

Breathing Space

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine the balance between my studio and community practices in creating safe and nurturing spaces. I will describe the process by which I design and facilitate collaborative projects with community members in relation to the work I show in gallery settings. I will respond to the existing literature and practicing artists with whom I relate. Time will be devoted to the issues of social justice, community building, and empowerment. I will reveal my reasoning behind bringing symbols, patterns, and encoded images into the visual language of the groups I work with. Most importantly, I will explore the need to break down the hierarchies between tutored and untutored artists. Equality can be realized through creating spaces in which all people are on a level playing field, therefore, realizing that everyone has something valuable to offer.

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My classmates kept me alive and kickin',

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INTRODUCTION

During my first formal experience facilitating a youth mural project in Detroit, I knew I was hooked. A small group of teenagers sat down with me on the pavement next to the location of our section of the mural, and we talked about what they wanted to paint.

“We don’t know,” they said over and over again. I asked them questions about their lives, their favorite people, their favorite subjects in school, and they looked at me blankly.

Finally, one of them mentioned that they had loved studying Egypt in school. The other kids were equally enthusiastic. We started thinking of the visual and cultural things that interested them about the ancient Egyptians and I encouraged them to draw the things they told me about. They all seemed to agree that they couldn’t draw, nor did they seem too interested in trying, but I soon discovered that there were artists hidden inside them who simply needed some encouragement to break out of their shells.

We sat on the ground and I started to draw what they described to me on a large piece of paper. They soon grew frustrated because I was not drawing the way they wanted me to, so they found a sheet of paper and tried to correct what I was doing. Their drawings were not only more accurate, but freshly showed the enthusiasm they felt for the subject. After we had the elements, we put them together, each one tackling the drawing they had corrected. They were a skeptical

about their ability, but I ignored this, and they continued drawing. By the end of the day, the kids were already planning for next week and spoke of the things they would research at home.¹

I return again and again to the image of this group sitting with me on the ground next to a blank wall and redrawing my sketches, the way *they* wanted them to be. The joy I felt at that moment is something I carry with me to this day. This experience taught me that I need only pay attention to each individual's strengths and encourage them to capitalize on these assets. I feel the same surge of pleasure from engaging in community art projects that I experience in the studio. Assisting another in pulling their creativity out from where it has been hidden feels like discovering a new color on my palette, or finding a new medium I hadn't thought of before.

This thesis will draw upon my experiences and research regarding the balance of being a community and studio artist. I will discuss the process of creating nurturing spaces for artists and "non-artists" in the gallery and in the community. I will illustrate that these projects address the larger context of social justice, empowerment, and community building. Breaking the barriers created by historically engrained hierarchies is a constant driving force behind the choices I make in both the community and the studio. Engaging marginalized populations in the art making process and bringing traditional craft practices into the gallery are two ways this is done.

Encoded messages, patterns, and symbols are elemental aspects of my paintings, quilts and installations. Since childhood, I have been infatuated by secret messages and hiding spaces. My favorite activities were creating enclosed spaces for myself, under tables, in trees, under my



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Youth at Work on Mural, 2004

bed, and in my closet. Patterns have always been present in my paintings as a meditative process, and a visually unifying device. I have used universally recognized and personal symbols to anchor my work to the world around me, as well as keep a part of me hidden in my own secret, safe breathing space.

Artists are taught to see themselves as exceptional people in order to defend a discipline for which there are few concrete rewards. As students of visual culture, we need to believe that what we do requires talent, skill, and ability. I argue that untutored art is equally valid. As a schooled artist, it is nearly impossible for me to create work that has the rawness of outsider art.

Hierarchies, such as those detailed by the Guerilla Girls, are played out in the art world through economic, racial, educational, and other social exclusions. Joseph Beuys controversially said, "Everyone is an Artist." (Birchard 2167) This statement automatically brings up the question, *what is art?* I will define art as any action that expresses oneself, whether that be through painting, music, or bagging groceries.

The elevation of artists leads to the exclusion of others. By limiting ourselves to showing our work only in galleries, we exclude ourselves from the wider audience that people such as advertisers and mural painters enjoy. By insisting that the most valid artists are those who show in galleries in New York, we exclude all but the elite few who have the resources and networks to make this possible.

We like to point to the rags-to-riches stories such as those of Jean-Michel Basquiat, who is portrayed in a Miramax movie rising from homelessness, to art star, and finally dying of a drug overdose. (Basquiat 1996) Some see this as proof that economically depressed people can rise to fame while Basquiat's life was complex and tragic. The rags-to-riches stories are few, and do not serve as accurate statistics of poverty leading to fame.

In the following paper, I will discuss the importance of imagination in every aspect of our lives. I have been convinced by research and personal experience that every human needs to express the creativity gained from everyday experiences. (Dewey 35) Success in school and life

depends on bringing the different aspects of psychological and intellectual lives together through the creative process. (Gardner 48)

The culture of poverty is imprisoning. It traps people within it and doesn't let them go. Paulo Freire stated that the key to breaking out of poverty is education. (14) During my months working in a school in Detroit, I experienced the extreme racial segregation and its subsequent poverty. In these public school environments, there is little time or funding for art because of the many standardized tests required for the schools to succeed. The children are drilled to memorize facts, but the system forgets the essential aspects of the arts, which can serve to tie academic subjects together and make school relate to their own world. I will attempt to make the case that through art, we can educate, and through education, we will be able to close the gap between segregation and poverty.

Finding a balance between a structured activity and a degree of openness is the challenge of community art. Everyone must have a hand in the planning and process of the project, but also must be guided along the way. This is why defined projects, such as mural painting and quilt making, are especially successful, because there is a structure from which to expand.

My personal challenge has been to integrate my own studio practice into this community. I have trouble giving my own work enough attention because I can become overly preoccupied with other people's work. I strive to give my own work the attention it deserves. My studio work fuels my creative process with children, youth, and adults as they find their own creativity and their development and artistic style, in turn, inspires my work technically, aesthetically and thematically. I am able to find a balance by maintaining a studio practice while at the same time doing community work. The community work is a break from thinking about myself, and the studio work is a break from thinking of others.

Everyone lives a hybrid life. Whether family and work, or a job that requires more than one expertise, we all have more than one purpose in life. The romantic idea of an artist, alone in her/his studio, fighting to show in galleries, is just one way of being an artist. Another way

pleases both the introverted and extroverted aspects of my personality. Time alone in my studio is essential to my growth in painting and fibers, while it restores my energy and enthusiasm for working with people. I learn new techniques and am invigorated by the work I do with others. These ideas come back with me to my private spot in my studio, where, in turn, I find new ways to engage people with creative activities.

This thesis will examine the balance between my studio and community practices in creating safe and nurturing spaces. I will describe the process by which I design and facilitate collaborative projects with community members in relation to the work I show in gallery settings. I will respond to the existing literature and practicing artists with whom I relate. Time will be devoted to the issues of social justice, community building, and empowerment. I will reveal my reasoning behind bringing symbols, patterns, and encoded images into the visual language of the groups I work with. Most importantly, I will explore the need to break down the hierarchies between tutored and untutored artists. Equality can be realized through creating spaces in which all people are on a level playing field, therefore, realizing that everyone has something valuable to offer.

CHAPTER I

Literature Review

“Culture within any given society depends on the capacity of the members of that society to develop their potential. If the members of a society are not given this opportunity, there can be no democratization of culture. There can be no culture, no democracy.” (Cardenal 231)

Introduction

Ernesto Cardenal, poet, author, and “comrade-padre” in Nicaragua’s Sandinista movement speaks to the right of all to experience culture, the arts, and knowledge in order to create a true democracy where everyone is able to think freely and creatively. (222) Countless artists have shared this view and have worked with the community in a variety of ways. Many people create art with others outside the traditional sphere of the gallery. Most of these artists have questioned the social hierarchies engrained in us and have found it necessary to act against them. My theoretical framework is drawn from a variety of artists, educators, researchers, and philosophers who have examined the social conditions forming both inclusive and exclusive art processes. The basis of my argument is that a dialogical method is essential to break down the barriers between different societal groups.

In the following section I will review the importance of visual communication to our experience of the world. I will discuss the balancing act that community artists play with their studio and community work. The social implications of dialogical education

and art making will be related to social justice issues such as race relation and economic disparities. Finally, I will survey the practices of artists, organizers, facilitators, and organizations who engage a wide community in the art making process.

Theory

The Guerilla Girls have convinced us that the art world has a history of exclusion. Since 1985, “The conscience of the art world,” (Guerrilla Girls 7) has been asking the question, “Why haven’t more women been *considered* great artists throughout Western History?” (7). They make exclusion public. The art world and art history have acted as an exclusive society, which went along with the isms of the day throughout history to exclude women, as well as other marginalized populations. The Guerrilla Girls call upon the art world to recognize the women who have been making great art throughout the ages.

One has only to look through an art history book to see that the most recognized artists have been white, western men. The Girls’ unveiling of art history has assisted in giving the art world incentive to credit contemporary artists who a century ago would have been excluded from galleries and museums. *Art 21: Art in the Twenty-first Century* proves that times have changed. This PBS series of contemporary artists profiles includes people of all walks of life. The big deviation seems to be economic at this point in time.

In *The Guerrilla Girls’ Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*, the Girls profile women who were unrecognized or taken for granted. Artemisia Gentileschi’s story shows how a woman can survive rape and empower herself through making art, while becoming well known at the same time. (33-37) Harriet Powers, a freed slave and quilter, used motifs

reminiscent of West Africa and is one of the many unrecognized African American Quilters. (54-55)

Communication is essential to human experience as we can see in the case of Helen Keller who describes her life before she learned to communicate: “Once I knew the depth where no hope was, and darkness lay on the face of all things...Once I fretted and beat myself against the wall that shut me in...But a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness, and my heart leaped to the rapture of living. Night fled before the day of thought, and love and joy and hope came up in a passion of obedience to knowledge.” (Keller 1903)

There are other forms of communication besides verbal language that lend themselves to the human experience. Suzanne Langer speaks of art as another form of communication. Poetry, dance, music, painting, film, and other forms help construct ideas for which pure verbal language doesn't suffice. Langer's definition of art is, “the practice of creating perceptible forms expressive of human feeling.” (76) According to Langer, art gives off a feeling, while language is a thought. The openness of this definition relates strongly to my argument that art should be seen as accessible to all. My interpretations of her basic premises are these:

1. It must be possible to experience the art through sight, sound, touch, taste, or smell.
2. The art is made from a human experience, relating to sight, sound, touch, taste, or smell.

The most alluring aspect of this definition is that the terms, “artist” and “materials” remain undefined. Man, woman, child, disabled, homeless, comatose, rich, or poor; all these terms could describe an artist. (She does state that it must be human.) “Material” also remains undefined, leaving us to interpret that dirt, gasoline, yarn, bread, or the sound of screeching tires could be used to make art.

John Dewey affirms Langer's inclusive definition by stating, "Experience occurs continuously." (35) Art and Experience, Dewey's seminal work on the philosophy of aesthetics, thoroughly makes the case that aesthetic qualities are an inherent part of having an experience.

"The remaking of the material of experience in the act of expression is not an isolated event confined to the artist and to a person here and there who happens to enjoy the work. In the degree in which art exercises its office, it is also a remaking of the experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity." (Dewey 81)

This is the core idea that attracts me to Dewey's work. Dewey's theory that expression takes the form of an experience in a person's life, that it is reflected upon, and made again in a new way, is an excellent definition of the creative process. This definition works from the inclusive thought that any person's experience can become art through mindful experience. Bagging groceries in a grocery store, working through a personal trauma, or gazing at light as it hits the horizon can all become art forms.

Let us take the example of bagging groceries. The physical act of bagging groceries could be turned into a dance of the hands. The sound of the plastic bags as they are handled could become a sound piece; rhythmic, musical, or both. I would argue that the very act of arranging the groceries in the bag could become an art form in itself through the way the shapes fit together in the bag, the weight of each bag, and the stacking of the objects in the bag, with breakable objects at the top.

Dewey continues in the aforementioned quote to say that art is accessible to all, not only the few. Art creates an understanding of the world around us. In the case of the bagger, her/his formation of each material within its container is sometimes looked upon favorably if the groceries are not squished and sometimes negatively if the opposite occurs. Many may simply not

think about the way the groceries were bagged at all. It seems the groceries are looked upon in the same way that a painting in a museum is enjoyed, abhorred, or not noticed at all. The difference between art and that which is not art the thought with which it has been made, and the way a person looks at it.

The bag of groceries goes from the artist/bagger's hands out into the world, as most art does. It is taken in by its surroundings and contributes to the world the food contained within. Far fetched? Perhaps, but the argument over what is and isn't art has obsessed our culture since Duchamp created the ready-made.¹ His *Fountain* was an exhibited object in a gallery. Sculptures travel into open squares to become public art. It doesn't seem so different to me to call an arranged container of shapes, *Art*.

Joseph Beuys (1981-1986) practiced inclusive art while maintaining a highly conceptual and esoteric art practice of his own. Beuys' work grew directly from the trauma of war. He was injured 5 times but one experience stands out as the most memorable, although, ironically, he was unconscious for most of the experience. In 1943, his plane crashed in Crimea. He said, "The memories I have of that time are images that penetrated my consciousness." (Tisdall 16) The nomads of the area, the Tartars, found him after the Germans had given up. They brought him

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53-25 MARCEL DUCHAMP, *Fountain*, (second version), 1950. Ready-made glazed sanitary china with black paint, 12" high. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia (purchased with proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works of art).

Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1950

back to their camp covered him in fat, and wrapped him in felt. These materials and their fundamental qualities often consumed his art practice. (16)

Speaking of his own struggle with what today would be called PTSD, Bueys said, "For me it was a time when I realized the part the artist can play in indicating the traumas of a time and initiating a healing process." (21) essentially acknowledging the self-empowering qualities of his work.²

Beuys strongly accepted his individuality as an artist, but through performance, education, and politics, brought others into his wider work as an artist. The use of his personal experience in his work served as a therapeutic practice. The duality of Beuys' thoughts is shown through the esoteric nature of his art in the gallery and the straightforward makeup of his other projects such as planting trees and fighting for educational equality.

