Art is Science is Art Part 2: The Impact

Featuring Kelly Montgomery and Sophie Wang Produced by Stella Belonwu, Celia Ford, and Devika Nair Release Date 2/15/2021

Stella: Some people think of science and art as separate entities

Celia: But, they're more similar than you think

Stella: That's right! And that's exactly what we've been uncovering in this mini-series

Celia: In part one, we talked about how the scientific method can be used as an artistic tool, and how the creative process drives scientific curiosity.

Stella: We were joined by choreographer-slash-educator Suba Subramaniam, who told us about her journey through dance and science, and how she got involved in a number of amazing projects interweaving both.

Celia: So cool! We were also joined by computational-biologist-slash-generative-artist Dr. Alex Naka, who creates these wild art pieces using his pen plotter...named *Robot*.

Stella: Good stuff! If you wanna hear more be sure to check out Part 1: The Process, wherever you're listening to us now.

Celia: Today we explore science and art in a different way. This time we're talking about how the link between science and art can also be *practical*.

Stella: For sure! We can use art as a tool to communicate science (something we desperately need right now).

Celia: And, to make it meta: we can use art to communicate how scientists can do better at communicating their science!

Stella: And then, to communicate how that communication can be better at communicating...art...?

Celia: Maybe we should stop there and let our interviewees take it away. That's enough meta for one day.

Stella: Let's do it.

CTOR tag

Stella: Hi everyone, welcome back to Carry the One Radio, I'm Stella.

Celia: And, I'm Celia. We were lucky enough to talk with two artists for this episode.

Kelly: Yeah. So my name is Kelly Montgomery. Um, my pronouns are she/her. I am a fourth year graduate student at UCSF in the Gestwiki lab.

Stella: Kelly is a co-founder of JKX comics, an organization founded in 2015, which creates comics with the goal of increasing scientific literacy in the general public

Kelly: So "J K X" is honestly just our initials. But J K or Jaye Kelly and Khoa, and then the X stands for anyone who wants to collaborate with us. So basically like what we've wanted to do was create, um, content that was easily digestible for audiences outside of STEM. So as scientists, we tend to use a lot of jargon, a lot of technical words that people outside of the field might not understand. And so we were together one day and just said, Hey, let's just cut all of that out. So other people can engage and participate in the scientific narrative for themselves and see how that goes. And so we met up in a pub one day and just started drawing. And now here we are.

Celia: We also met Sophie.

Sophie: Hi I'm Sophie Wang, my pronouns are she/her, and I'm based in the Los Angeles area. I do a lot of different things for an activist collective called Free Radicals at the intersection of science and social justice, and I also make a lot of art and zines around having a critical lens on science and thinking about the ways that science is political and directly impacts different communities.

Celia: Sophie mentioned making "zines," which not everyone is familiar with (but you should be! She'll help us out).

Sophie: The general definition, I guess, of a zine is a self published piece of work that contains text or images or both. It usually takes the form of kind of like a booklet, a little mini magazine ("zine" comes from magazine). I've also seen zines that are just like accordion folds.

One not-very-serious argument that I've had with a friend is whether or not a single sheet of paper without folds counts as a zine. But usually they're used for different forms of artistic expression or education. They can do a lot of different things. The main thing is that they are an accessible form of this expression or education. Anyone can make a zine.

What's their medium for sci-art-commm + path/journey to it?

Stella: So before we go into comics and zines, let's hear about how our guests today made their way to using art to communicate science. Kelly started off with no formal art training.

Kelly: Yeah. So I don't think either Jaye or Khao had any type of formal art teaching either to my knowledge, I personally know that I did not. So the, my background in undergrad was purely science and I had women and gender studies minors, and in religious studies minor. So nothing specifically in terms of like expressive art or drawing the technical drawing abilities, that's definitely something that we just kind of picked up a pencil and just started doing it one day. And then I bought a tablet for, um, my computer it's a illustrator and just went from the paper straight to doing everything digitally instead of like inking it, scanning it in and then re-drawing the lines. I was like, Oh, this is too many steps for me. So I just cut the middleman and like learned to use a tablet at that point too, which I'm still definitely learning and growing in right now.

Stella: Her path to career discovery started off in the science realm.

