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Exploring How Narrative and Symbolic Art Impacts Artist, Researcher, Teacher and Communicates Meaning in Art to Students

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EXPLORING HOW NARRATIVE AND SYMBOLIC ART IMPACTS
ARTIST, RESEARCHER, TEACHER
AND COMMUNICATES MEANING IN ART TO STUDENTS

by

DOROTHY J. ESKEW

Under the Direction of Melody Milbrandt

ABSTRACT

This educational study on narrative and symbolic art and its impact on me as artist, researcher, and teacher and ultimately how the use of narrative and symbolism impacts student learning was conducted throughout the school year 2013-2014 in the environment of both my home and my classroom in a south metro Atlanta high school. The research is based on my reflections of my artistic processes, my research of family history, and my observations as I introduced narrative and symbolic art in the classroom.

The findings of the study reveal that the roles of artist, teacher, and researcher are significantly interrelated and enhance one another; I also believe that my students' learning was impacted.

While students are at first assigned narrative and symbolic art projects, many begin to extrapolate that art is more meaningful to them when it has a story to tell or includes symbolism with which they associate importance.

INDEX WORDS: Narrative art, Symbolic art, A/r/tography, Meaning in art

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Art Education
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father John H. Eskew who modeled the importance of continued, life-long education, my mother Dorothy C. Eskew who encouraged me to follow my heart and become an art teacher, and to them both for telling and re-telling many of the stories that still inspire my narrative and symbolic art. Also, this dedication goes to my daughter Briana M. Long who not only encouraged me to pursue this M.A.Ed. but worked alongside me in the same cohort to pursue her degree as well.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Need for the Study

I grew up in a rural, agricultural community in Henry County, Georgia where there was a long, family history with many anecdotes handed down through storytelling from my mother and other relatives. These stories are true to my family and represent snapshots of family life and history. My purpose was not to re-write a history that has already been told, but to place some of the family stories, some of them my own, visually into a context of the moment in the time and the culture of the place where they happened. Documenting places, things, people, and events in narrative form, as well as through using symbolism, fills a need to preserve family history and to share the meaningfulness in my art. In this way, I hope to communicate through my art a message to those who might find a connection, whether through awakening memories or through informing the viewer about a time and a place that they could no longer experience.

For example, my family owned a cotton gin and many fields of cotton which were plowed, planted, and harvested by tenant farmers. It was documented that my Granny, Allie Laney McGarity, never a stranger to work or people, sang songs in the fields while helping pick the cotton. Although that alone invoked visual imagery for me, I had stronger images of my own. My cousins and I used to jump and play in the pile of cotton on Granny's side porch. It is not so much that I chose to document the fact that we lived in an agricultural society; rather, I chose to document how my family and I were influenced by the time and place. Those are the things that I wanted to add visually to the pages of local history—the stories that no one else could tell in exactly the same way. In communicating life experiences, I hope to contribute to the field of knowledge about visual storytelling and documentation of history and culture. In undertaking this thesis, it was my goal that the research process would reveal a wealth of infor-

mation both in the quantity and quality of family stories in the culture that my family and I have experienced as well as how this information could impact my art and personal identity. It was also my goal to enable my students to experience my narrative and symbolic art and to enhance my teaching as well as their learning. I hope that my creations and the impact of bringing them into the classroom might, in turn, contribute to a broader conversation about narratives, symbolism, and personal voice being expressed through visual art.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

In order to tell these stories, I needed to research the history and the culture so that I could accurately communicate the timeline and environment of the stories. I could not have possibly, during the span of one thesis, created enough artworks to illustrate the entire wealth of stories, so I had to choose highlights that felt important to me and that invoked the visual imagery that I needed to communicate. Some of my art work is symbolic in nature rather than literal, but each piece has a story to tell. Although I expect the viewer to have his own interpretation of my art, I wrote about its meaning and my reflections as I experienced the process of creating it. As I expected, I opened a dialogue among viewers, especially students, as they experienced my art works.