Beuys was a strong advocate for students. As a professor, he founded the "Committee for a Free College" whose objective was to make college accessible to all students, regardless of whether they passed the appropriate exams to enter, or whether they had sufficient funds to pay for it. (Stachelhaus 79)

His most famous action on their behalf was to insist that sixteen rejected students be accepted to the Academy of Art. He won this battle, but was later fired for his radical thinking

2



Beuys, *The Pack*, 1969.



Joseph Beuys, *Felt Suit*, 1970.

and political views on equal opportunity. (Adriani, Konnertz, Thomas 236-238) Equal access to education is still disputed today through anti-affirmative action campaigns and high tuition rates.³

The work done by advocates for equal education shows how our society chronically ignores the people who aren't in power. These marginalized populations are dehumanized, given up on, and pushed aside.

Paulo Freire was a leading advocate of education for marginalized groups. His models of education included the “banking” system and “problem-posing education.” The banking concept of education involves the students “receiving, filing, and storing the deposits.” (72) This system calls to mind the massive No Child Left Behind Act that ensures that students have the facts to pass the tests, but not the knowledge to enrich their intellectual selves.

(<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>)

Freire argues that, “it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system.” (72) This “filing away” is realized through the unmandated, informal segregation discussed later in the section about Arts Integration.

The banking system's rival is “problem-posing education,” which features “dialogue” and “consciousness”. (79) Introducing a topic, while connecting it to the lives of the students, can lead to a conversation in which the teacher guides the students towards their individual evolving opinions on the chosen subject. “Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and



Joseph Beuys Lecturing at the 1980 Edinburgh Festival.

stimulates true reflection and action upon reality.” (84) The notion that people can reason their way towards a full understanding is still considered revolutionary. Freire believes that respectful education, based on dialogue, can raise people from oppression.

Augusto Boal, creator of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, used the Freirian concept of dialogue in his *Forum Theatre* where, “the audience could use the same stage as the actors to convey what they thought.” (35) Boal’s idea is based on his belief that every human is an actor as well as a spectator. Through the *Forum Theatre*, actor becomes spectator and spectator becomes actor. This dialogue brings about learning and social change.

The theories of Freire and Boal are key to my job as facilitator. Creating a space in which everyone is heard and the student is as valued as the teacher is my primary goal of every project. When a space is created through open dialogue, the participants are empowered because they feel important. They know that the classroom would not be there without them. They feel that we all have equal footing and that I appreciate their creativity and individuality rather than the number of facts they know.

Sharon E. Sutton outlines the importance of place and environment on children and how this affects society. Sutton, herself having grown up in between places as an African American woman and a woman who was achieving high goals, has an intimate understanding of this, which aided her research. Her theory essentially says that,

“•Observations of the physical environment - which reflects the materialistic, competitive values of the modern industrial era - instruct children about their roles in society.

•These environmental observations are reinforced at school through a hidden curriculum of separateness.

- The hierarchical power structures within schools, which reflect inequities of the larger society, result in a patriarchal contract between teachers and students that maintains the status quo.
- These three elements - environmental observations, a hidden curriculum of separateness, and hierarchical power structures - work in concert to encourage socially and environmentally destructive roles and behavior.
- Such roles of behavior exaggerate differences in material wealth and make it unlikely that children will learn to imagine a more equitable society.
- Place-related learning, which can help children to see their connection with and through nature, might promote more sustainable relationships.” (Sutton 7-8)

Sutton’s points describe the cues given to children as to the level in society they are supposed to achieve. When everything in a child’s world indicates poverty and low goals, it is unlikely they will see a way out. Sutton theorizes that creativity through knowledge of the world around them, may lead to equality.

Another relevant advocate for arts education is Howard Gardner. His *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* argues that there are seven forms of intelligences; linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. (Gardner 48) This theory informs us that there are many ways that people learn. More importantly, it shows that standardized tests are irrelevant because they only show a limited range of intelligence.

Dialogical Community Artists

“It’s not only the transformation of the public consciousness that we are interested in, but it’s our own transformation as artists that’s just as important. Perhaps a corollary is that the community change can’t take place unless it’s transformative within us. That familiar line - “I see the enemy and it is I” - means that every prejudice, every misunderstanding that we perceive out in the real world is inside of us, and has to be challenged.” (Kaprow 33)

Allan Kaprow, professor of both Judy Chicago and Suzanne Lacy started to break down the barriers between the academic institution of art, and the general public. He led a movement towards integrating the wider community into contemporary art based on dialogue. (Lacy 33)

The visual outcome of community art projects can be seen as *the* work of art, but this is far from the truth. The *process* of community art is the goal. The empowerment, learning process, and community building aspects of the projects are by far the most important outcomes while the paintings and other objects simply help to validate the experience. Suzanne Lacy’s projects clearly outline the process of dialogue as the focus of the art. They focus on an aspect of community art, which can be overlooked: *how* to do it, instead of what the result is.

Whisper, the Waves, the Wind (1984)⁴ is a performance piece by Suzanne Lacy in which



Suzanne Lacy, *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*, 1984

154 older women sat at tables on a beach in La Jolla, California, talking about their lives while an audience gazed on from a nearby boardwalk. (Kelley 245) It required much planning and relied completely upon the participants in order to flourish. In this project, Lacy achieved aesthetic beauty through her own vision and created a loose template in which the participants could exert their creativity through their own voices. I used to think that the most “artsy” projects could never leave room for the participant’s creativity, but Lacy created a bizarre and beautiful event involving a community in dialogue regarding the planning of the piece and the execution of the performance.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is a prolific artist who has included non-traditional voices in her large-scale public art projects since the 1960’s. In her maintenance activities starting with her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* written in 1969, she took her everyday activities that had been cooking and cleaning and caring for her children and defined them as art. Ukeles soon aimed her admiration for maintenance outward towards other workers whose efforts behind the scenes was allowing others to shine, “Wives, lovers, technicians, and fabricators fuel the fantasy of independence. Ironically, it is this very support that allows the practice of art making to appear as the ultimate expression of individual freedom.” (Phillips 172)

Later, as artist in residence with the Department of Sanitation in New York City, Ukeles began to involve others in her works. A good listener, who is always in awe of the accomplishments of the maintenance workers who keep a city running, she brings their ideas into her inventions which honor their work, “The development of structures that are open and supple enough to accommodate the intentions and actions of many people is an unbreachable, animating feminist principal of Ukeles’s ephemeral performances, as well as her ongoing projects.” (Phillips 173) Her main aim is to help others see the creativity and the importance of their professions.

My favorite work by Ukeles is her *Snow Workers' Ballet*, a performance work for *The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial* in Japan.⁵ Engaging in dialogue with a group of Japanese snow removal workers resulted in an exquisite ballet using the trucks and equipment used to plow the snow. (Ukeles Penny Stamps Lecture) I see this performance as truly evocative because of its unlikely pairing of maintenance workers and heavy machinery contrasted with a graceful dance. This event is absolutely inspiring to me because it illustrates that the masses, the everyday people of the world, are inspired by the artistically idiosyncratic.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Snow Workers Ballet*, 2003

Community Murals

Art made by the people, for the people, can act as a symbol of social change, while building community and self-confidence in the process. Californian Chicanos carried on the Mexican Muralist tradition in the 1970's using murals to carry "a message everyone could understand." (Treguer 22) They were artworks made for the masses employing symbols they could relate to. The Chicano murals were political, cultural, and made by and for the community.

The murals made in Estrada Courts, California⁶ between 1973-1976 weren't made only for the sake of aesthetics, but also to communicate messages to the viewers. (Goldman 28) Anti-gang violence, drug awareness, religion, and knowledge of cultural heritage are only some of the messages conveyed through the murals. By painting the Chicano history, both ancient and recent, the mural movement has become a way to bring people together by reminding them of a shared past. Instead of feeling alienated and unwanted in a new land, the community is reminded of a brave revolutionary history, and inspires people to work together to build a cohesive Chicano future. Bringing art into the public sphere shows the community that art is for all, not only for the special or the talented.

Melvin Delgado is the leading researcher in the field of Community Organizing to study the effects of murals. He has focused on the making of memorial murals and their effects on the immediate community. Delgado explains the importance of viewing murals within a social



Mural in Estrada Courts, Los Angeles, CA

context instead of simply as an art object. (67) A mural empowers it's makers by improving communication skills, maintaining a connection with the cultural and decorative symbology that creates the painting, working across generational gaps, and contributing to the beautification of communities. (Delgado, Barton 346-356)

Judy Baca and her organization, The Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), have been widely discussed in the field of Community Arts. Baca led SPARC and it's 215 teenaged mural makers to create the 2,435' long *Great Wall of Los Angeles*.⁷ (Baca 2)

Often collaborative murals have actually been designed by one "experienced" artist, and transferred to the wall by participants who then color in the shapes with paint. In the SPARC mural, however, the group attempted to break out of this mould.

"Artists encouraged local residents to join them in discussing the content, and often, in doing the actual painting. For the first time, techniques were developed that would allow non-artists working with a professional to design and paint their own murals. This element of community participation, the placement of murals on exterior walls in the community itself, and the philosophy of community input, that is, the right of a community to decide on what kind of art it wants, characterized the new muralism." (Sperling-Cockcroft, Barnet-Sanchez 6)



SPARC, The Great Wall of Los Angeles, begun in 1976

In the Stimson Street Mural Project, discussed later, I used my own technique to create a mural design by all those involved, and therefore, owned by those that created it, bringing the participants to think of themselves as artists and the ones who are changing their own lives through their individual styles and creativity.

Although I draw from the meaning and importance of the Chicano muralists, the following project is closest to the ventures I have participated in because of its attention to community development through the gathering of neighbors through art.

The Dudley Street Area, an economically depressed part of Boston was in deep decline when residents decided to take action. Waste removal from vacant lots and getting involved in city politics helped to put their neighborhood back on the map. This is an ideal situation because the community itself was initiating the change and empowering themselves to create a better neighborhood for themselves, their families and friends.

An element of this neighborhood's revitalization was the symbolic actions of creating public art spaces throughout the neighborhood. Residents participated in creating an art space in the Emerson School playground. "Mosaic tiles in a low curved wall spell out a "Declaration of Community Rights" that begins, "We the residents of the Dudley area have the right to participate in all the planning, programs, and policies affecting our lives." (Feldstein, Putnam 79)

This initiative, along with the painting of a mural depicting people from the community,⁸ acted as a symbol and visual reminder of their community's resources within its population. The Dudley Area was on its way out of its recession. (Feldstein, Putnam 80) In conclusion, the mural



Dudley Street Mural, Roxbury, Massachusetts

was not made solely for the purpose of beatification of the neighborhood, but to bring the community together in a united effort in which creative means could start dialogue and become a close, caring neighborhood again.

Murals have historically brought paintings outside to the viewer. More importantly, they have involved improbable people in the exploration of themselves and their culture through creative means.

The following section on quilting examines a way that women have been coming together for centuries and continues to draw people to the craft or art of community self-expression and creativity.

Quilt Making

The concept of the Underground Railroad Quilt steers my interest in encoded images, hiding spots, and women's work. The symbols leading slaves north is a driving force behind my teaching of the use of pattern and code as a way of expressing oneself.

(<http://educ.queensu.ca/~fmc/may2004/Underground.html>) Though the historical validity of the existence of the quilts is disputed, the fabled utility of a traditionally women's craft illustrates my belief that art can be made by anyone and can be understood by those of least power.

(<http://www.ugrrquilt.hartcottagequilts.com/>)

The AIDS Quilt has been an inspiration and a process of mourning for those who make the squares, as well as those who view it. It brought families and friends together in community centers across the country to form 3'X6' squares. Squares were sewn, quilted, and drawn upon to create a memorial to an individual with AIDS. The largest showing of the Aids Quilt was on the

Washington D.C. Mall in 1987⁹, and involved the ceremonial laying out of each section, followed by the reading off of victims' names over a microphone by family members, partners, and friends. The Quilt serves to bring closure to a horrific illness and give voice to those who stood by helplessly and watched a loved one die. The openness of the process gave the makers license to create how they saw fit, a symbol of love. The acre wide result is empowering, energetic and moving. (<http://www.aidsquilt.org/history.htm>)

The seeds of the Freedom Quilting Bee were sown in 1966 when the quilters of Gees Bend were discovered by a local minister who saw the potential of their quilts to be sold in New York. Gees Bend was a small, isolated African American Community comprised mainly of poor sharecroppers; descendants of slaves who were brought to the area by a wealthy landowner. (Callahan 3-13)

The most aesthetically influential quilts are from first years of discovery. "The bold color schemes, dramatic contrasts of scale, combination old patterns, and experimental attitude are in keeping with an African American tradition that embraces stylistic diversity and uniquely idiosyncratic compositions." (Johnson 33) The freshness of the style is brought on, not by lack of skill, but rather, the isolation of the community, and the purpose of the quilts to give warmth instead of showpieces, subsequently resulting in spontaneous lines and shapes.

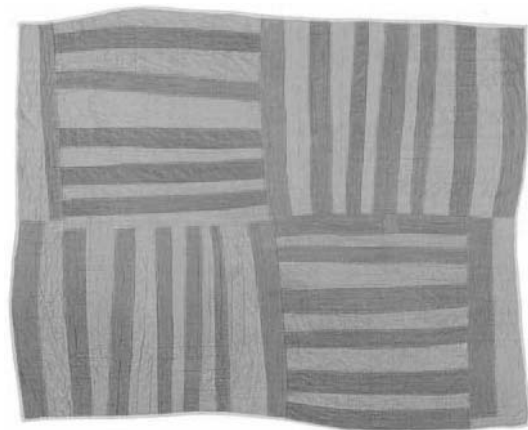
The sales of the quilts allowed the women of the Freedom Quilting Bee to support their families. "They weren't just field hands any more, but artisans, business women, decision-



The AIDS Quilt, Washington D. C., 1987

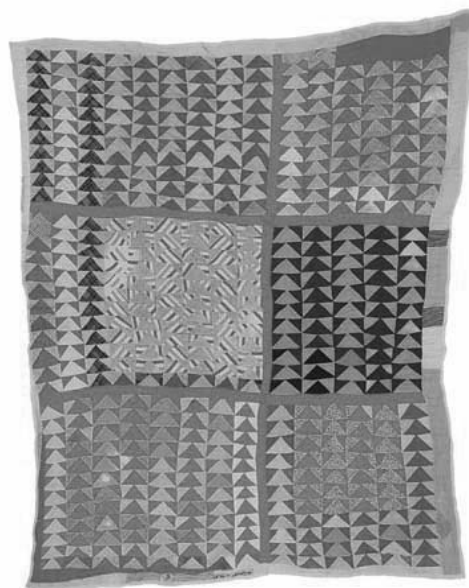
makers, members of the marketplace.”¹⁰ (Callahan 318) The Freedom Quilting Bee is a community development model, which showcases the appeal of outsider art and how the streamlining of this endeavor can lead to both the changing of a dynamic artistic style and the economic empowerment of a community.¹¹

10



Florine Smith, *Four-block Strips*, Circa 1975.

