselves in. When there are some very different perspectives out

there and learning to really listen. I think that, that's also been something that has come from this.

Making time for reflection and thought I was very much guilty of being too busy in my faculty life. It is a busy life there's no doubt about it. I realize now that I should have taken more time to really live in the present moment and really have the time to reflect as I was saying. Then also, availing ourselves of cultural opportunities, living in academic worlds like we do, there are offerings of exhibitions of works of art, to study and performances to watch. Sometimes we don't realize how valuable these activities are to us until we almost lose them.

That's what happened over this last year and a half. Reminded of the value of actually taking the time to do that. Really, it was only because I decided to take a little time, that this world opened up to me and the message from the universe came in and I listened. That wouldn't have had happened if I hadn't taken that time. This is not to say, I mean, I know that I've done something pretty dramatic here, and that is leave my long, academic career as a tenured name professor and begin this whole new career. I'm not suggesting that, that's what needs to be done, but I do believe that we all have time, even in those busy lives, to enrich our lives with these experience of other kinds of disciplines, whatever that might be. Spending time pursuing our passions on the weekends or whatever it looks like for you, but taking some time. I think that would be my message for today is that's just so critical.

Dr. Ruth Chen (27:10):

What I'm hearing from you, is that you're really highlighting how exposure to the culture outside of our own professional lives, enriches us as people. It makes us more whole, as people-

Dr. Robin Davisson (27:25):

It makes us more human. It does. It makes us understand what it means to be fully human, maybe that's one way to say it. I think that's right. I love this quote by somebody who received her MFA from the University of Iowa. Her name is Rita Dove, and she later became the Poet Laureate of the United States, and she says, in describing the link between imagination and scientific achievement, she says, "Without imagination, we can go nowhere and imagination is not restricted to the arts. Every scientist I have ever met, who has had success has had to imagine." I love that. I think that the crossovers, it enriches all aspects of our lives, and it makes us better scientists and professionals, health science professionals. I mean, it surely does.

Dr. Ruth Chen (28:19):

I have a quote from your website that I wanted to read to you or read back to you. I was so struck by this quote. On your website it says, "What if you finally pursued that dream you filed away in the impossible, or maybe someday category. What if on the other side of daring was an inspiring journey to your truth?" I'm curious, why did you choose this quote and what is the significance of this quote to you?

Dr. Robin Davisson (28:55):

That sums up what's happened to me with this life journey. The lifelong sort of pull toward making and participating in the world of art in a broad way. The pull was really strong. It was, as I said, the life in the academy, the training and then as a young faculty member, and then as we go along in our careers, some of those pulls, those passions get kind of filed away. As I was saying, kind of that week I took off, and I started to think what if? What if I didn't file it away anymore? It just so happened that colliding in time with that little inkling of thought of what if I didn't file it away anymore, came

this course that then led me down this path. I think that we have to give some thoughts to those things that we filed away into the impossible, or maybe when I'm retired, or way down the road, what if we looked at those more carefully and thought about how we could maybe bring even a bit of it into our current lives?

What if we made a little tiny bit of space for it even just one afternoon on every other weekend? What if we turned our phones off and read at night instead of scrolling through our phones? What if we found the time to take a quiet walk in the morning and really reflect on what's important to us? That's kind of what that all means to me. As I said, you don't have to do anything as dramatic as I did. You don't have to leave your 25-year academic career. It can be something really small, but it can be so enriching to your life. That's my hope for people and that's sort of the message I want to share.

Dr. Ruth Chen (31:01):

Thank you so much, Robin, for such a wonderful conversation. You've inspired me so I thank you for that.

Dr. Robin Davisson (31:10):

Thank you, Ruth. Thank you for inviting me. I'm really excited to be part of the Spark podcast, that's really great. Thank you so much.

Dr. Ruth Chen (31:18):

Thank you again, Robin. One more piece that I'm really forward to, is following your work in the future, and following your future exhibitions, and seeing how you evolve as an artist as well.

Speaker 3 (31:36):

Thank you so much for tuning in to the MacPFD Spark Podcast. Just so you know, this podcast has been brought to you by the McMaster Faculty of Health Sciences and specifically the Office of Continuing Professional Development and the Program for Faculty Development. If you're interested in finding out more about what we can offer for faculty development check out our website at www.macpfd.ca that's www.M-A-C-P-F-D.ca. Many of our events are actually web events that are free. Finally, I'd like to thank our sound engineer Mr. Nick Hoskin who has been an amazing asset to our team, thanks so much Nick for all that you do. And also thank you to Scott Holmes for supplying us the music that you've been listening to. All right. So until next time this is MacPFD Spark signing off.