In this exploration, I hoped to inspire others to tell their stories as well. Within the realm of art education, I hoped that students would realize that their personal experiences and local culture are important to communicate visually. More importantly, I hoped to communicate to them the importance of researching, thinking, feeling, and reflecting on their art so that what they create is not merely a pleasing image but also an expression of deeper meaning. When I began this thesis, sharing my personal art in the classroom had been limited to occasionally bringing a finished piece for a sample or quickly demonstrating a technique and never completing the art

work. It was a new experience for me to share the work in process to its completion and to discuss its meaning and technique as I worked. I believe that this experience of actively creating art modeled an artistic work ethic that included thinking and researching as an important part of the creation of narrative and symbolic art.

As an art educator, I expected the creating and sharing of my art to renew my enthusiasm toward the joys of teaching and make my teaching more meaningful as I presented a model of an artist-teacher expressing a personal voice and finding identity through art. As a researcher, I expected that reflecting on my process of creating meaningful art and its use of problem-solving and critical thinking skills would give more credibility to the visual arts as a vital learning experience in the world of education. As an artist, I was grateful for this opportunity to get back into producing art and integrating my art-making, my researching, and my teaching into one. I was pleased to acknowledge and demonstrate that the artist, teacher, and researcher could live in harmony. As surely as a pleasing combination of musical notes or artistic colors could create harmony, I expected these roles to inevitably find congruity.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Symbolism in Art

Symbolism in art refers to images that have a meaning to the artist and which may be hidden, ambiguous, or blatantly obvious to the viewer. Artists often use symbolism in art to express religious, political, current events, or personal meanings. Sometimes the meanings are apparent as in Edward Hicks' painting from 1834 titled *Peaceable Kingdom* which illustrates settlers signing a treaty with Native Americans in the background while lions and lambs are friendly in the foreground. Often the meanings are more subtle where the artist leaves the viewer to decide his own meanings as in Hugo Simberg's 1903 painting, *The Wounded Angel*. The contemporary artists Sue Cole and Alexis Rockman use symbolism for "...making the invisible visible" (Galerie St. Etienne, 2005, para. 9) as they each create art about causes that are important to them. For example, Sue Cole creates art to expose the hidden cruelties about our sources of meat or the impact of poverty and abuse, while Rockman uses his art "...to create apocalyptic visions of a world that might be, if we are not careful" (para. 9) through pollution or global warming. The artworks of Cole and Rockman are both symbolic of what they represent and narrative in the message that they wish to tell.

2.2 Narrative in Art

Narrative art is defined as art that tells a story; it can represent a single moment in time or a sequence of events within the same artwork. The artist determines the space and the time of the artwork and how the story is represented. I have long been entertained by the narrative art of Faith Ringgold. Each of her quilts tells a story, often autobiographical, both in writing and in narrative art. The reading of her book *Tar Beach* and the perusing of the accompanying illustrations beckon one to join the family on the roof-top as a young girl dreams of flying over George

Washington Bridge. I have realized that my interest in narrative art began long ago when I taught elementary students; inspired by *Tar Beach*, we created our own version of story quilts as the students thought of ideas, created the art, and wrote rhymes beginning with, “If I could fly, I’d fly to....” The students’ art was beautiful and expressive, and I was indebted to Faith Ringgold’s narrative art for inspiring the project.

Norman Rockwell is the “creative cousin and fellow storyteller” (Edwards, 2010, p. 1) of filmmakers Steven Spielberg and George Lucas who both collect his art. Making an analogy with the work of these filmmakers, Edwards writes about Rockwell:

His pictures draw us into the scene, letting us forget the involvement of the artist and his artifices, in the same way a good director erases our awareness of crews and equipment and the other side of the camera. Rockwell has the power to win us over with his illusions. (p. 2)

Edwards (2010) comments, “Serious art critics often dismiss Rockwell as a cautious and calculating master of the middle way, a kind of mild moderator of lives too sweet and too narrow” (p. 1). Then, he defends Rockwell’s depictions of real life situations. I am personally interested in Rockwell’s ability to capture his perceptive point of view in such a way that the characters in his work tell the story with their expressions and interactions. I appreciate the fact that Rockwell not only tells a story of everyday life in America, he also illustrates moments in history in works such as *The Problem We All Live With*, created in 1964 as a visual narrative of racial desegregation.

Other artworks such as American artist Thomas Cole’s *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, painted in 1836, invite the viewer into the scene with the possibility of numerous interpretations. It contrasts the wilderness

on the left with changes caused by the influx of man on the right. The artist places himself in the scene as though to document that he is part of this beautiful, American landscape. I like that he is personalizing his art, not only by adding himself in the landscape but also by adding his personal voice that seems to tell a story.