11



Annie E. Pettway, *“Flying Geese” Variation*, Circa 1935.

CHAPTER II

Creative Work

Introduction

In the following chapter, I will present my artwork, as well as the community projects I have done during the past three years. I have used the skills learned in my social work classes to create nurturing spaces (breathing spaces) in which we can come together to empower ourselves, examine the socio-economic issues that affect our lives, and build communities that recognize each individual's unique creative gifts, whether schooled or unschooled. During this time, I have grappled with the connections between my studio practice and the work I engage in with others.

The Tent

“To look up at the sun
Through fields of fiber hues.”

-2004

During my cohort's trip to China during May, 2004, I was drawn to the distinct forms of community building at work in the culture. Walking through Beijing's various parks was my favorite weekend activity. Groups of people could be found practicing fan dancing, fencing, speed walking, practicing Tai Chi, fishing, singing, playing instruments, painting, and exercising

on what I named, *adult playgrounds*.¹ These were brightly colored exercise equipment for the middle aged and elderly, and took the form of playground equipment for small children.

Communities would congregate on and around them so that they served social purposes as well as physical functions.

I connected strongly with the playgrounds because of my own dissatisfaction with the absence of toys for adults that hold the same qualities that simple children's toys have. I longed to make an environment where adults could play.

This desire led me to create a tent and its surrounding environment. My aim was to create a peaceful haven where a person could rest or tumble on the soft ground and look at the colored fabric as light shone through it. The piece was shown in an exhibition which I curated in Warren Robbins Gallery entitled, *Panoptic Influence*. *The Tent* was in front of a wall of windows and was highlighted by a red maple whose leaves were turning red.

150 yards of muslin were dyed using shibori techniques. Shibori is the Japanese tradition that is commonly known as tie dying. The preparation of the fabric was a long, physical, and tedious one, but soothing and relaxing. I mixed the colored dyes in big buckets of water, always a red shade, a blue shade, and a yellow shade. I dipped hot, wet clumps of fabric into dye, let it sit, stirred it, moved pieces from one bucket to another for greater complexity of color, and then rinsed the fabric.



"Adult Playgrounds" AP Photo Archive

The construction aspect of this project was not as spontaneous as the dying, but was equally meditative. Cutting, pinning, and sewing are tasks requiring patience (as do many creative activities.) I listen to books on tape while I sew. The words carry me through the actions.

At this time I was having a hard time reconciling being both a studio artist and a community artist. It was clear that the two vocations were very important to me. During the fall semester, I was immersed in community art and the philosophies I needed to understand in order to participate in this endeavor. At this point there was a huge disconnect (or so I thought) between my personal work and the community work. I was overjoyed when a friend and classmate, Sarah Buckius, helped me realize that *the Tent* had become a spot for play and exploration for two children who played in the tent during the opening. The social work theories about creating spaces for people to grow and learn in were starting to materialize in my visual work.²

The Tent continues to have a life outside the gallery. For a while *the Tent* sat in my living room. Last spring at a party *the Tent* was a very popular space for sitting, talking, and eating the sushi and egg rolls I had made for the occasion.

Now my bed is in the tent so I get to wake up to the pretty colors every morning. It is my personal sanctuary in the stressful world. *The Tent* can serve as a public place for dialogue, a personal place for reflection, or a combination of the two.



Tent, 2004

I have brought the obsession of hiding and playing in small spaces from my childhood. I often dream of winding stairways, hidden passageways, and tunneling burrows. Imagining the underground worlds of other animals, has always been a part of my visual vocabulary. In China I found the rock gardens adorning many parks to be the most exciting environments I have found that are socially acceptable to use as an adult. Beijing's adult playgrounds and rock gardens were important references for the success of my concept of *the Tent* as a secret, solitary space. Later these ideas would come into play with activities I did with children such designing a worm's underground home, or inventing camouflage animals.

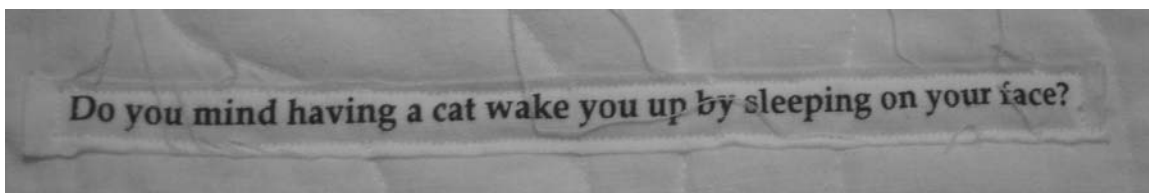
The thought of attracting people to reflective spaces where people can engage in dialogue led to my interest in creating a bedroom environment in Slusser Gallery.

**Pillow Talk,
A Relationship Screening Center**

Have you ever wished you'd asked your partner about that irritating or hurtful trait BEFORE you fell in love with them? ³

-2005

3



Pillow Talk (detail), 2005

In the Winter Semester of 2005 we exhibited our 2nd Year Show, *Common Descent*. I made a quilt on which was sewn an application to be my boyfriend. I called the piece, *Pillow Talk*. Four pristine white sections contained questions as silly as, “How do you care for your cast iron pan?” and “Would you mind if I got fat?” and as serious as “Do you do hard drugs?” and “Have you ever had sex with someone when she said she didn’t want to?” People were encouraged to snuggle in bed and discuss the questions written on the quilt. The installation included elements of humor and the ridiculous.

The desire to make this quilt came from a long time wish to create an application for potential relationship opportunities. During the years that I have actively dated and had relationships, I have often found that a budding relationship is always perfect and then you learn, bit by bit, that the person you are dating is a freakish jerk until you can’t stand to look at them. If there were a simple application that would weed out the incompatible partners, years spent in bad relationships could be saved. Promoting healthy communication in budding relationships was the goal of the installation, and it was timely, coming out close to Valentine’s Day.⁴



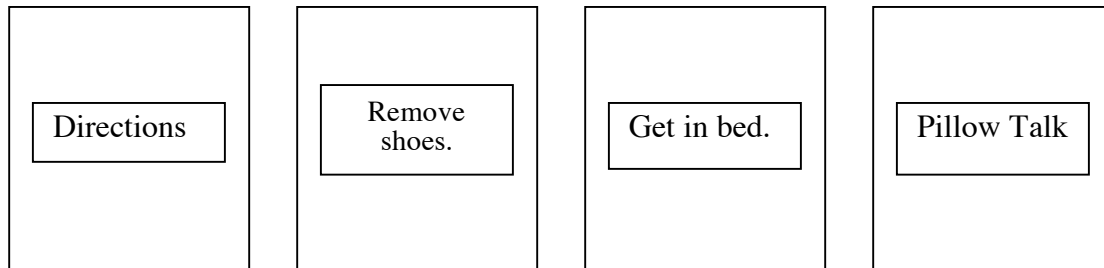
Pillow Talk, 2005

I had been informally working on a list of questions for years. The designing process took place one morning when I was experimenting with ideas in my sewing space at home. I made a small, baby quilt to create the large “page” of an application.

The visual structure, and the concept evolved until I had a full sized quilt formed of four machine quilted “pages.” The white quilt was edged with a thin border of patterned green fabric alternated with a blue version of the same pattern.

This list was printed out in its various fonts and each question was cut apart. The questions were then scattered on the quilt “pages” in relation to surrounding questions.

The quilt was shown on a bed in the largest room of the gallery. A shelf, wrapped in white cloth, was above. On the shelf were picture frames containing directions for how to use the bed.



An important element of the concept was to upset the conventional use of the gallery which is normally used to show works of art. As in Tracy Emin’s, *My Bed* (1998),⁵ shown in the Tate, I was aware of bringing an unconventional object into the gallery. Asking people to



Tracy Emin, *My Bed*, 1998

physically and intellectually interact with the object was especially challenging, because in galleries and museums, we are traditionally not allowed to touch the art.

My aim was to question not only the use of the gallery as a “public space.” I wanted to question the privacy of the bedroom. I have engaged in conversations with friends who know very little about their lovers. I myself have been guilty of this in the past. I hoped to voice my opinion that if I am in bed with someone, I hope that they will ask me about myself, as I will be asking them questions, both comfortable and uncomfortable ones.

I relate to the concept of Osorio’s *La Cama*,⁶ which pays homage to his childhood nanny, and his wife, choreographer, MeriAn Soto. Covered in memories, this bed is similar to my own bed installations that are inspired by childhood memories and connect the past inevitably to the present. (Indych, 72) The past is always an element of our present in that our memories evolve with time. Therefore the bed, which once was simply a child’s sleeping place, and a mysterious location where adults spent time, becomes a sexual spot and escape from our busy lives as we grow older. This duality is often present in my mind during the formation of my beds and quilts.

Installation was tricky as I had a very open area in the main part of Slusser Gallery. I wanted people to feel welcome to lie down and chat but most people don’t feel very comfortable lounging in front of a bunch of people in a gallery, but I didn’t want to make it too private, because the concept was about being open with each other in public. With lighting and a shelf, I managed to make the arrangement feel open but cozy at the same time.



Pepon Osorio, *La Cama*, 1987.

I succeeded in making the bed approachable to people in the show. People seemed to enjoy getting in and using it, and it was definitely an absurd sight in a gallery. Friends, strangers, former lovers, mothers, children, and colleagues used the bed. Most of them engaged with the questions while they reclined.⁷

Many people thought the project was very funny, but some seemed upset about it. My idea had been to promote early conversation and honesty in relationships, but some people didn't like the formal nature of the quilt. The idea that you would ask these questions upfront, was a big let down for them. They wanted to discover things naturally about their lovers. Furthermore, an animated debate broke out about whether the quilt would "work" or not. Could this prototype work in a real-life situation? Since the aim of the bed was to get people talking, the debate proved that I had reached my goal.

I don't make quilts to keep people warm, but to question the use of the quilt, the bed, and the home. This quilt put these ideas to work. I was thrilled that I had made a quilt whose purpose necessitated that it be a quilt. This was a turning point in my fibers work, and would later transfer onto my thesis work. I felt I had made a safe and nurturing space in which people could get to know each other. Its purpose is the same as my community projects: Creating spaces for people to share in creative experiences.



Pillow Talk, 2005

The Quilting Myself Workshops

The Quilting Myself Workshops were organized and facilitated by MSW student, Rachel Hood, and myself as a class project for the Women and Community Organizing Class in the School of Social Work. As an art student, I wanted to do a creative project and Hood and I soon realized that we both love to sew. We decided to make a quilt with adolescent girls at Home Away From Home and the Girls Group at Unity Center. It seemed to combine both of our strengths and the history of quilting was a fruitful place to start creating our theory of empowerment through quilting. We facilitated two 3-hour art workshops at Home Away From Home, and two 3-hour art workshops at Unity Center during the month of March, 2005 with girls, ages 13 to 16.

In her seminal book, Reviving Ophelia, Mary Pipher speaks of the hardships and emotional issues of adolescent girls. Girls are often fractured into pieces of what they think others want them to be. They are obsessed by the fear of rejection. Some of the major problems experienced by girls are problems with parents, divorce of parents, depression, body image issues such as anorexia and bulimia, addictions, and sexual violence. (301)

We drew heavily upon her theories in order to understand the population we would be working with, and hoped to address some of these issues indirectly through our conversations with them and through their self-expression on their quilt squares.

Our mission was to facilitate a sewing project with adolescent girls about the subject of *identity*. We dealt with women's issues through the context of making a quilt. Girls were to learn various methods of making images on fabric as well as how quilts have played various roles in women's lives such as communication, memorials, and self-portraits, as well as how quilting bees have brought women together in friendship and unification. In the present chapter, I will discuss the method by which we brought this activity to the girls as well as our reflections on the project.

Setting

Unity Center serves people of all ages who are influenced by a variety of social and economic issues. The center leads people to better lives through education, skill building, and friendship. We visited the Girls Group, a club of about 16 girls who meet weekly and engage in various activities.

Home Away From Home serves homeless youth and their families, assisting them with housing, drug and alcohol treatment, and any other specific needs they may have. They have a shelter, a drop in center, and a crisis hotline.

Methods

With help from Dominique of Home Away from Home, and Anna, Juniper, and Skye who facilitate the Girls Group at Unity Center, we planned 2 two-day workshops with the groups. Our community contacts enthusiastically gave us their full support, and were present during the workshops to troubleshoot and participate. We planned activities and thought in depth about how we wanted to introduce the topic of quilting.

The workshop at Unity Center brought about 16 girls who each made the square of a quilt that represented their identity in some way. It was a very hectic 4 hours and there wasn't much time to sit down and get to know the girls. But everyone seemed to enjoy themselves and the girls seemed to grasp what it meant to describe their identities. Each square was different. The girls described themselves through patterns, drawings, or connecting with images or colors already existing on pieces of fabric.

We introduced ourselves, and Hood asked the girls if they could tell us what "identity" was; they also defined "self-portrait" together. They had wonderful things to say about these topics and their answers got better the next week. I showed them pictures of *The Quilting Bee at*

Arles quilt by Faith Ringgold¹ to talk about women quilting together, and talked about Underground Railroad Quilts as described in *Sister Clara and the Freedom Quilt* to talk about encoding messages. We embellished this to talk about encoding our feelings and how we might tell who we were through symbols by showing some examples that I had made earlier.