Kelly: I think like most people, I kind of put us top, there are very few career paths. Like, either you become a doctor or a lawyer or something else? Right. So my mom was a nurse and so that's kind of all I knew. Um, and then everyone around me in my world was like, "Oh yeah, well she'll just go into medicine as well". And so I kinda like started on a career path. Like everyone comes in like "I'm premed", whatever that means. Right, so you just start taking all these random science classes and you do them and you complete them. But I was never really satisfied. Um, from my science teachings, it was all kind of subpar at best if I'm being completely honest and I never really grasped what any of the professors were saying. Uh, sure. I managed and I graduated and I got by and I did well in undergrad, but at the same time, I never really felt like I was learning anything meaningful aside from reciting the things that they were telling me in a lecture.

Stella: I think a bunch of us feel this, too. Society (or family expectations) sometimes primes us to believe that there aren't many valid career options out there. And, yeah -- there are indeed moments over our many years of education where things are geared towards memorization and test prep, and not so much on actually *digesting* the content.

But back to Kelly -- as time went on, she started to appreciate the collaborative nature of science, and realized that science communication is key to that thing that she felt she was missing: the ability to digest and *retain* information.

Kelly: As I was graduating, I did a few summer programs in the middle and those are really fun. I think I kind of liked the interactive part of science when I got my hands on that. And that was always most definitely from internships. You know, like you meet people from different institutions, you learn that science at your institution, isn't the same as science at someone else's institution. I learned how collaborative it was.

And I met a few people along the way that actually taught me science, like really well, like, and they explained their work really well. And I realized I was only excited about continuing in STEM when someone could explain to me what they were doing in ways that didn't seem so inaccessible. And I think that kind of solidified my desire to want to tell more people about what was happening in the field. Um, because I was in these classrooms sitting in these spaces, existing in these spaces and still feeling like, I didn't know what was going on, but when someone else took the time to break it down as like, Hey, it's really not that hard. And it's science is for everyone. I was like, Oh, maybe I can do this. And it was just those few moments that kind of got me into wanting to keep doing it. And not only that, but making it accessible for

others because science can be so isolating and everyone wants to be the best, and it can be really competitive. And like that's, it's just not the person that I am. And I oftentimes felt like I didn't fit in because those were the experiences that I had, but that didn't really mesh with my personality.

Celia: Kelly developed her appreciation for art over time, but Sophie actually grew up drawing.

Sophie: Yeah, so I was definitely one of those kids that grew up drawing a lot: you know, doodling in class or drawing weird single anime eyes on my class notes. And as I kind of went through college, I was starting to think more and more about what I wanted to do with both that art, and then also with my degree, which was, I was actually a biology major as an undergrad.

Celia: As Sophie went through college, she was drawn to the idea of communicating science through art

Sophie: And so at the time, I was really thinking a lot about different ways that you could communicate science directly. And I was thinking about art as one of those forums, creating comics that are just straight science communication. I was particularly interested in evolutionary biology, marine biology, that kind of stuff, and ways that I could do that through kind of like a visual form as something that was a little bit more fun than just papers or articles.

As I went on through college -- I was a biology major. I was also an Asian American studies minor, and so taking these ethnic studies courses, I started to think more critically about what I wanted to do with science communication, right. So, when you are communicating science, who is your audience? What is your intention? And then also, what are the kinds of values about types of knowledge that you're either replicating? Or that you're creating through the practice of science communication?

Celia: Sophie began to think more critically about what it means to do science communication in a way that's accessible to everyone...and how that question might not be quite right.

Sophie: I was always very invested in, you know, science museums, and went to a lot of them growing up. I really enjoyed learning about different forms of natural history, the world around us, that kind of stuff. But as I started to learn more, also about things like the history of race in the US and different power structures that still persist to this day, anti-Blackness, the ways that Asian Americans are used as well, with group model minority myth. All of these kinds of things. I started also to think more about what it meant to do science communication with the critical lens. And so at that point, my interests kind of shifted from. Oh, how do I communicate science to how do I make science more accessible.

But as I continue to learn even more that also then shifted from, how do I make science more accessible, which is still a very kind of assimilationist view of science. This idea that Western science should be shared with all of the communities around us. And that's kind of like the paragon of what knowledge is. To thinking about how do we share these critical histories and these critical perspectives on what knowledge really is, and what science really is, and the

different kinds of less-well-known and more hidden histories of science that we don't really learn about in school through a visual medium.