Whether a visual narrative actually tells the written story like Ringgold's quilts, re-creates a moment in time like Rockwell's work, leaves interpretation to the viewer like Thomas Cole's paintings, or creates awareness like Rockman's work, narrative and symbolic art have great merit in serving the needs of the artist to create and the viewer to appreciate. Creating narrative art has become a method of searching through the archives of my stories to express my personal voice, but as an art educator, I feel that I have helped my students find meaning through narrative and symbolic art.

2.3 Symbolism in Art in the Classroom; finding meaning

Gnezda (2009) writes, "Making relevant and meaningful art can foster in students a sense of art's significance in their lives" (p. 49). In addition to integrating studio and academic in art, Gnezda recommends finding meaning in student art. Rather than merely creating the typical assignments, students can add meaning that is relevant to their lives. "The art room is a natural setting for authentic learning because art is an expression of an individual's real-world encounters with self, history, and culture" (p. 49).

Borbely (2008) comments, as well, "students often struggle to develop a creative response to pictures, but if they have a familiarity with symbolism and the deconstruction of visual artwork, they will find this task less of a challenge" (p. 32). He uses Picasso's *Guernica* as an example of pictorial symbolism and describes how it pertains to performance art. Art educators

can make assignments that enable students to incorporate their own meanings and symbols so that their learning becomes personally relevant.

2.4 Narrative Art in the Classroom

Goldberg (2005) engages students in interpreting visual stories, writing about the narratives that they see, writing about personal experiences that relate to the images, and finally, creating a narrative work of art. Her article was influenced by the Visual Thinking Strategies developed by Yenawine (2000). Goldberg writes:

Three primary steps stimulate student thinking, communication, and visual literacy skills: 1) looking at art of increasing complexity; 2) responding to developmentally-based questions, and 3) participating in group discussions that are carefully facilitated by the teacher. This approach invites students to focus, become reflective and to question—the basis for thinking critically. (Goldberg, 2005, p.26)

Although Goldberg was writing for students in grades 3-6, this approach would be applicable to any age student as long as the inspiring images and the art project were age appropriate. It makes sense to show, discuss, and write about some examples of narrative art before attempting to create your own.

2.5 A/r/tography; understanding the process

My identity as a teacher, artist, and researcher is very complex. Through a/r/tography I have come to value and understand those roles much more clearly. A great deal has been written about this combining of roles of artist, researcher, and teacher in *A/r/tography, Rendering Self Through Arts-Based Living Inquiry* (Irwin & Cosson, 2004). This book is a compilation from 12 contributors, all of whom are artists, researchers, and teachers, who have conducted research

through the visual arts, each using his or her personal methods. I found that I particularly related to Lymburner (2004) as she wrote,

In an era fraught with difficulties in education and low teacher morale, my experiences as a teacher-researcher have been most uplifting. This period of intense self-examination invited me to perceive my world more closely, re-search the details of my practice, develop inner strength, and eventually, expand my repertoire of skills and sphere of influence. (p. 79)

I find that Lymburner's comments are especially relevant today as I see teacher moral decline because of increasing demands on educators. For example, in the public school sector, art educators are coerced into reducing our visual world to numerical data to show student improvement along with teacher effectiveness when, in fact, we know that the improvement and effectiveness are both quite apparent in the artistic creations of our students. The suggestion that this teaching and researching process can be uplifting is encouraging, and I admire her perception as far as the potential influence of her self-examination.

Lymburner's methods of research include journaling and collaged portraiture, in honor of people who have influenced her. Her simultaneous writing and collaging are meaningful to me as I included those processes in my own research, although my research entailed the use of various media and creation of historical, narrative and symbolic artworks. Lymburner comments, "Arts-based journaling methods provide the opportunity to reflect in action and on action aesthetically, intellectually, and introspectively" (Lymburner, 2004, p. 87). It is pertinent that she alludes to her arts-based research methods as allowing her to "...negotiate a path that simultaneously accepts my role as a devoted teacher, a developing artist, and a disciplined researcher" (p. 87).