Girls received a square of fabric on which they made a self-portrait. For our purposes a self-portrait was defined as any images or marks which describe how the girl feels about herself, how she sees herself in the world, and what visions she has of herself in the future or past. The context of the quilt was a good one in which to discuss the girls' views of women's roles in the world, both currently and historically, and to discuss the girls' individual lives. As women have discussed their lives at quilting bees in the past, we spoke over our stitching and ironing about issues that are important to these girls.

The girls worked hard on their quilts and even though their cliques were very defined before we started, the groups seemed to mingle as the activity progressed. We were very impressed with the creativity in their final projects, and how varied each square was. These self-



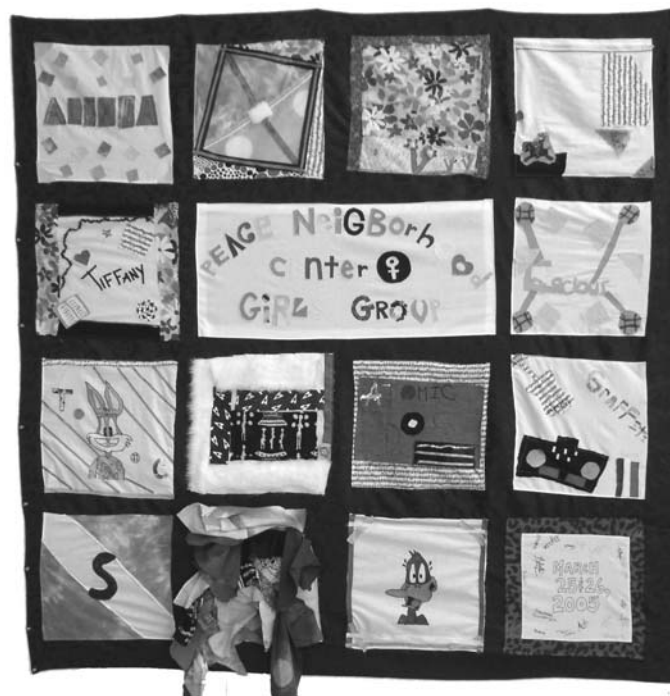
Faith Ringgold, *The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles*, 1991.

portraits were sewn together to create a quilt of our small community that was hung in Harmony Community Center in a small hanging ceremony.²

Home Away From Home's workshop brought only 2 girls, but was also a rich experience. At this workshop, we each sat down and worked on our own square with the girls. We all chatted the whole time so we got to know the girls well. One of the participants told us that her square represented "girls being forced to grow up too fast." We were impressed with this response and how she had expressed her feelings through pattern. Since the ideal response isn't always possible when we have spent so much time planning and don't have much time to relay the message to the girls in the actual situation, this was a particularly gratifying moment.

Reflection

I was most nervous about addressing the group of teenaged girls because I hadn't ever worked with this demographic before. My own adolescence was so uncomfortable that I have been scared to revisit that time through working with people of that age group. Hood and I have a



Girls' Group, Identity Quilt, 2005

very honest and comfortable rapport with each other and this made it easy to discuss our worries and plan how to best deal with them. For instance, Hood wanted to talk to them while sitting down to maintain a level playing field. This was a good insight on her part and helped the girls see us less as authority figures and more as friends, an appropriate dynamic for these short workshops.

I believe that making art with people who don't think of themselves as artists can be a learning experience for all, but most importantly, it often results in empowerment and community building through creativity and collaboration. This type of expression is different than talking about specific issues with words. Art has always been a way for me to express my feelings and experiences in abstract ways. Sometimes talking isn't enough. I find that expressing my feelings through images often helps me understand myself better. I wanted to bring this experience to the girls.

I wanted the girls at Unity Center and Home Away From Home to feel as though they had control over their lives. I wanted them to feel that they can change the world through self-expression. If they feel they are important enough to have an impact on the world, then they may have the strength to fight for their own lives.

Communication is key in my work with communities. Every time I enter a room full of strangers who may have different backgrounds than myself, I am always nervous. I fear that they will not understand where I'm coming from. I worry that they will wonder why I'm there. Then I open my mouth, and the challenge of communication begins.

I am a person who needs to see a smile before I know that I have been accepted. The more blank faces I see, the more I try to make people laugh. I try to look outside myself to find the universal things that all people care about. One of the main ways I do this is through art.

At Home Away From Home, especially, I recognized that I love to connect over art. While making our quilt squares, silences weren't uncomfortable, but filled with thoughtful

designing and self-reflecting. The more time we spent together, the easier conversation became. I realized how much I had in common with the girls though our life situations were different.

Hood and I maintained excellent communication about goals and methods. We were very excited to work together, because we knew we would learn different skills from each other. We were very enthusiastic about the project because it related to our own interests and skills.

It is hard to tell if you have made a difference when you are with a group for a short period of time. Some ways which told me that our activity had an effect were the engagement of the girls with their work, the fact that they said they thought about it during the time between the sessions, and that the group facilitators praised our work, and later said the girls seemed to have a good grasp on identity as they started a new creative project.

I bring art to others as an empowering experience because I use it in the same way for myself. I find that the creative process helps me process my own life. It helps me deal with my emotions and decide how to make them transformative instead of destructive. In the following section on self-portraits I will describe the way in which I use to empower myself through showing my thoughts to the world through encoded images.

Self-Portraits

I explored the idea of morphing various parts of my body into visual equivalents of how I physically or emotionally felt about that portion of my anatomy during my struggles with depression. Sometimes the state of mind can be described in visual ways through the actual morphing of body parts into elements from animals, symbols, or other forms. The transformation that took place during a severe depressive episode rendered my body numb and drove me to

obsessively imagine my physical self in irrational ways. Exploring this irrationality from a few months later allowed me to critically examine the illogical thinking in a artistic way.

Perception and memory are made of sensory information. We don't experience the world as only a visual place. Our memories are stored as more than visual images. How can I paint a smell, my cold feet, or the call of a bird? How may I draw an obsession, an impulse or a fantasy? These are the things I think about when I attempt to represent memories of my feelings.

Frieda Kahlo's paintings describe her emotions and physicality in symbolic ways. In *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940)³, she shows us her chopped hair lying on the floor around her chair, a strong feminine figure with masculine qualities. Painted at the time of Diego Rivera's infidelity, she seems to be playing out her emotions in a symbolic and physical way.

My drawings were slightly larger than life size and were drawn and painted on heavy bond paper with pencil, gouache, acrylic, charcoal, watercolor pencil, and pastel.

The first self-portrait started as an outline of myself when I was 16. The outline was nude, and came directly from my head. I was interested in what my mind thought I had looked like, rather than what I actually looked like. The body had one hand whose fingers dripped to the



Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940

floor, and one amputated forearm. I put the paper on a large table and surrounded the outline of my body with dark reddish-purple gouache until the pale body appeared to sink into the table. The body had become too pale to touch, so I hung the drawing on the wall and drew a face with pastels, then poured gouache on it to smudge it out. Finally, I drew lines with pastels passing in and around the figure. These lines served to integrate her into the reddish-purple field.

By the end, the body was vacant. I had two left feet and one is shown as a footprint. My hands were useless, one because it was absent, one because it was drooping and grotesque.⁴

The second self-portrait took the form of a mermaid. I've always been scared of open water and the idea of becoming brave enough to swim into it and live there symbolizes a risk that ends in a lifestyle. There was also the feeling of helplessness evident in the drawing from the blank stare on the vacant and pale face, as well as the carefully painted, subtly mangled hand. Repetitive mark making has been present in much of my work and occurs here in the fins. In this self-portrait of me as a mermaid, my face is vacant and thinly drawn. My shirt disappears into the background and the hand is gnarled so that it is unusable.



Self-Portrait, 2004

The mermaid is a fairytale character. They are beautiful, and they experience happy endings, but I never feel like a mermaid. I do, however, feel the separation from my friends and family that not being able to walk on land would give me. I get squeamish in open water so the idea of having to stay out there is scary. You can't control it, just as you can't control the ocean. This is no happy mermaid. In summary, *Self-portrait as a Mermaid* integrated feelings of bravery and strength juxtaposed with numbness, isolation, and futility.⁵

Self-Portrait as a Wolf utilized fish tails for arms. They were attached at the elbow and flapped in the air. The feet extended below the page, and the body was cut into with a hieroglyphic like symbol, starting at the pubic area. The human head was replaced with a wolf's head whose eyes dripped tears down the page. Here is my naked body. It is hollowed out in the places of violation.-The fin hands are simply beautiful useless objects. A costume I have no

5



Self-Portrait as Mermaid, 2005

reason to wear. The wolf head is the fierce, uncontainable me, insisting that I still have power.

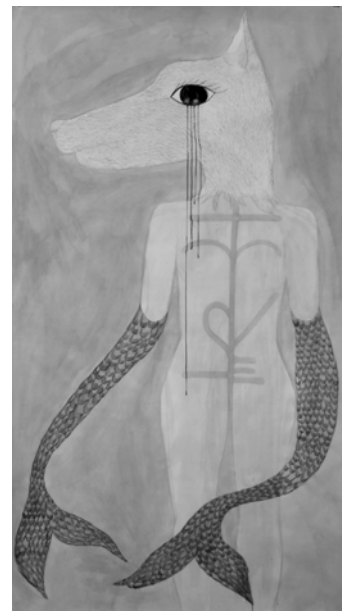
The human eye with the dripping tears is a visual truth of how I feel sometimes.⁶

The drawings were shown in the “Common Descent” show, surrounding the bed, entitled Pillow Talk. Although I considered them experimental in nature, perhaps this rawness is what provoked a positive response from viewers.

These pieces related to the larger context in a way I didn’t expect. I was beginning to believe that I could bring the notion to non-artists that their ideas could be formed into symbols rather than perfect pictures from their heads. Many non-artists I have met feel they can’t make art because they can’t draw things realistically. This changing of literal ideas into metaphor, abstraction, or symbol is a key practice that stands between non-artists and artists. The use of symbols played strongly into my work in the Identity Quilt Project, the Stimson Street Mural Project, and my interest in Underground Railroad Quilts.

In the next project I created my own iconographic symbol.

6



Self-Portrait as Wolf, 2005

Doxies, Dames, and Daughters

“All the millions of Me’s.
They crowd me.
They comfort me.
When pressed for years, sand becomes stone.
We become one.”

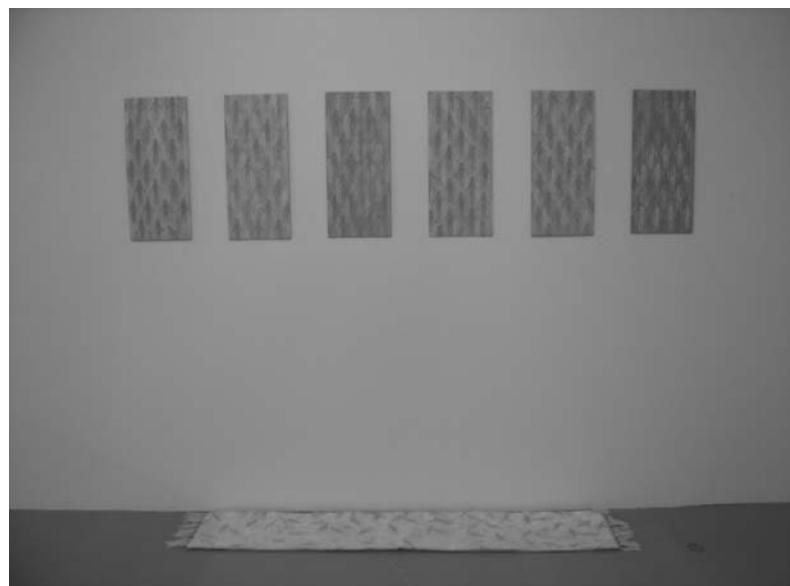
-2003

A second series of self-portraits expanded the former series into a more universal realm. For years I have experimented with different ways to put paint on a surface. I have explored the usefulness of sponges, q-tips, wadded-up paper towels, whiteout pens, etc. I have also long used layers and patterns in my work as a way to build surfaces and retreat into an obsessive occupation. I was attracted to the silhouette of the first self-portrait who had sunk back into the deep space of the drawing. I made a stamp of this silhouette with carving tools, and experimented with different colors, mediums, substrates, and densities. The results included a wide variety of results stemming from one simple image.

One series included 6 yellow paintings on wood, each a slightly different hue. *Floating Women* included layers of orange and yellow “Francies” undulating in and out of space. These were hung together in a row while below them was a long thin yellow rug with scattered women upon it entitled *Fallen Women*. The installation described the idea of a “fallen” woman who once

was pure, but becomes tainted by illicit behavior. All the pure ones are seen to float above⁷, while the fallen are picked out of the line-up and thrown to the floor.⁸

Another series explored the integration of the stamp onto black and white photographs of myself. The photographs had been taken by me four years before. I held the camera at arms length and shot the photographs quickly. Surprisingly, many seem to have caught me unawares. Some are of ridiculous funny and blurry faces, some have caught me looking at the sky, some have a symmetrical composition, while others have a face off to the side. One or two very dark purple stamps were applied to each 4”X6”print, then were arranged to create triptychs and

7
Floating Women, 20058
Floating Women and Fallen Women, 2005

diptychs in plain, silver frames. They represented a girl coming of age, flashing before her older self. They were unsettling but humorous because of the expressions on my face.⁹

I often rely on patterns and personal symbology to express myself while keeping the truth from the viewer. This practice is one that I have been attracted to in other media that use symbols to express stories, instructions, or interactions such as Underground Railroad quilts. I brought this interest in encoded symbols to the Identity Quilt Project, and it will also be apparent in the community projects profiled later. Empowerment does not have to reveal the whole truth of our lives. (Who, in fact, could ever understand an entire, complex other person?) Empowering art can also take the form of a secret code, which some may understand, but some may fix their own meaning to.