Celia: Sophie's passion for drawing blended with what she was learning in school -- she started thinking about how to leverage her love of visual art to communicate stories (*critical* stories) about science that don't often get told...at least, not in a way that's easy to understand.

Stella: Exactly! She's lowering that barrier to help people understand something that otherwise may be codified or esoteric. It reminds me of something Kelly mentioned earlier - she was more excited about continuing in STEM after interacting with people who explained science in a way that wasn't super complicated and ...well, boring.

Celia: But one reason why science is often communicated badly is because good science communication is *hard.* There are so many important things to think about, like Sophie said.

Stella: Yeah, it's so important to think about the community you're communicating science to, what your objectives are, and to take a step back to think about what forms of knowledge you're calling the "gold standard" (and what you're dismissing).

So, thinking about all this stuff, we asked Kelly about what she's working to achieve through JKX. She said...

Kelly: Yeah. So one of our really big goals when we started this, so first and foremost is accessibility and I'm increasing the scientific literacy access and exposure to diverse sets of children, families, people who typically don't have this access to STEM and this understanding of STEM research, that's the like large overarching goal, but something that we're actually working on now is, you know, how do we actually get this into the hands of kids so they don't have to pay for it. So we create these comic books and we've recently created, um, a new series called "Gaining STEAM", illuminating research through art that we kind of partner with. Well, we won a competition, the UW art of science competition a few years ago and we use those funds to create, um, a series of comic books. And so we're working now on like creating a Kickstarter and getting some fundraising going so we can distribute these comic books to children in different communities.

And so we've partnered with the Madison reading project and that's one place that our comic books are going to go. And so that's the start of kind of actually like taking our work, printing it and putting it in the hands of children and like really high quality work. So we usually like would just print it ourselves and distributed it at, um, science fairs for instance, but we really want to move past that and give the community something tangible and something nice to have in their spaces and to share with their kids and to use it as a learning resource, but also make it fun. So parents can also engage. So you never have to have the parent that says like, I would love to help you with this, but I actually don't understand that myself. So that's something we're trying to eliminate as well, because that shouldn't be a barrier to education for kids.

Stella: Amazing, this not only makes it translatable for the younger generation, but provides a means for parents to feel scientifically empowered to guide their kids and enjoy learning together.

Celia: It's a double duty comic! So, we also asked Sophie to tell us more about how Free Radicals, the activist collective she's part of, came to be and what they have been up to.

Sophie: With Free Radicals, in particular, we started out with a group of folks who had come from pretty disparate scientific backgrounds.

And folks are in Free Radicals and have come to this perspective because they're interested in how those different disciplines...either where the knowledge comes from, what knowledge isn't being represented in them, how those different -- how the different research that's conducted in those fields impacts different communities differently. And then also what kinds of knowledge are prioritized.

So, Free Radicals is an activist collective that works around making science more accessible, more socially just, more equitable. And a lot of what we do is through political education, whether that's through workshops we have a blog and a website and then through social media and then also working on the ground and campaigns and in coalitions with other community groups.

Free radicals actually started out as this reading group thinking about science critically, but as we were doing these readings, we had this thought of, you know, if we're just doing these readings together, we're just reproducing the inaccessibility of STS, right? If we just keep it to ourselves.

Stella: Wait, what's "STS"? I've heard of "STEM," but this sounds different...?

Celia: Yeah, it's a different thing. "STS" stands for Science and Technology Studies (or, Science, Technology, and Society...studies...people don't quite agree on that even within the field). It's an interdisciplinary field of academic study that focuses, not so much on the technical details of science --

Stella: Equations, formulas, biological processes...

Celia: Right, not that stuff. Instead, scholars in this field study *how* scientific findings come to be in the first place, and what their impact is on society.

Stella: Gotcha, gotcha. Okay, so Free Radicals was reading about STS. Then what?

Sophie: We have a lot of privilege to have access to this course, to these readings, to the time to do them, and to have these discussions together. And so let's do something about that and let's try to connect it to something that's a little bit more actionable. And so that's when we started doing the work that would become the blog, which is what we started out as.