In her writing, “Reflections on Artist/Researcher/Teacher Identities, A Game of Cards,” Pente (2004) discusses her work of art titled *Shuffle the Cards, Deal a Hand* which is a metaphor for the roles of the artist, teacher, and researcher and how they playfully interact. Pente (2004) explains, “The physical act of creating the art helps me to bring deeply held beliefs and attitudes concerning teaching, art-making, and researching to the surface for examination” (p. 94). I related to her comment, “One of the challenges of teaching art is to help the student tap into her/his own well of creative thought. Teachers spend much energy coming up with innovative ways to do this without overly influencing students” (Pente, 2004, p. 98). As I personally tackled/embraced this research, it was one of my challenges to reflect on ways to tap creative thought in my students through my teaching.

Porter (2004) describes her experiences of bringing her studio into the classroom and the fears and challenges that it presents as well as the effect on her teaching and her students. As she realized that nobody was bothering her supplies or vandalizing or saying negative things about her work, she also became aware that students sought her advice more often and worked in class without complaining. I especially liked that she often placed the students’ work on her own working easel to discuss their work; I tried this in class, and it seemed to give recognition of importance toward the students’ work. Porter found that students learned valuable lessons about inquiry and learning beyond grades, that art takes time and is a process of evolving, and that they “could do that, too” (p. 112). Porter (2004) writes,

Action research by its very nature encourages cycles of change and reflection that many artists engage in continually. One creates purposefully, reflects, and continues to grow. I believe that I have taught students something of that purposeful exploration in art by sharing this process in my own work. My research has been lived. (p. 114)

Porter (2004) comments that there was no time to work in class, but I certainly already knew that. She also comments on the struggle to accept working in the institutionalized school space as opposed to the usual studio space that was separate and offered “an oasis of calm in the chaos of endless meetings and marking of assignments” (p. 105). I wrestled with this notion, as I knew the need to escape from the school environment. I determined that having my work in progress and seeing it to completion provided enough of the “catalyst for change in my classroom” (p. 115) that Porter experienced without my staying at the school to do my studio work.

Stephenson (2004) writes about the integration of art-making and documenting history in art from a personal point of view. She and her family literally dug for artifacts in an old pile of refuse, and she created an assemblage collage called, *Archaeology of my Parents' Lives, 1943-1949*. Stephenson elaborates about artists who have depicted history. She writes, “By history, I mean the presentation of the researcher’s understandings of what it was like to live through an earlier time period from a specific point of view” (p. 160). The point of view is what most interests me about her historical art because that is a significant contribution of the individual artist.

Barone and Eisner (2012) present arts-based research as an approach to social inquiry that promotes disequilibrium rather than “...contributing to the stability of prevailing assumptions...”, and they note that “...the arts-based researcher may persuade readers or percipients of the work (including the artist herself) to revisit the world from a different direction, seeing it through fresh eyes, and thereby calling into question a singular, orthodox point of view” (2004, p. 16). They feel this research fills the basic human need for surprise, “...for the kind of recreation that follows from openness to the possibilities of alternative perspectives on the world” (2004, p. 16). I feel that Barone and Eisner (2012) give credibility to my need to present my family and cultural history from my point of view. They further describe the arts-based researcher:

The artist is a researcher with his or (her) whole organism, inquiring, testing with the body as well as the mind, sensing and seeing, responding and retesting—a multitude of

functions performed simultaneously—registering complexity, then sorting, finding a pattern, making meaning. (p. 43)

Barone and Eisner (2012) also support the validity of arts-based research. “Arts-based research is, at its deepest level, about tentative artistic and aesthetic explorations of problems that may not see the light of day in traditional forms of research” (p. 61). I found that sharing my art work with my students not only informed them but also informed my growth as an artist, teacher, and researcher. Art educators have embraced the need for a/r/tography as a method of research because of the undeniable and spontaneous integration of the roles of artist, teacher, and researcher in various contexts. As much as I value arts-based research in itself, I found that it would be impossible to deny or repress the co-existence of the art educator in this process; therefore, a/r/tography was the message that became the best fit for my thesis. I felt that I could add to the body of research as I explored my personal identity in my art and considered the merits of teaching narrative art and symbolism in art as well as the merits of bringing my art process into the classroom.