I had a show at Sweetwaters' Café entitled, *Dames, Doxies, and Daughters*. This venue drew a wider audience than a typical gallery show would have. Though not nearly as prestigious, a show in a café is noticed and enjoyed by those who aren't paying special attention to the art, but rather are living with it as the background to their study, meetings, or conversation with friends. As I mentioned before, when discussing the theories of John Dewey, art can be seen as an everyday part of our experience, something to live with, and something to enjoy as a part of everyone's life. (35) As I will illustrate in the following section about the Stimson Street Mural Project, I have attempted to not only create spaces in which to make art, but spaces in which



Ignoring Myself, Watching Myself, and Screaming at Myself, 2005

every person can enjoy these pieces; public art. The *Dames, Doxies, and Daughters* show was an opportunity for me to experiment with how people responded to the work as it seeped into their subconscious during a coffee break. My work has usually been seen before in galleries where people come for the sole purpose of looking intently at a piece, then moving on to the next.

I was very pleased to receive so many positive comments on the exhibition from a wide variety of people. It was clear that more people had attended the show during its month in the café than had ever attended another show of mine. A number of people remarked on how they enjoyed being with the work as it existed in the café. They could look up and admire it, and take it in slowly and peripherally.

The Stimson Street Mural Project



I conceived of the Stimson Street Mural Project as an equal partnership between U of M art students and Haven Housing tenants. Haven Housing is a non-profit organization that helps the very low-income people of Barenclaw County obtain and maintain housing. Haven Housing owns 173 housing units and rents them out for reduced prices to people who would have no home

otherwise. The organization is landlord for its tenants, many of who are suffering from mental illnesses including recovery from drug addiction. Haven Housing solves the homeless problem by not only putting a roof over someone's head, but also by giving them the means and resources they deserve.

This population is in need of empowerment. Homelessness has been shown to separate people from the supportive systems that could better their lives. (la Gory, Ritchey and Fitzpatrick 201) People who have previously been homeless need to feel they have something to contribute to the world. The creation of a mural could help develop new skills, raise self-esteem, and make them feel that they aren't just taking services, but *giving* back to the community as well. (Delgado and Barton 346-356) In the following section I will describe the mural project and outline key elements that I felt were unique to our situation.¹⁰

Methods

The project consisted of a series of workshops based on community building, collaborative painting and drawing, and the design of a mural painted on the back of Bowling Bonanza on South Engineering Blvd. near the graduate studios and near Stimson Street Housing (one of Haven Homes' properties.) As the facilitator of these workshops, a primary objective was to maintain a level playing field where we could all learn from one another. I did this by

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Artists at Work

emphasizing the group efforts made through collaboration, and choosing introductory activities that emphasized the strengths of all, regardless of experience or ability.

We received funding from the building owner for supplies and food. The Beardsley Service Learning Center gave me a small stipend and money for publicity and personal art supplies for the participants. We received a grant from Arts Connecting People to pay the tenants an hourly wage.

Empowerment Techniques

I wanted to design a form of guidance that would help people find their own voice. I knew I needed to help inspire people, but I did not want to do this by standing on stage and talking at them. The empowerment techniques used in the project included adequate compensation for time spent, ensuring all participants felt their individual strengths were equally valid, creating a level of honesty that showed respect for others abilities, and creating an open atmosphere of dialogue in which we could discuss art, goals for the project, and life issues.¹¹

A key element of this project was to empower the tenants by creating a positive workplace environment where everyone received compensation. All students and tenants went through the same application and interview process. Tenants were paid a stipend while art students received one credit hour for participation in the project.



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Inspiration strikes

Creating a level playing field is essential to creating an empowering experience. The students were never treated as though they were at a higher level than the tenants. The students said they were comfortable with this and were always respectful and supportive of the tenants, who in turn were gracious and caring of the students.

Equality within a group does not mean we are all the same, rather it means that we are all respected and valued for our differences. We appreciated each other for what we had to offer. One boy was praised for his creative ideas of how to bring different characters together while a woman was skilled at finding people to carry out her ideas.

It was more challenging to keep myself on the same footing with the group, primarily I was organizing and facilitating the project. There were various ways that I learned to show appreciation for each individual's contributions and give them a sense of ownership over the project.

Honesty was one of the most important elements of the mural project. I felt that it was essential that people hear not only the good things, but the things they still have to work on. When critiquing someone's work, I would be careful to make sure to make my observations and motives clear. If I sensed the slightest bit of discomfort, I would say clearly and honestly that I was telling them my opinions out of a desire that they work to their potential, and that they realize what they are achieving visually.¹²

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Painting

When someone expresses their disappointment with their work, I have a catalogue of replies that I have developed in response to their displeasure. I also trust my intuition to find the words that an individual needs to hear in order to both challenge themselves and feel proud of their work. Most people can tell when I'm not being honest, and when I get tired, and resort to, "that looks great!" remarks, people usually call me on it. Non-artists are very astute when it comes to catching me not paying attention, or being dishonest. I feel that patronizing remarks can lead to them feeling that I disrespect them, and so when I receive a comment such as, "You don't even mean that," I try to bolster my honesty and express the exact things that I enjoy about their work, as well as the things that could be improved.

Positionality

One way of keeping myself out of a high-powered, expert position is to critique my own work and voice the mistakes I make instead of hiding them. If I take it upon myself to support others, I think it is hypocritical to not allow others to support me. I act skeptical about what I am drawing and ask other's opinions, not just to humor them, but because I genuinely want their advice. I don't want to hide my insecure thoughts from them, because I see that as an act that tips the balance of trust and honesty.¹³



Proud Muralist with Her Section of the Mural

I have a very bad memory and believe that this helped the dynamics. I gave myself a nearly impossible task in co-organizing and facilitating the Mural Project because I had never taken on anything of this scope before. There were countless things to remember every day, and I soon realized that if I didn't remember them all, someone else would. The notion that the success of the project revolved around me is another form of taking on power that could be better used by the participants to empower themselves. Acknowledging my own imperfections allowed others to take charge in various situations. For a few weeks, the participants assumed that I had everything under control. When they realized that I was a normal person with flaws, they took the initiative to help when I needed it. I never thought my personal shortcomings would be an asset, but in this situation, I believe they were.

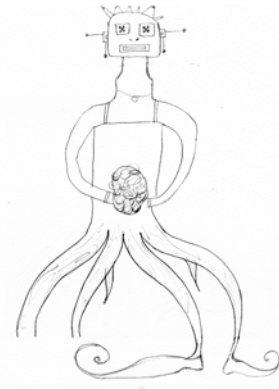
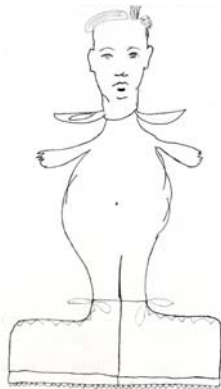
Methods

We began with a series of workshops aimed at creating an atmosphere of collaboration and creativity, as well as designing the mural and making a body of work to be shown in the Warren Robbins Gallery on North Campus. We started with the basic principals of color theory. Each participant was given a large sheet of paper to use as a palette and a dollop of titanium white, ultramarine blue, phthalo blue, cadmium red, crimson, cadmium yellow deep, cadmium yellow light, burnt umber, and raw umber acrylic paint. I preformed a short demonstration of how to mix paint, and made green, orange, and purple with the colors. They worked together making purple, green, and orange on their own paper palette. When people had figured that out, they were given a paint chip from a paint store and tried to mix the color on the chip. I walked around, suggesting different colors that I saw in the chip, and asking them if they saw more. It was surprising how quickly they began to see the subtleties of the colors. At the end of the activity, they mashed their paint together in whatever way they wanted and we set the paintings out to dry. It was a crash course in color theory, and achieved my goals of making them aware of the

qualities of paint and how different colors could be formed. They didn't need to know the exact chemistry of mixing colors. My aim was that they learn to look deeper than before.

A popular activity that became a large part of our gallery show was making collaborative drawings. The drawings of people, animals, or characters were made by playing the Dada game, *Exquisite Corpse*.¹⁴ In this game, one person drew the head of a creature, folded over the paper so the head couldn't be seen, and handed it to the next player, who drew the body. Only after the paper had been passed around the circle, collecting legs and feet, did someone open it to reveal a collaborative creature. This activity gave everyone a chance to anonymously contribute their drawings to a whole, making the importance of collaboration clear to us all.

The drawings of scenes and other scenarios began with someone quickly drawing random lines on paper. The paper was passed to the next person who could make anything he/she wanted out of the random lines. After a few minutes of drawing, the paper was passed to the next person who continued the picture. This process continued until the group decided the picture was complete.



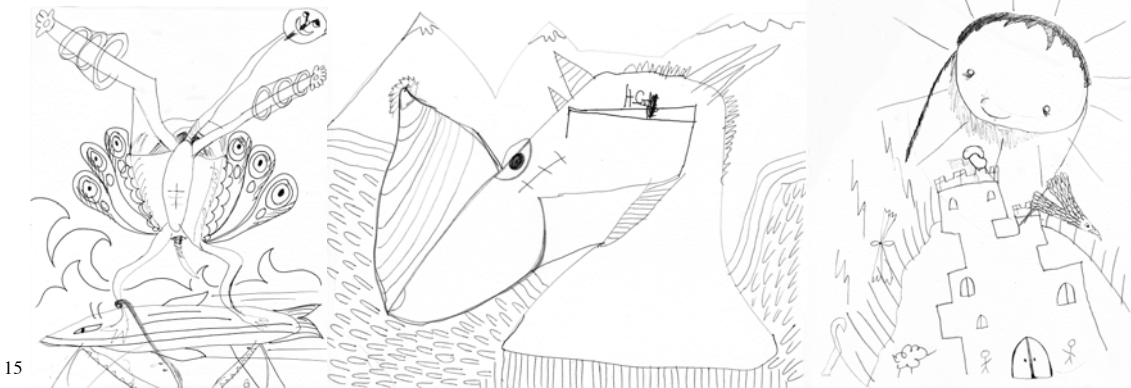
Exquisite Corpse Drawings

Everyone loved these games. They were something to do at the end of the day, or when it was too hot outside to paint. Laughter would erupt at the end of every round and it was abundantly clear that we were much more creative together than we were apart.¹⁵

For the final mural design, we expanded on a sketch that a participant had done of the top of someone's head peeking out over the edge of the paper, with a thought bubble in the middle of the page. We decided that the final design would have each of our own heads poking out from the edges of the mural and all our thought bubbles would be floating and overlapping in the middle. Everyone had their own head and bubble to display their thoughts and dreams.

As the date to start painting arrived, we grew more and more excited, but the night before the painting was to begin, I received word that the insurance had not gone through to protect the owner of the building if any of us got hurt while painting. We would not be able to paint the next day and were unsure when the paper work would go through. It was out of my hands. It was also out of Haven Homes' hands. All we could do was wait.

These set backs are to be expected in a project of this kind, but that doesn't make it less stressful or disappointing. I had very little time to regain my composure and decide how to deal with the situation in a way that did not communicate defeat. Even though I was worried the plug would be pulled on the entire project, I needed to keep these worries to myself and relay the problem in the best possible light.



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Collaborative drawings

Ever cheerful on the outside and very nervous on the inside, I spent a long week trying to reassure everyone that we would have enough time to paint the mural. It was the hardest part of the entire process, but finally, the insurance came through and we were able to start. The mural painting was the climax of the experience. I have never been happier than perched on a ladder with a paintbrush in my hand. I focused on painting the background so that the rest of the group could enjoy their own thought bubbles.

I was very ready to give advice if asked, or tell people what I thought about their painting, but for people who are just beginning to explore their creativity, it is important to tell people the things that will inspire them to go on. I can't make someone be something they are not. I want them to achieve whatever will make them feel good about the process. Their pride will come from the experience. My pride will come from how they feel about the experience.

For a long time I had heard other artists say that hearts, stars, and other symbols were the things to avoid in community work. Many would question me as to how I would ensure that the mural wasn't a wall of piece signs and rainbows. My rebellious nature was whispering to me, "What's so bad about pizzas and suns?"

I decided to tackle the subject in my own thoughts and in the minds of the muralists. I have often heard it suggested to outlaw stars and suns all together. But I knew there must be a better way, so I began to inspect the situation.

I gathered a number of images by famous artists, such as Andy Warhol, who used symbols to express themselves and showed them to the group. I asked them what they thought about them, what the artist was trying to say, and if they thought he/she succeeded. It was great to hear their responses and during the conversation, I finally figured out what I thought about the subject. As we finished the discussion, I expressed my thought that we use symbols to communicate our opinions, hopes, dreams, and emotions. It is our choice which symbols best communicate to the viewer and so we should be aware of what each symbol means and if it is right for what we want to express. It was very important for these budding artists to feel they

were communicating clearly to their audience. If a heart described their feelings, then I agreed they should use it.

Melvin Delgado adds to my thoughts about symbols: “The medium takes on a social-cultural-political perspective represented through use of symbols that are particular to a given culture or community” (68)

We relied on many symbols such as suns, hearts, and money symbols (\$), but I also encouraged them to try new things. It was important for them to maintain a safety net, while experimenting.

As the completion deadline approached, it was clear that there were many empty spaces on the mural. Participants were concentrating so hard on their individual thought bubbles that they had not considered all the empty space around them. Although the participants didn't seem bothered by it, I knew that the mural would be better received if there weren't all the empty, forgotten spaces. I tried to turn people's attention to the spaces, but they were not easily distracted from their own little spaces. The art students and I started quickly sketching the collaborative drawings we had made earlier on, onto the wall. It was a risky move in that the schooled artists were taking charge of the situation. I continue to feel conflicted about this choice. I think it was the right thing to do so that the mural would be aesthetically interesting, but I'm not sure it was best for the tenants in terms of their levels of empowerment.

While transferring these sketches, I continually pointed out the aspects that others had designed, as did all of the participants. It was a shared sense of ownership over these images becoming part of the mural. As the art students and I quickly painted in elements to fill the space, we took requests from the tenants on what to paint. This was very fun, although they started to give me things to do that were very hard! Painting bacon was especially challenging, but I was pleased with the results.