And after we started the blog. We then started to do workshops for different organizations, different institutions around Southern California. So Free Rads has kind of gone through a bunch of different waves of what we have been. And that's one of the things that I actually really love about it, is that it is determined by the people who are a part of it.

One of the things that we really value right now is making sure that the work that we do is also making sure that the work that we do has community input beyond just the people who are part of Free Radicals.

What's the point of using art?

Celia: It sounds like both Sophie and Kelly are creating art as a way to communicate...but isn't drawing comics and printing zines and keeping up a website a lot of work? Why not just like...write things?

Stella: Well, that might be easier, but wouldn't you rather look at something pretty on Instagram than a wall of tiny text?

Sophie: I think the cool thing about art is that it can serve many different functions, and it definitely does for us. So I think on Instagram, the art is kind of partially a lure, and partially it just makes all of the text go down a little bit easier right now, since a lot of them are fairly text heavy. So, I think depending on the situation, it changes what the impact and what the strategy of using the different visuals are.

Stella: I feel like illustrations do so much more than that!

Celia: Yeah, they totally do! Beyond just making text easier to swallow, illustrations act as important visual metaphors, making the *point* go down easier, too.

Art advances narrative

Celia: Using zines to give value to information in this way is really important for Sophie and the Free Radicals team.

Sophie: One of the things that I really like about zines is that they give a sense of value to whatever you're producing. And whatever physical piece of paper pamphlet you're producing because I think that, you know, I've been to a lot of different actions where you get a flyer, a pamphlet. You might read it. Look for the pertinent information, and just put it in your bag or put it in the recycling bin.

But when you receive a zine as a form of political education and action, it is something that maybe you want to hold on to. And maybe you want to share with somebody else too, right? partially because it is something that has been crafted specifically for -- specifically to be shared

and to be read and to be kind of consumed in this way, and also partially because it's just...partially because it's usually some form of narrative or something that's cohesive. That provides a different kind of value.

Stella: I do love getting cool handmade things.

Celia: Me too! It feels so thoughtful and special! They're onto something, for sure. But you don't need to make an adorable handmade zine to communicate.

Sophie: I think that stories always have power. And one of the things that I think about a lot is, I always feel like I've been like...growing up, I was always like, "Oh, I'm a bad storyteller." Like, "I can't...I can't tell stories with my words, I'm bad at talking," this kind of stuff. And creating zines and art has actually been a way for me to think differently about creating narratives and stories. And about still creating something that has a compelling emotional story that can draw people in and also has like a throughline where you can draw people in, maybe based on like a metaphor or something. And still tell a very pertinent story.

Celia: So, whatever your medium is, you can use it to tell stories.

Advice for future communicators

Stella: Okay, but....how? Sometimes I feel like Sophie used to, like "oh, I'm a bad storyteller."

Celia: Me too. So I asked her for some advice! Like, how should we even start *thinking* about what story to tell? And she shared some great nuggets of wisdom.

Sophie: Ask yourself, you know, why are you interested in this work to begin with. And I think that that's where a lot of the compelling narrative comes from, right? Is what makes this particularly interesting to you, or relevant to your life.

And then I would ask, what is the relevance of this to the audience that you're trying to communicate it to? And why should they care? Not in kind of like a snake oil salesman kind of way. Or like, craft a reason that they should care, but actually think really critically about what is the reason that I want to communicate this, what is the benefit to the folks who are going to be receiving this knowledge for me to communicate this?

And then I would ask, what are the values that are embedded in whatever work or research that you're doing? So those questions that I talked about earlier. Right. So, who is doing the research? Who is represented in the research? Why are you asking this question to begin with? And then, who benefits, and who was harmed by the work that you're doing?

Because I think that when we talk about science communication and these questions of how do you craft a compelling narrative to share your work with the public. And I think that sometimes these bigger questions, which to me are more important, get lost. Because I think these are the

foundational questions, right?

And so this, and then this is going to be the question that maybe folks might push back on a little bit more, which is, um, what is the value of doing the research that you are doing, and should you be doing this research? And are there other forms of research, other things that you could be doing that might either bring you joy and bring more positive impact to the world than what you're currently doing? Or are there ways that you can change what you're currently doing?

Stella: ...oh, wow.