2.6 Definitions of Key Terms

A/r/tography- a body of practices and procedures used by artists, teachers, and researchers as we integrate our multiple roles through which we are “...living a life of deep meaning enhanced through perceptual practices that reveal what was once hidden, create what has never been known, and imagine what we hope to achieve” (Irwin, 2004, p. 36).

Narrative art- art that tells a story, either as a moment in an ongoing story or as a sequence of events unfolding over time. (Wikipedia, 2013)

Symbol- “a form, image or subject representing a meaning other than the one with which it is usually associated” (Delahunt, 2010).

Symbolism-

1. The practice of representing things by means of symbols or of attributing symbolic meanings or significance to objects, events, or relationships.
2. A system of symbols or representations.
3. A symbolic meaning or representation
4. Revelation or suggestion of intangible conditions or truths by artistic invention.
5. Symbolism The movement, theory, or practice of the late 19th-Century Symbolists.
(The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition, 2013)

Symbolism in art can be used by the artist to represent an idea or object either to communicate meaning to the viewer or covertly to only some viewers or to reserve its meaning only for the artist himself.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Statement of the Problem and Method

The problem that I investigated is exploring the merits (and roadblocks) to creating and teaching narrative and symbolic art. I used the method of A/r/tography in which I integrated my roles as an artist, a researcher, and a teacher. As the artist-researcher-teacher, I did arts-based research during which I recorded my reflections and documented the process as I created 8 pieces of narrative and symbolic art, searching for a personal identity and voice in my works that included family and personal stories. Additionally, as the artist-researcher-teacher, I took field notes on my observations of the merits of teaching narrative and symbolic art in the classroom. I documented my perceptions of the impact on my students of seeing the progress of my art as they simultaneously worked on their own narrative and symbolic art. I reflected on the students' working on and completing their own narrative and symbolic art. The impact of my students' creating narrative and symbolic art was apparent as I reflected on my role as teacher toward enhancing student learning.

I created 8 artworks, ranging in size from 11" X 14" for my family crest to 30" X 40" for "My Family Tree". I wrote about the narratives and/or symbolism while documenting the process and context of the creation of these artworks.

My hope is to extend my "sphere of influence" (Lymburner, 2004, p. 79) beyond my classroom by inspiring other art educators to create their own art as part of their teaching process rather than to limit themselves to the typical quick and incomplete demonstration. I have found that there are merits not only in the process of the creation of narrative art in the finding of personal meaning and personal voice but also in the modeling of this process for one's students.

3.2 Research Questions

In this study I attempted to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways did my creation of art enhance my growth as an artist and help me find a deeper personal identity through my personal, visual narratives and symbolic artworks?
2. In what ways did my creation of art and bringing it into the classroom impact my teaching?
3. In what ways do I think that reflecting on my role as teacher and sharing my art works and the use of narratives and symbolism in the classroom enhanced student learning?

3.3 Limitations

There were limitations in that my school, classrooms, and individual students were unique. Merits of creating and teaching narrative and symbolic art may vary widely among schools and regions. The results of the data that was collected, however, will hopefully transfer to other educators and students as they are influenced to find a deeper rather than superficial meaning in their art. Another factor which I perceived influenced the reactions of students toward the creation of the narrative and symbolic art were their attitudes, both positive and negative, toward various media. I used the collage-painting process as well as other media so that reflections won't be solely on one technique. I found that giving the students choices of media allowed me to focus on my perceptions of their reactions to the narratives and symbolism rather than wondering whether or not their attitudes were influenced by the media.

3.4 Timeline for Completion

By mid-April of this school year of 2013-2014, I have come to conclusions based on my creation of narrative and symbolic art and my perceptions of students' creation of their narrative and symbolic art. I began the process of creation of narrative and symbolic art to some extent

during the fall of 2012 during a studio class. As I worked this past summer in another studio class, my interest in personal narrative and symbolic art evolved as to what I believe I needed to explore, and this need became more apparent as I continued to work. Although I do not expect to have completed the process of creating art about all my personal stories during this school year, as this process will probably continue for years, I have worked enough that I have been able to share my reflections. I hope that I will inspire other artists to create narrative and symbolic art and encourage other art educators to share their artwork in their classrooms. By April of 2014, I have also had ample time to reflect on the impact of the creation of narrative and symbolic art on my teaching and to reflect on my perceived impact on my students as I shared my artwork and as they created their own narrative and symbolic art.