The two culminating events were a gallery show in the Warren Robbins Gallery¹⁶ in the Art & Architecture Building and a celebratory unveiling with accompanying barbeque. Both events were designed to honor the participants while engaging the public in the process and educating people about community art and its validity, not only as interesting art objects, but as a challenging, exhilarating, and diversifying process. The intent behind the showing of this project was to help others understand the entire process. This was a multi-tiered process directed towards Avalon tenants and staff, Art & Design faculty and students, and the general community.

The gallery show was hung by myself, and I regret not involving the participants more in the process. By the time it was time to hang, I was very exhausted from the whole process that had taken 60 hours/week for the last 2 months. I needed a bit of time alone to reflect on the work, and do things my own way. The opening was fun and interesting. It was very hard to get the tenants there as they were nervous to go to a “fancy” art opening with professors and people they didn’t know. I assured them that it would be very a comfortable environment, but the only ones who came were the ones that I drove there. Once they were there, they all had a great time. The response from art school folks was very positive and warm.

The unveiling was a fantastic celebration of process and friendship. It was a more open environment than the gallery show. It was staged outside near the mural, and people brought



The Mural Artists at their Opening

family, friends, etc. It was a very wonderful event in which we presented certificates to the participants, as well as gifts to all our helpers at Haven Housing.¹⁷

Reflections

By bringing an open-ended creative experience to people, I find that I quench the same need to be creative that I experience in my studio. In a community project, I gain joy from others. I often feel that I am learning so much more from them than they are from me, but I am reminded again and again through participants' enthusiasm, and growth, that this is a mutual experience. I feel lucky that I have learned the skills and have found support for my work as a community artist. This summer, I will not only have initiated, but will be a participant in the process of people finding creativity in themselves. By being there, from beginning to end, I will have made huge strides towards making this my life's work.



Spectators at the Unveiling of the Mural

Arts Integration in Detroit Union Elementary School

Arts Integration is a way of bringing the arts back into the classroom by using visual means to reinforce academic subjects. From September 2005 to February 2006, I created, facilitated, and documented Arts Integration activities for students in grades K-3. I was an outgrowth of Detroit Connections, whose mission is to partner University of Michigan students with fourth graders at Forest Elementary School to create public art.

Forest Elementary School has a large African American and Chaldean population, and a very small Caucasian population. The school is in a very economically depressed area of Detroit and there are as many abandoned houses as there are inhabited ones. Despite this poverty, the elementary school is a warm, inviting place with caring, tireless teachers who have welcomed the Detroit Connections class into the school for the past 5 years. The teachers welcomed me into their classrooms with open arms and were always open with feedback and advice that was greatly appreciated.¹

I was an Americorps worker who came to Forest Elementary on Monday and Wednesday each week to work with 5 classes each day (about 220 students/week in 9 classrooms). My

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Child's Drawing

funding came from Americorps, which was given the money to pay me by the University of Michigan School of Art & Design. Thankfully, Forest Elementary School did not have to fund me as they didn't have this money to spend. My graduate student fund for supplies was used to buy all the materials. I kept costs to a minimum by using materials from discount stores. There was no reason to buy expensive materials because the school would never have enough money to buy such things in the future. I wanted to do activities that the teachers could do themselves the following year, so I used what I had, and tried to think of reasonable ways to prep things in a short period of time.

Sometimes I felt like I was rushing everywhere all the time. The work at the school consumed me so completely that my studio work often suffered. I never had enough time and when I arrived home every Monday and Wednesday, I always collapsed on the couch for the rest of the evening. I gained a deep respect for full-time teachers! I gave 110% but usually it just was not good enough. The interesting thing about teaching is that it can never be perfect. I don't ever have TOTAL control. There is always more to learn, and that's what I love about it.

Methods

Every Wednesday at Forest, I would make sure to get an idea for the next week's lessons from the 2nd and 3rd grade teachers. We briefly discussed what the students needed help understanding, and then I went off and created a project. Usually I reviewed the book or subject they were studying, and looked for visual cues in the material to spark an idea. These sometimes included words that inspired imagery, or learning processes, which related to art making practices or visual illustration.

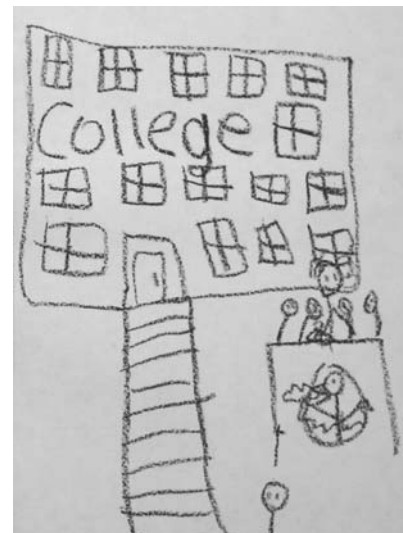
I let the ideas sit in my head for awhile. Often, I searched the web for ideas, or got a book from the library that related to their school work. These concepts germinated until Sunday when I would make a solid plan and prep for the week in my studio.²

Every Monday morning, I arrived at Forest Elementary with all the supplies I would need for the day. I stashed the supplies in a corner of the teacher's room and went to the kindergarten class. I usually did a project based on the older children's lesson for the day. The kindergarten and 1st grade teachers were happy for me to do anything, so they were my fun, experimental classes. After the kindergarten class I would go to the 1st grade.

I had prep time and lunch. This time in the teacher's lounge was always the most educational for me. I heard the unedited version of the teacher's stories. They talked about the children, the administration, their lives, their kids and husbands. There was no romanticizing the life of a teacher in this room! Even with all this truth and jaded comments, I still think I want to go into this field.

In the afternoon I met with three 2nd grades on Monday and three 3rd grades on Wednesday.

2



Child's Drawing

The activities were designed to hook the students in a number of ways.

1. They could grab some of the visual and spatial learners in a way that has not been tried before.
2. They helped connect the spaces in between ideas: for instance, how the story related to real life, or what the spaces are like between cities, towns and rural areas.
3. They turned facts into reality. Vocabulary became relevant.
4. They encouraged creativity.

The next pages contain 2 examples of activities:

Picassify Me

Picassify Me stemmed from a unit in the 3rd grade Open Court Reading Book section on Imagination. One story was about Picasso (Unit 3: Lesson 4) and I thought it would be a good opportunity for the students to think about different styles of art. It turned out to be a very successful project that opened the children's eyes to different ways of seeing.

Skills:

Learning about realism and cubism.

Learning that drawings don't have to be realistic.

Expanding their ideas of what is valid artwork.

Identifying and talking about Pablo Picasso and his artwork.

Connecting realism, cubism, and Picasso to the story about Picasso in the Open Court Reading Anthology.

Time:

5-10 minute discussion.

30-50 minutes of drawing.

Materials:

2 colors of construction paper (1 for realistic drawings, one for cubist drawings)

Crayons

Handouts of one realistic drawing and one cubist drawing by Picasso.

Discussion:

Start with a description of Picasso:

1. Can anyone tell me who Picasso was? Take answers.
2. Picasso lived from 1881 to 1973. He had many different ways of painting and drawing. He drew, made sculptures and prints, and paintings. He was bald. He is one of the most famous artists who ever lived.
3. Handout 1: These are 2 paintings by Picasso. They are of the same man. Which one do you think is realistic? Which is cubist? Why does he paint the man in two different ways? What does the realistic painting tell us about the man? What does the cubist painting tell us about the man? Can you describe cubism? (Broken space, shards of glass, things in different places)
4. We are going to draw 2 pictures of a person. One is going to be a realistic person. One will be a cubist person. The person can be anyone you know, but not someone in this classroom. The realistic drawing will look like the person. You can draw it the way you usually draw a person.
5. The second drawing will be of the same person in a cubist style. If I were going to draw a cubist person where would I draw my nose? On my cheek, or forehead, etc.

Steps:

1. Hand out the first colored paper. Students should draw a realistic person (from their heads so they don't focus too much on making it look like a person in a photograph. This could make them frustrated and take the emphasis off the learning.)
2. As you walk through the room, ask students questions about their work. Who is it? Why did they pick them? What are the physical traits they have shown in their drawing? Also, urge students to push their drawing further. Add color, draw a background, or add patterns on clothing.
3. As students finish their drawings, give them a second color of paper to draw an abstract person on. Ask them how they will change their person? Then let them draw.
4. Continue pushing all students to spend time on their drawings and to take them further with color and detail.

Reflections

The children always seemed very concerned that they would do things wrong. I feel this is because they are taught to memorize facts, instead of explore the world. During this activity, however, the children seemed to realize that they didn't have to do things perfectly. Even though cubism is a complex idea, it was explained to them simply, in a way they could understand. This gave them an opening through which to explore the individual ways they could change reality.

Some teachers found this to be a ridiculous activity, but I saw that it opened many doors through which the children could look at the world. Furthermore, the children were very excited when they started reading the section in their reading books about Picasso a few weeks later. Without my asking, they told me the new things they had learned about Picasso from their book, and were able to describe Cubism to me, even though they often have a very hard time retaining information.

Underground Railroad Quilts and Symmetry

The unit on Underground Railroad Quilts and symmetry covers a number of themes. In each class, every child seemed to understand symmetry by the end of the class. We also talked about encoded images and how shapes and colors can tell a story to someone that others would not understand. The Underground Railroad Quilts Activity uses the rich cultural heritage of African American History to understand Symmetry.

Skills:

Learning about symmetry

Making symmetrical patterns

African American History

Time: 30 – 70 minutes

Materials:

Felt cut into triangles and squares

Glue

Handout of the North Star quilt square

Prep:

Cutting felt

Handouts:

Series of Underground Railroad Quilt Squares, some symmetrical, some not.

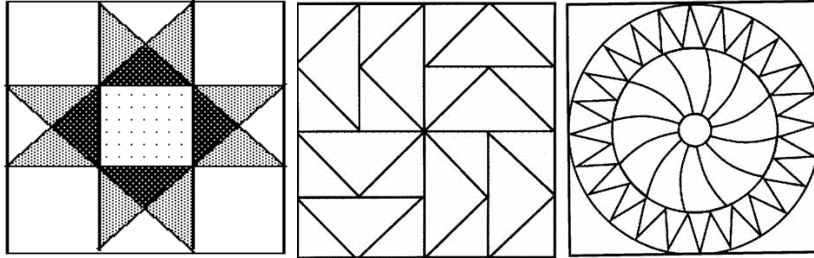
Discussion:

Explain what Underground Railroad Quilts are and how they worked.

Talk about codes and how they are secret messages.

What other ways of conveying information secretly are there? (speaking in a language other people don't know, Hansel and Gretel leaving the bread crumbs, morse code, etc.)

What is a sign you could make with your hands that other people wouldn't understand? Have students perform their signs, either all at once or in partners, or individually in front of the class.



North Star

Flying Geese

Wagon Wheel

Steps:

Hand out handouts.

What do these patterns say?

Each child can read a description.

Go through and have students guess which patterns are symmetrical.

Each student gets a series of shapes.

They can choose the colors they use, but the pattern must turn out symmetrical (by color)

Adaptations:

Colored paper could be used in place of felt.

Students could cut out paper or felt themselves

Positionality

The most interesting dynamic for me, however, was to be a white woman teaching African American children about slavery. This position was very awkward for me, but one that I felt was important for all of us. Sharing my dismay of what happened in the past with a group of young people was moving and eye opening to me. Before this year, I had rarely talked about race with people of different races than myself. I realized this year while working in a segregated school, how ridiculous it is to not talk about these things when it is so obvious that few things have changed. These children of color are poor, living in a poor neighborhood, and will have trouble breaking out of this cycle of poverty. Acknowledging the past can empower them (and all of us) to work hard for a better future.³

After a few awkward classes, I began to realize that the children were less uncomfortable than I was. I found that others were comfortable with the topic as long as I spoke honestly about historical events and how I felt about them. Many of the children didn't know what slavery was.

3



Children's Drawings

It was unnerving to describe it to them, because I felt it wasn't my place, but the teachers assured me that it was important they know. Although it was painful for me to watch them as a look of understanding crossed their little faces, I knew it was inevitable that they find out one day, and it's better that they find out in a nurturing classroom than in various other ways.

My approach was to speak clearly about the history of African Americans. I didn't use loaded words to describe things, and I didn't add information that may shock them or scare them. For example, instead of saying, "If a slave tried to escape, he was whipped," I would say, "If a slave ran away, he got in trouble." For a kid, getting in trouble is probably as bad as it gets

During African American History month when I did many projects on this topic, I discussed my discomfort with one African American teacher. She said that it is people like me who break down the barriers. Every new person who comes in and works with the children helps them see the wider world. We break down segregation bit by bit, person by person. It can be disheartening to realize that when I learned about Martin Luther King Jr. as a child, I thought he had changed everything. I thought that racism had been fixed. As I grew up I saw that it wasn't gone, but only hiding. Standing in front of the children and talking about African American heroes made me incredibly sad at times because it sometimes seems that nothing has changed. I drive from Ann Arbor to Detroit twice a week and watch on the highway as faces turn from light to dark and rich to poor. Something needs to be done to turn this around, once and for all.

African American History Month (February) was my favorite month at Forest Elementary because of the challenges and learning that happened for me, as well as the moments with the children, both uncomfortable, and proud.

Empowerment Techniques

I usually relied on positive reinforcement to give them self-confidence. Many of the children seemed to have trouble thinking outside of the box because they are forced to always be preparing for tests in which there is a right and a wrong way to do things.⁴ I tried to instill in them that all they had to do in art class is try. It didn't matter how "stupid" they thought their project looked, as long as they *tried* to do a good job, they would get better and better and more and more creative. There were definitely some students who really didn't like to draw. Often these students surprised me by their enthusiasm when we did a different sort of project, such as mosaics, collages, or papier mache.

It was important to me to deflect the praise given to me, not to a ridiculous extent, but politely and graciously. Sometimes it was good to say, "Thank you so much for that compliment. It really means a lot to me." Other times I preferred to answer, "No, thank YOU for being such a wonderful and creative class." My theory is that as long as there is an honest response, and a direction for us all to go in the future, we will be on the up and up.

4



Child's Drawing

Reflections

The students always called, “Hi, Miss Riddle!” whenever they saw me and usually seemed excited to see me when I came in for a lesson. They are very sweet and often volunteered praise such as, “I love when you come to our class,” and sometimes I could see the pride on their faces from their knowledge that they were doing well.