Celia: Yeah, as a scientist with a research agenda, I felt that in my soul. These questions are so important to ask, but we often don't! We should probably get on that!

Barriers to effective science communication

Stella: I'm taking notes. Okay, so we know that telling stories is hard, but I feel like I hear about people like...failing to understand science all the time. Especially with all this news swirling around about vaccines, and viruses, and all that...are there barriers to *understanding* science communication?

Celia: So, I asked her about that, and she had an amazing answer that basically called me out for asking the wrong question. I'll let her explain.

Sophie: I don't know if you've heard of like, the "deficit model." So the deficit model is this idea, this model for thinking about education, where the communicator goes out into a community, assuming that the community has a deficit of knowledge and that you are pouring essentially knowledge into an empty vessel.

Right. And of course, what we know about communities and what we know about human beings is that everyone has different forms of knowledge that you bring to the table and you might not have the same forms of knowledge. But the critical question to ask is, why are certain forms of knowledge being valued over other forms of knowledge? And why do you personally value certain forms of knowledge over other forms of knowledge?

Celia: Oof, right? She followed up with even more questions that science communicators should consider at every step of the planning process. Starting with...

Sophie: How are you going into this process? What are your assumptions about the knowledge that is being shared? And what is the direction that knowledge is taking? Right. So is this a unidirectional exchange (which isn't an exchange), or is it bidirectional, multi-directional? Are you sharing things and learning and actually taking to heart the knowledge of the folks who you're working with in a community? Or are you just going in with the assumption that you're

going to give them knowledge? Because if you do the latter, then you're making an assumption about what knowledge is valuable and what knowledge everyone should have, right?

And related to that question is what is your relationship to this community? What is your investment in this community? Why do you think that they should have this knowledge? And how do you think that this knowledge is relevant to them, their daily lives or just their lives in general?

Celia: People have their own agency, and multiple forms of knowledge production can coexist (not just the Western institutional science a lot of us grew up with)

Sophie: On the other end for the folks who are quote unquote receiving the knowledge which, you know, I just take issue with in general. I guess my message to folks who are being, quote unquote "communicated," having science communicated to them, would just be not to let that undermine the forms of knowledge that you know that you already have.

Next steps / projects

Stella: What a powerful message: storytelling is intimately linked to the background of the storyteller. Of *course* it is -- who we *are* shapes the scientists we become, and how we interpret the world and share our knowledge with others.

Celia: Identity matters! Especially since the canonical capital-S "Scientist" is usually depicted as some wacky middle-aged white man in a lab coat.

Stella: Yeah that's totally true, and for a long time, we've been missing visible examples of scientists who don't fit that very narrow description. This is something Kelly cares about a lot, and works to address as a fellow with 500 Women Scientists. 500 Women Scientists is a fellowship that is focused on promoting the work of minority women in STEM. I'll let Kelly tell you more about her plan create comic books that highlight women who exist at the intersection of multiple identities

Kelly: So whether it is, um, your race, your ethnicity, your religious background, your sexual orientation, I want to pull people from all of those different identities, people who exist at the intersection of all of these identities and tell their scientific stories. A really important goal of mine is to show the community that science doesn't just look well...it's incredibly diverse.

Stella: Seeing this diversity can challenge our understanding of what a scientist quote-unquote "should look like".

Kelly: Right? And so when you and I, we did this before we ask kids like, you know, can you describe a scientist to us? And they'll be like, Oh, you know, my bill Nye, you know, the grass Tyson. Right. Um, and then we were like, okay, what else? What you got? And then we'd be like, well, I'm a scientist. And I'm like, no way, or like, introduce you to a colleague. And I'm like,

well, he's a scientist. She signs like, Oh really? Like I thought scientists were supposed to like, like fit in this particular identity. But, um, even more than that, like no people don't know like women scientists either like all of the sciences that they'll name. Sure. They'll be like, white men. But on top of that, like they can't name like a female scientist, like, or a living scientist for that matter. And that's a narrative that I want to change in the, you know, put women at the center of their own stories and be able to tell their own stories.

Stella: Fueled by this idea to change the narrative of who a scientist is, or what type of person can be a scientist, Kelly came up with a wonderful little book idea.