4 DOCUMENTING THE PROCESS

4.1 My Creation of Art

As I began my first studio class during the graduate program for art education at Georgia State University during the fall of 2012, our first assignment was to bring an unfinished art work to complete. I had plenty of unfinished artworks, but I chose one that happened to be both symbolic and narrative in content. Titled *Secret Chair* (Figure 1), it visually tells the story of a secret place where I used to go on our farm when I was a child; I have visited this tree a few times as an adult, first being surprised that the chair formed by the tree's roots was so small and later being dismayed that the chair finally disappeared through 60 years of growth. Although the tree is no longer there, the secret chair will never disappear from my memory and is now immortalized in this collage-painting. The rag doll symbolizes that I left a part of my childhood there.



Figure 1 Secret Chair
23" X 15", Collage and Oil Paint, 2012

Without intent, I had started a number of narrative works in 2005 when I took a workshop with Holly Roberts, an artist who expresses her narrative art through mixed media, at Anderson Ranch in Snowmass, Colorado. When I completed *Secret Chair* all these years later, I was actually beginning a series of narrative and symbolic art works that would take direction during the course of this thesis.

Symbolic and narrative art often overlap, as in my collage-painting titled *Beautiful Disaster* (Figure 2) which tells a story of a broken relationship and includes symbols throughout the art work. While the symbolism and narrative are personal to me, I brought the art work into the classroom to give my students an opportunity to see my art and interpret it themselves. I was fascinated by some of their interpretations and the conversations that were sparked; this experience encouraged me to share my art with my students which ultimately became an important part of this thesis.