I usually felt I was making a contribution. I often had very positive experiences with the classes, and since I worked with about 5 classes/day, there would always be at least one class that really made my day.

It was, however, a draining environment in which to work. Although the school is clean and attractive, 100% of the students are below the poverty line. My impression is that they are so concerned with simply surviving, that little energy can go towards education. If your family is living from one day to the next, it is hard to concentrate on putting the necessities aside to study and educate yourself for the future.

I get the feeling that the children were taught to grow up too fast, and had too much on their minds, to fill them with seemingly meaningless facts in school. One thing that stands out to me is how persistent the kids were in wanting to help me hand out papers and carry things to the next class. They got upset when I did not have anything for them to help with. My theory is that they are forced to take on too much responsibility at home. Even the smallest children may be taking the role of caregiver. They might not be getting the care and attention they need because parents might not be there, either physically or emotionally. They have found that the way to get attention in school is to help the teacher. By helping with small tasks, they are praised and appreciated. Each child craves this attention, and so they crave the role of responsibility.

Their need for attention was extreme. Almost every child needed my assurance during the first few visits that I was watching them and understanding them. Some would ask me after every

mark if their drawing was ok, holding it up and calling out, “Miss Riddle, Miss Riddle, Look what I did! Is this alright?” Some of them learned that I would come around and talk to them if they gave me a break from calling out. Others continued to need the constant attention, and though I wish I could have given to them, the reality is that it was overwhelming.

I had a hopeless period in January when I felt that nothing I could do would change the situation of these children. I was emotionally drained and couldn't accept the reasons for bad behavior, inability to retain information, and impatience of the children. I found myself shouting too often, and didn't know how to stop. I was unable to find the positive aspects of my work, and ended up dreading going to school. I became very emotional about the children's futures, and resentful that others didn't seem to care. It was a very challenging time and I needed to talk about it with family, friends, and the teachers at school, to get a grip on these emotions, which were affecting my interactions with the students. The thing that kept me going was the commitment I had made to the children to give them art lessons. I also had to work Americorp's required 300 hours, and the knowledge quitting might make my life easier, but would definitely reflect negatively on myself, the University, and the Forest Elementary School if I were to quit. It might make it hard for them to get another Americorp worker if I were to not finish my term of service. I also just kept telling myself that this was a phase and that things would get better. Although I was overwhelmed by the ramifications of the poverty I was witnessing, I was dedicated to the fight, and knew that I would rather work through the challenge than work with college students, or K-12 students in a wealthy suburb.

Creating nurturing environments is the theme of this thesis, and even though I was rushing from class to class throughout each day, I still tried to create a space where children could learn. I did not come in with idealistic visions of children listening attentively to me, but what I experienced often infuriated me. I tend to have a great deal of patience. But working in this

school sometimes required more than I could muster. I think the need of the students to be integrated with the outside world made them very excited to see me, a Caucasian young woman from another place who comes and does fun things with them. It was very hard to keep control of the classroom, and often, the teacher had to step in and help me out. Children are very smart and can tell when they can get away with things. They could tell that I was learning how to manage a classroom, and they took advantage more than once.

One of my main hurdles in the classroom was containing my frustration. Sometimes I would get so angry at children with behavior problems that I'd want to scream. It was hard to hold my temper. I'd sometimes forget that these were children, not adults. The children sometimes were lacking caring adults in their lives. Some were in foster families, or had parents with their minds on something else. Some children smelled bad, wore dirty clothing, and had rotten teeth. These were children who needed understanding and compassion, but they also knew how to act out.

I met some true masters at maintaining a caring, calm, and nurturing environment. These teachers all agreed that children do not feel safe if they are allowed to act wild. Being a firm teacher does not mean that you, yourself are mean. A learning environment is made by a teacher who ensures that each child has the physical and mental space to do their work. This space cannot be had if there are numerous children running, yelling, or acting rude.

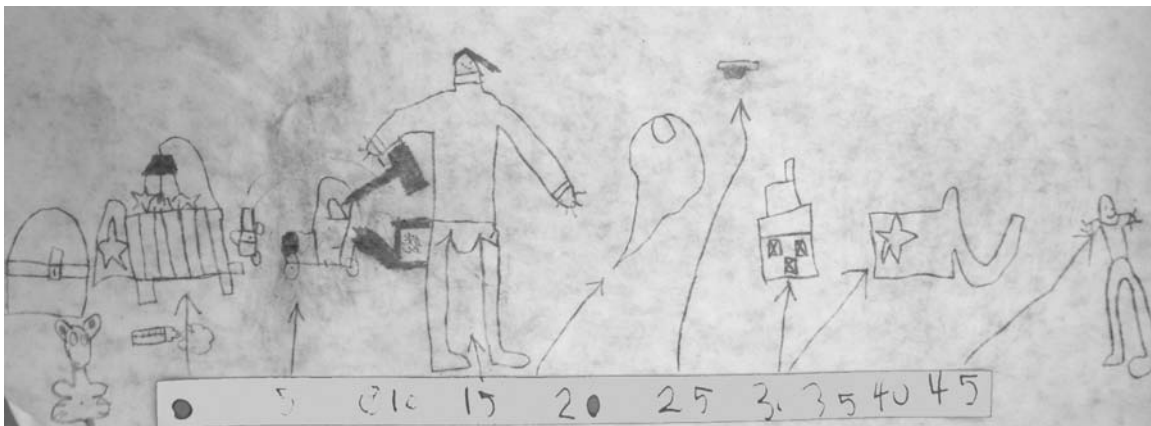
I gradually grew more patient and firm in some of the most difficult classrooms, but I will learn these management skills for years to come. The teachers I worked with at Forest Elementary told me I did well keeping control, but I know there is more I can do to improve.

In this section, I have illustrated how I attempted to achieve my mission to facilitate art projects that strengthen academic knowledge. The teachers and students were very enthusiastic

about the program. Although sustainability was a major goal in this I am skeptical that this tradition will be carried on. There are 2 or 3 teachers were very involved and helped with the activities. They are interested in continuing with them next year. The rest are not super-humans and seem to have enough on their plates right now. One element of sustainability will be the curriculum guides I am creating for the teachers. I think those will be very helpful to them. These guides will be ready and in teachers' mailboxes by next September and will be accessible to everyone on my website.

Arts Integration is not a new idea. Projects like shadow boxes have been around for decades. I believe, however, that as the arts are cut out of public education, especially in low-income neighborhoods, we will see a marked difference in the minds of the students who come from these schools. It is essential to bring arts back into the classroom in any way necessary. Visual, and spatial understanding is vital to the education of all people. All children have a right to a quality education, whether they are in public or private school, whether they are rich or poor, black or white. Art is not just for fun, it is an essential piece in our understanding of the world.⁵

5



Child's Timeline of Their Life

The Thesis Project: Quilts, Self, and the Search for Home

The source material from my life is always the basis for making something, but there are things in my life that I don't wish the world to know. I do think my work would take on new social and political levels if I were to publicly disclose all the situations the work is based on, but at this time I prefer to work around these issues by speaking through encoded images and subtle patterns.

How do I connect place, self, and home? I am my own ever-changing self, moving from place to place. I interact with each space and situation I enter. I am changed, and sometimes it changes. I look for a place where I can be at rest. This place is called home. My home is not always perfect. It is lonely, boring, and uncomfortable sometimes, but it is the place where I feel I can improve and grow in a way that is sustainable.

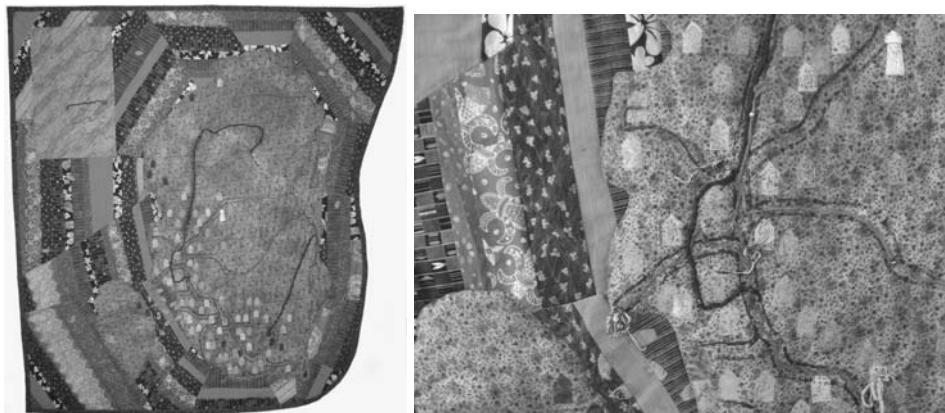
This thesis project was inspired by my time at the University of Michigan in which I spent time working with the community, and time reflecting on my personal world in the studio. I have been heavily influenced by the purpose of quilts, both during the making and after the making of them. The quilt has become the basis for most of my work, and my task has been to stretch the confines of what a quilt can be to the maximum extent of its definition. This body of work defines myself. I am using different ways to look at myself through the lens of my own eyes and others. My time in Michigan has aided in my own definition of home, as well as home's importance and the importance of personal history, friends, and knowledge of a location. I have been searching for a safe space for myself and others through creating spaces like the Stimson Street Mural Project. I am still verbally unable to define what home means to me, but I hope that my series of quilts will help the viewer understand what I mean, when I speak of "Home."

The distribution of my thesis project took place in a future women's center located in an old farmhouse on the corner of Pratt Road and Dexter Road. The exhibition was a group show including the work of Sarah Buckius, July Park, Jennifer Zee, and myself. It was called *Voices*.

The Way I Walk⁶

Both the 2nd and 3rd grades at Greenfield worked on mapping exercises and we have mapped their communities, the world, and the senses. I have been fascinated by their sense of their own places in the world and how they relate to the space around them. How do I relate to my surroundings? How do I express myself innately in my environment? Who am I in this environment?

The word, "Home" often illicit a single response such as happy, at ease, or comfortable. But many of my homes have not been this way. Loneliness, boredom, and plans for future escapes also take place in home environments, though we often forget these parts in the nostalgic



The Way I Walk, 2006

moments. Home is never one thing, and should be given credit for being more than just a nostalgic location, but rather a place of complex emotions.

I relate to a space, not only through looking at it, but by moving through it in different ways at different times. I made an island quilt that systematically categorizes my moods by the way I walk. I don't think of these expressions as performative, but as the needs to work, get from one place to another, or to play. To categorize my ways of walking is to pay attention to the way I am in the flesh, the different aspects of my life on a very small island off the coast of Maine.

The design for this quilt was based on an old postcard, found in the attic of a historical hotel called the Island Inn, which shows a map of Monhegan Island. I used this imperfect map as a guide to my own imperfect representation of a former home.

My vision was of a multiplicity of fabrics, both printed, and hand dyed, with various types of stitching making up the details. I wanted the quilt to look very homemade, and to represent the stories of my summer/working home.

Stamping houses and roads came next. Finally, I stitched the crocheted and beaded rope onto the island to form the walks.

The assortment of walks are described below:

Avoidance Walk – Shyness results in the antisocial behavior of avoiding town at all costs

Billy Goat Walk – Running from rock to rock along the southeastern section of the island.

Drunken Walk – Too many drinks produces a wavy, loopy gait.

Night walk – A secret way of walk in the pitch black night to traverse the paths to Burnt Head and Cathedral woods.

Naked Walk – The foolish flashing and naked night running that results in scandal.

Working Walk – A flurry of activity, often compared to a whirling dervish.
Takes place up to 16 hours/day.

The Way I Walk was the most commented-upon piece in the thesis exhibition. People were drawn to the various techniques, assorted media, and the examining of different roads and codes.

It is challenging to retain a spontaneous and flowing pattern in quilting when the popular quilting goal is straight lines and tiny perfect stitches. This spontaneity is what drew me to the Gee's Bend Quilts. Their curvy edges and irregularities inspired me, both in *The Way I Walk*, and in the following installation; *I Woke up With a Spider on My Pillow*.

I Woke up With a Spider on my Pillow⁷

I have had a long, unpleasant history with spiders. As a child, I dreamt again and again that spiders were crawling out of my bed and descending the stairs of my house, pouring out into



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I Woke Up With a Spider on My Pillow

the street in vast numbers. This dream was a visual nightmare, but at the same time, spoke of the terror of a childlike fear of the unknown.

I was driven to recreate the visceral terror that spiders give an arachnophobe. The shiver down my spine, the goose bumps, waking up in a cold sweat, and lying awake, eyes open, waiting for the next humongous spider to crawl out of the cracks were all feelings I hoped to address in this piece which would include a quilt, shown on a bed, with spiders crawling across the floor.

The spiders in my childhood nightmares were oddly similar to the wolf spiders that can be found on Monhegan Island, ME (the same island as in *The Way I Walk*). These spiders would always be a surprise to me. They I would find them behind beds when chambermaiding, and in my small shack, named, the Chicken Coop (the Coop for short). My shack was small and the spiders liked the area around my bed the most. I would spend sleepless nights, waiting for the spiders that I had dreamed of as a child to crawl up the legs of the bed. For three summers, I sprayed the edges of the room with poison, in order to calm my nerves so that I would sleep. I was terrified of these wolf spiders.

Collecting plastic spiders during Halloween was essential, because they aren't generally stocked in Dollar Stores during the rest of the year. I was looking for a certain size, just large enough to be slightly ridiculous, but not large enough to be blatantly unreal. The more I collected, the more fake and unbelievable they became to me. It became clear that I needed to treat the surface in some manner that would make a more believable creature. I devised a plan to coat the spiders in dryer lint, and paint them, leaving them slightly hairy and thoroughly gross.

The production of the spiders was the part that finally proved the visceral impact of the piece. Up until this time, sketches and verbal descriptions had met with bland responses. Once the

spiders were coated with other people's dryer lint, they became absolutely disgusting. People's lips would curl and many refused to touch them.

As for myself, I found the process revolting. Picking through the garbage for lint, touching who knows what with my fingers, breathing in the foreign dust, getting gluey, linty residue stuck to my hands, and pulling long hairs off the finished beasts was an activity I could only handle in small doses. It curled my stomach and I resorted to wearing a dust mask to shield my lungs from the disgusting dust.