Kelly: So the book is basically going to be telling the story of the person without including any scientific mention, right. Because first and foremost, we're people, and then also the second half of the book will be telling them more and more in the narrative of, um, what they've contributed to the field. And I think it's just like a really nice way to, you know, round out, um, people as people, but then also incorporate, you know, how their identities influenced what they study and who they are and how they, how it's shaped their experiences in STEM. So that's gonna be it and hopefully something good comes out of this and I'm really excited.

Stella: And what does Future Kelly have in store?

Kelly: For so long, I wanted to do science policy, and I think that's still a route and option because my ultimate goal is just to like tell people, communicate science to others. And I don't necessarily know if that's still in the policy sphere. I'll be open to the possibility, but I think very, maybe it's an unsatisfying answer, but science communication I think is now the goal because I think I can do it and do it well. So whether that's like science, journalism, science policy, finding my own niche, creating my own space. Um, eventually I think that would be cool too, but definitely like some form of communication to engage public accessibility and outreach.

Celia: We also asked Sophie if she had any project fantasies floating around.

Sophie: I feel like my dream project is one that I've been grappling with ethically and production wise for a while...and also by saying this on a public podcast I have to like actually do it...

For a couple of years every October, I come back to this idea of it would be really interesting to do like, some kind of emotional, like an affective experience around science and technology studies. Around different political histories of science, and to do essentially like a "skeletons in science's closet," a haunted house. So that's my kind of like, dream project. If anyone has experience doing like, set design and production or like, exhibit kind of stuff, hit me up! This is my dream project. I know nothing about physical manufacturing except for having used an angle grinder to open a lot of plaster fossil jackets when I worked in museum collections before, which is like, totally different story. Um, but I'm a fast learner and we can work together! So let me know.

I grew up loving magic school bus and going to science museums and those are two very different experiences, right? I think you get something very different out of the two of them.. I don't think I've ever been to, like, a science-related kind of theater experience. But just like the emotion that you get from experiencing something is just so different, right, then just reading or looking at something.

Celia: It really brings an added emotional layer to something that's usually so...not that.

Stella: You know what this reminds me of?

Celia: What?

Stella: Okay, in the Before Times, I feel like I saw so many couples going on cute science museum dates. There must be something to that...

Celia: Oh, I know exactly what you mean. Science museums are like, cool now! Cool for adults!

Stella: Ugh, I can't wait until we're all vaccinated. I want to go to science museums again and other places!

Celia: Fingers crossed we don't have to wait too long. Gives me some time to find a cute science museum date, you know? It's all part of the plan.

Wrap Up + social media plugs

Celia: In part one this miniseries, we got a glimpse into how science can be used as an artistic tool, and we learned about how creativity is hand in hand with scientific discovery.

Stella: And here in part two, we dove deeper into how the creative process drives scientific curiosity. How art can be used as a way to communicate STEM concepts that might otherwise be inaccessible

Celia: And with this, we also discussed some things to consider when communicating science through art or other mediums. Art can also be used to make us think about *how* we think - not just "how can I explain this science fact?", but "*why should I* explain this science fact?"

Stella: Other things to consider were also how best to communicate science to those who aren't traditionally reached (or served) by Western STEM education, and the importance of knowing your audience, and being receptive to different ways people learn and acquire information

Celia: Kelly and Sophie gave us really cool insights into their medium for science communication, as well as goals such as using art to emphasize diversity/increase representation in STEM. We're super excited to see what they do next, and we hope you are too

Celia: To learn more and support the amazing work these artists and their people do, use the internet! Free Radicals, Sophie's activist collective, is at freerads.org (f-r-e-e-r-a-d-s, dot org). They're also at freeradsorg on Instagram and Twitter, and you can find links to donate on their website! They recently celebrated their FIVE YEAR anniversary - so happy anniversary, guys! - and published a zine all about it.

Stella: And Kelly's comics are online at jkxcomics.com, and on Instagram at JKX comics, and on Tumblr at jkxcomics.tumblr.com. But don't worry, all of these links will be up in our show notes. Go follow them! So much science-y art awaits you!

Credits

This episode was produced by Stella Belonwu, Celia Ford, and Devika Nair, with help from the rest of the team at Carry the One Radio. Thank you so much to Kelly Montgomery and Sophie Wang for their time, and to you for listening.

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