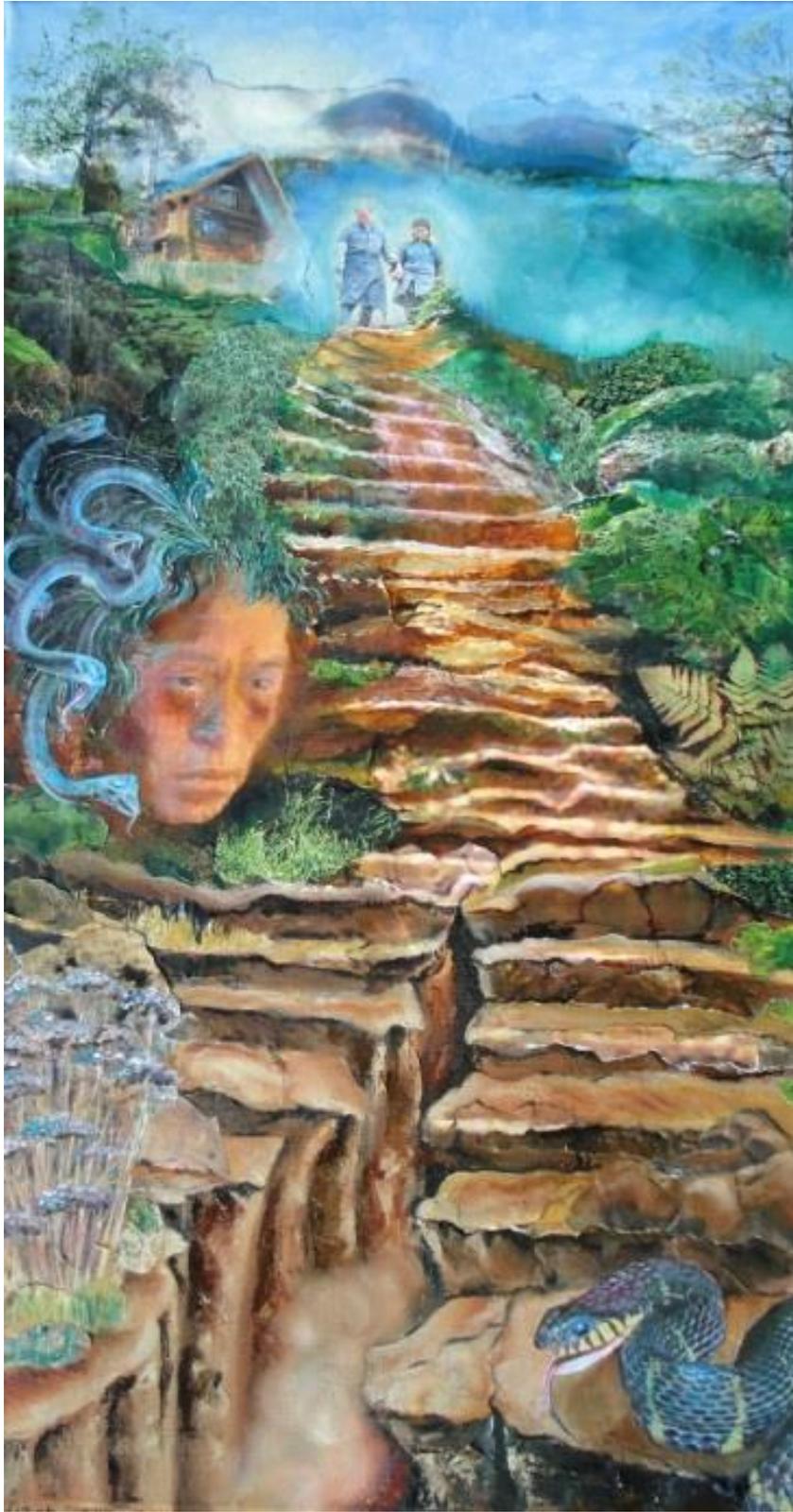


Figure 2 Beautiful Disaster
16" X 30", Collage and Oil Paint, 2012

One of my first creations in this series of symbolic and narrative art was a watercolor, *Daddy's Lantern* (Figure 4), a still life of a wagon wheel, boots, and an old lantern. These items were part of a much larger still life that I set up at school for my students to draw and paint. I did not reveal to them the symbolism behind my work as I chose this part of the still life to paint. Actually, I did not work in front of the students although they could see the process as I drew and painted the work and left it out at school. I did not want to be interrupted when I was working, so I chose not to even attempt to paint while my students were there. For the viewer, the painting appears to be a traditional, Country-Western theme, but for me, there is important symbolism.



Figure 4 Daddy's Lantern
18" X 24", Watercolor, 2012

The wagon wheel represents the journey that my father and uncle made when their family moved from Toccoa to McDonough, Georgia in 1932. They built a covered wagon to move farming supplies. They drove the mountain wagon pulled by their two mules and stopped along the way to spend the nights in farmers' barns. One night, Uncle Jones and a farm-owner played their banjos together; the mules were watered and fed, and Daddy and Uncle Jones slept in the barn after a hospitable meal. In spite of taking three days, the mule team beat the rest of the family here because of the weather and muddy roads that were treacherous for the two cars. When the family finally arrived at their new home, the previous tenants had not moved out, so they all spent the night together in that house—the 9 people in my family group, including two friends that helped drive, along with whoever had not yet moved! My family had no groceries, so the local grocer Mr. Minter opened his store for them in the middle of the night. When he found out they were his new neighbors, he insisted that they all come to his house for breakfast!

There was no electricity, only the oil-burning lanterns like in the painting. Years later, about 1939, when electricity finally was available “in the country”, my dad wired what became my childhood home and many of the houses of friends and neighbors on Highway 81 East of McDonough. I added my boots to the still life because of my personal connection to this family history. I would have used Daddy's boots if I still had them; my boots are in place of his, but I could never begin to fill the shoes of such a brilliant and kind father. In my mind, he could accomplish anything on earth and mostly did. So, this painting is a tribute to him. No one would be able to experience this work of art in the same way that I did as I created it, but I think that others would probably find the meaningfulness behind it interesting. Yet, at this point, early in my process, I was hesitant to reveal the depth of my symbolism, at least to my students.

The next work of art that I created was *Granny's Watch* (Figure 5), a watercolor of items that belonged to my maternal grandmother. Granny and I were very close. The items in the watercolor all remind me of her, especially her piano where I should have spent more time practicing and the churn with which she churned buttermilk as I watched her with fascination on her back porch.



Figure 5 *Granny's Watch*
18" X 24", Watercolor, 2013

I placed the churn and the pitcher next to the piano stool with the milk can in the background, symbolic in itself for the dairy farms in the family, although I wished that I had Granny's milk bucket to place there. Granny used to tell about milking the cows with such a rhythm that the children could dance to the tune of the milk hitting the bucket.