The quilt became a secondary object. It became clear that it was not the quilt, but the spiders on a seemingly cozy bed that would give the piece the visceral feel I wanted. Looking to the Gee's Bend quilts and the Freedom Quilting Bee, their quilts became a symbol of home that I was looking for. I imagine these quilts in a sharecropper's home, keeping a child warm with a quilt sewn of scraps of cloth, while the poverty encircles them. It is not a romantic image, but it is still home, and a young adult who left home would still look back on it with the same feeling of belonging that I feel for my middle class bedroom, and my own patchwork quilt.

The Gee's Bend Quilts are a means to keep loved ones warm. They were seen by outsiders as art objects, and their meaning changed with the view of the outside world. But they remained a utilitarian object for the women who made them, because they began to make desperately needed money.

I wanted to pay homage to these beautiful patterns and decided to try my hand at a Gee's Bend style quilt. It instantly became clear that my hand could not create something so beautiful. It brought me to appreciate fully the work of the women in Alabama and their abstract patterns and crooked lines. The lines are more like those a brush would make than like those a needle makes: a

utilitarian painting.⁸ I used a simple pattern copied loosely into my own version. The cloth was not as worn, nor the lines as voluptuous. Just as the Freedom Quilters products became less interesting as fine art as they learned the skills to mass produce quilts and therefore support their families, so do a person's skills as an artist change form and manner as they gain more skills, but lose the rawness. The experience of trying to copy a Gee's Bend quilt was proof to me that we all have things to offer as artists, whether they be skills and knowledge, or a fresh, new approach.

The quilt I made became a suitable background for the brown, hairy spiders to make their descent upon the world. The quilt was laid on a platform representing a bed, and was made up with sheets and a pillow. The colors were complemented by the red walls in the Pratt Road Home, and spiders crawled from under the quilt, out into the space over the floor to the fireplace and out the door. My favorite detail was a few spiders placed outside as if they had crawled through the door onto the porch. This was an element that few noticed, but which was very important to me. I saw it as a hidden element that the artist holds for herself.



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Jessie T. Pettway, Bars and String Pieced Columns, 1950's

The Baby's Room

“Dad, What’s in a zebra?”

“A heart, lungs, blood, bones, muscles, a brain, a liver, a stomach...”

“Ooh...”

I began to think about my homes and how they could fit into my artwork and was brought back again and again to my childhood. Images of the comfort of home were the surface of the home idea at first, and my most involved installation began to evolve. When I think of my childhood, I often think of my room.⁹ I spent much time in my room as a child, because I had a bizarre sleeping schedule of going to bed at 7 pm and waking up at 4 am every morning. I always took a nap at 1 pm while my mom watched her only soap opera, “All My Children.” I remember



The original curtain made by Winnie Riddle, 1977

that there was no way around naptime. I had to lie there, occupying myself in my crib, until naptime was over. It was a beautiful, quiet time, the muffled sounds of the tv wafting up the stairs, my mother speaking in whispers, and tiptoeing through the house. The heat of the afternoon would seep through my window, and the light of the afternoon sun glowed through a pink curtain, embroidered with the ABC's. I think I spent more time looking at that curtain than I did napping. It is a labor-intensive piece of embroidery, every letter cross-stitched in my Aunt's perfect way.

These elements of my childhood were combined to recreate the bedroom of my infancy. I exploit the nostalgia of childhood and court the idea that nostalgia is not a realistic reproduction of what once was, but rather, a longing for the familiar.

Having the grad studios next to a second hand store has been a fundamental source of materials for me. I am obsessed with anything discarded that I see as potentially useful. I collect things, and wait for an appropriate use for them. I am firm in not using them, just to use them, but rather to wait until an idea grows around and inside of them, which fits with my intent.

I found a wooden crib next door 2 years ago, leaning against the cement wall. It stood there for almost a week and I kept waiting for someone who might USE it (for something other than an art piece) to take it. This person didn't seem to be coming, so I brought it inside, knowing it would fit into my work at some point.

After questioning my parents on the structure of my baby crib, I discovered that my found wooden crib was perfect. I tried to match the yellow paint with the color my mother described over the phone, and painted the crib, thinking of my mother painting the crib for me 28 years ago with the paint she had found for free.

I was shown a picture last summer of my mother as a baby. I was drawn to the forms and blank slate of her image as an infant. Even though she seemed to be a yet unformed creature, the

picture appeared to show her as an individual because of the composition of her in the arms of an unseen adult. I longed to connect her with myself and decided to paint her on the mattress of the forgotten crib.¹⁰

I inspected the mattress and instantly discovered that the plastic cover was easily removed by unzipping the zipper. I slipped off the cover and was awed to discover a beautiful faux quilted surface. It was a perfect surface to paint on. This surface fit the picture of my mother perfectly. The texture was soft and delicate, and reminded me of fabrics in my grandparents' house, textiles which surrounded my mother as a child. I gessoed the surface and painted a loose version of the photograph on it. This painting is the most quirky part of the piece in that her eyes are too clear and the baby is so clearly flat. She is not painted in a purposefully deformed manner, but she looks so bizarre staring up at you from the mattress, that it has been called creepy by more than a few. The baby is awake and absurdly alert. This infant seems to contain a self. This infant penetrates your gaze and unnerves you. It is me looking back on my childhood with visual criticism. I am inspecting the visual memories and recreating them self-consciously, hoping to

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Baby's Room, 2006

attain the idealized memory of what was, when perhaps, in reality, I spent most of the time in my room, crying and wishing I didn't have to have a naptime at all.

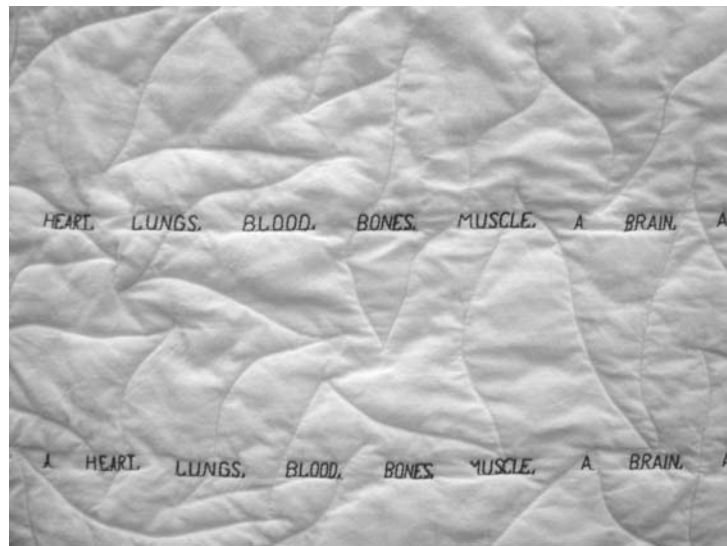
I remember crawling into my parents' bed¹¹ in the mornings to snuggle with the smell of warm bodies in the chilly morning. I would lie there with my dad playing a game we loved. "Dad, what's in a tiger?" I would ask, and he would tirelessly respond with a list of things contained within the tiger's skin. Over and over, I would ask him about animal after animal, even though there were almost never any variations. I knew that my Dad knew *everything*, and that if I only asked enough questions, then I would know everything too.

I covered this baby in a white quilt, machine embroidered in blue thread with the words of the game my father and I played. The endless game is ridiculous in nature and from far away a linear form.

The curtain was incorporated into the work done at Greenfield Union Elementary School. I asked to come into Mrs. Esaw's 1st grade classroom (which I continued to come to every Wed.) and told them that I needed to redesign an alphabet curtain that had pictures to correspond to each



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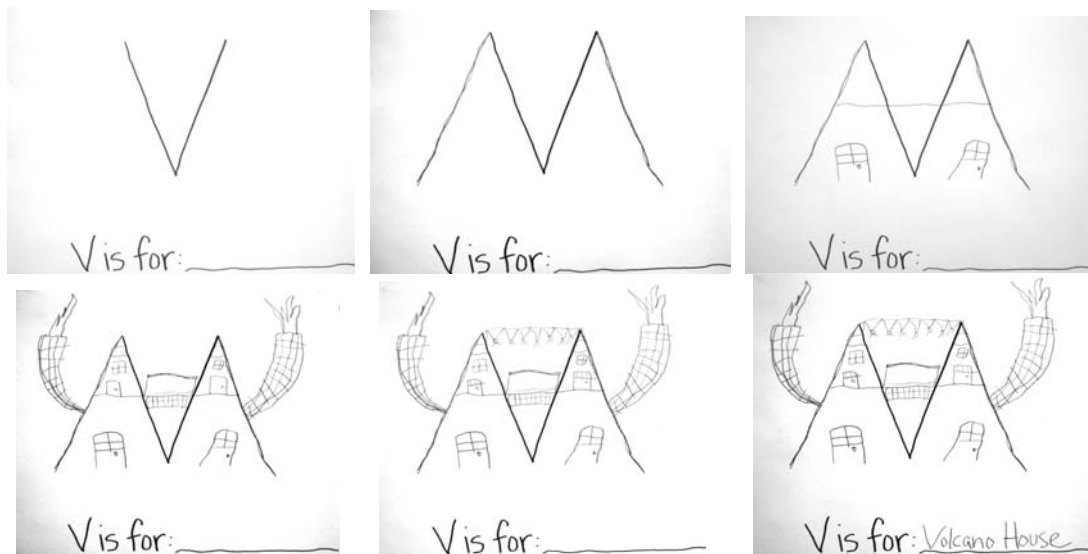
Baby's Room, 2006

letter. Each classroom has large alphabet cards that hang above the whiteboards, so they understood what I was talking about.

Each child was given an 8 1/2" X 11" sheet of paper with a different letter taking up most of the sheet. They were instructed to draw something the name of which started with that letter, using the letter's form on the paper, therefore transforming the letter into a picture. They were excited to draw and spent the whole time busily drawing on sheet after sheet of paper.

There were various elements to the activity for the students to understand.

1. Transforming the letter into something else.
2. Identifying a thing that started with that letter (not just drawing whatever they wanted).
3. Making a drawing that may be recognizable as that object.



Transformation of V into Volcano House.

Some of the students simply did not understand the assignment, and although I wanted them to learn something from the lesson, since it was their first time working with me, I was more concerned with creating a space for creativity than I was getting them to learn their ABC's. They gave me some fantastic material to work with. Pictures of chicken noodle soup and a volcano house were among my favorites.

I enlarged some of the drawings to the appropriate size and transferred them to a piece of cloth by tracing through the fabric or looking at the drawing and copying it free hand. This was an extraordinary experience for me to feel the hand of each child as they drew. It was hard to get the exact marks because of the freshness of their hands and the jaded quality of my own. The more I practiced, however, the more accurate the copies became.

I made one curtain for the class and gave it to them, much to their surprise, and made one for my own installation using the exact same drawings. The cloth is a pink checked cloth similar that my aunt used on the original.

The bright colors of the fabric markers forming the children's drawings gave a childlike feel to the Baby's Room, while the painted baby lent an eerie aspect.

The light coming through the window was an essential part of the piece. I longed to see that light again, paired with the other elements of my childhood and the childhood imagery of the first grade children. I feel the same way about their curtain as I do about Aunt Winnie's. I imagine them drawing, just as I imagine her stitching, and I know I could stare at the curtain during the long hours of a forced naptime.

This is my most historically accurate piece, but in an obsessive way. This piece enforces the obsession we have with childhood and the unreal love we maintain for home as we grow older. Re-creating that home is impossible, just as the dream-like quality of a playful, worry-free

childhood is historically inaccurate. But I hope to replay my childhood through the children I meet. What is their first thought when they hear see the letter, B? How is their imagination different than mine? Seeing childhood from an adult point of view showcases the reality of that period of life, and makes one realize that NOW is the time to pay attention. Childhood is all around us if we pay attention, and I don't have to return to my crib to feel at home again. I can create my home as a place to experience life as an adult.¹²

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Two squares of final curtain with installation, 2006

Conclusion

This thesis has discussed the process of creating nurturing spaces for artists and “non-artists” to share in the making of creative work and has addressed the larger context of social-justice, empowerment, and community building issues, making a case for doing this work.

During the last three years, I have struggled to integrate my studio work into my community work in a way that is natural and inspires growth in both sectors. This connection has come organically and in a way that feeds both sides of my introverted and extroverted practices.

I have taken a firm stance on Joseph Beuys’ stance that “everyone is an artist.” (Birchard 2167) We both hold the belief that everyone has the capability of being an artist, regardless of capabilities or financial limitations.

John Dewey has added to my argument that art comes from the everyday. (81) It does not have to be elite. It is a way of connecting our experiences.

I have successfully engaged in various community projects, which have led to my growth as a community artist and have challenged me to learn skills necessary to doing this work. Although teaching and facilitating groups of children and adults will be a lifetime learning process, I feel I have made substantial headway in this endeavor.

The two aspects of my life can now go hand in hand. One cannot live without the other. I am unable to be an artist without the balance of working with people outside of the art world, just as I need to retreat to the studio in order to refuel my personal studio work.

The future seems wide open. I will be moving to Holyoke, Massachusetts, home to a thriving culture of community murals. Holyoke is a struggling community within a wealthy area

of college towns. I will seek out opportunities to use my skills through public school teaching, non-profit work, or college teaching.

The balance of my studio practice seems wide open as well. I will continue sewing and painting and experimenting with the combination of the two. I see my work becoming more figurative, nostalgic, and based upon mapping. The structure of this may be hard to visualize, but this is the exciting part of my life; finding a home within groups of people and ways of working that break the boundaries of what I have set before in my artwork.

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11. *Baby's Room*, detail, 2006.
12. Two squares of final curtain with installation. crib: latex paint, oil on mattress / quilt: fabric, cotton batting, thread / curtain: fabric markers on fabric, yarn, thread / inspired by

Francie Riddle
Breathing Space

an ABC curtain by *Winnie Riddle, 1977* / ABC drawings by *Mrs. Esaw's First Grade class at Greenfield Union Elementary School in Detroit* / dimensions variable, 2006

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