Somehow, there was still something missing; adding the crayons and the watch added the personal touch that connected Granny and me. The crayons on the floor symbolize the many times that Granny took me to "the dime store" to buy crayons and coloring books. Most importantly, the watch on the floor has its own story. Papa traded a mule for that watch as a gift for Granny, and years later, Granny called me aside and gave me this treasured watch to keep.

So, in the process of creating this art, I found that I needed to add something personally meaningful to me that no one else would even think or know of when he or she thought of Granny. Still, my process was very introspective, as my priority at this point was to create art that answered my personal needs to reflect personal and family history through symbolic and narrative art.

Granny also plays a part in the next creation, titled *Playing in the Cotton* (Figure 6). It was on Granny and Papa's side porch, on a house that had a porch that went all the way across the front and then around one side of the house, where my cousins and I played in the cotton. This is how I gave personal relevance to the rural and agricultural world that Henry County was long before it became an extension of metro-Atlanta. I can remember the mule-drawn cotton wagons passing my house on the way from the family farm to the family-owned cotton gin when I was small. In the process of creating the art, I was able to locate photographs of the McGarity and Welch Cotton Gin from both my cousin Bonnie McGarity Williams and the county historian Gene Morris.



Figure 6 Playing in the Cotton
20" X 16", Collage and Oil Paint, 2013

In the artwork, there is a progression of time as the viewer moves from the background to the foreground. The ladies sitting on the bale of cotton include my mother, Aunt Eudora McGarity and Aunt Sarah Upchurch. In the foreground, my cousins Lindsey and Arch McGarity are jumping in the cotton with me. I used the cousins' actual photographs from Granny and Papa's 50th Anniversary, and I took mine from a birthday photo of 10 years old. The jumping children's bodies were randomly selected from the Internet with sizes and clothing changed to appear as though they were in the time represented in the painting.

It happened that a friend found some cotton samples in his barn that his dad had saved from the old Planter's Warehouse. One of these cotton-grading samples was self-addressed to my grand-parents' home from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, so I knew that this was actual

cotton from the farm. I collaged some of this cotton into the collage-painting so that it is part of the cotton that we were playing in as well as the cotton bolls in the foreground.

At this point, I felt more comfortable bringing my art into the classroom, both discussing the narrative and sharing the process with the students as I added to the collage-painting.

Having seen positive reaction to my art both at a local gallery and in the classroom, I was encouraged to create another collage-painting of an historical piece. This time, I re-created *Progress Day* (Figure 7). In *A Town and Country Girl of Henry County—The Story of my Life*, an autobiography by my mother Dorothy Cortez McGarity Eskew, she wrote that she was part of a group of girls who wore Indian costumes and performed as Indian dancers as a dramatic part of the program that celebrated the paving of the streets of McDonough. Reading the *Henry County, Georgia—The Mother of Counties* by Vessie Thrasher Rainer, the book given to me by her grandson Fred Rainer, I found that Progress Day was set aside as the day to celebrate the paving of our streets on November 22, 1931. This would have been the fall that my mother was in the ninth grade; it became apparent to me that this was the same day that my mother wrote about in her book. In this book is pictured an article from *The Atlanta Journal* which had photos that I included in my collage-painting. The book also included a photo of local dignitaries that were present that day, their identities listed in the book; I included them in my collage as well. A photographer in town, Scott Evans, gave me a photo of the square in 1910 when the Confederate monument was dedicated. I included the court house but tore away the cars from 1910; I collaged in cars from 1930-1931 and included a photo of my Uncle Harold sitting on the Model-A Ford in the foreground.



Figure 7 Progress Day
16" X 20", Collage and Oil Paint, 2012

I was puzzled as to how to handle the images of the ninth grade girls who were dressed in Indian costumes and who were dancing in the square. Some of my students had fun posing in positions that might have been dancing like Indians so that I could draw them; this got them interested in the research process and anxious to see the resulting art. I realized that this work of

art was meant to happen when, looking through my mom's old photos, I found a photograph of her ninth grade class with every person identified on the back in her hand-writing. I collaged in head-shots of my mother and her friends, using some that I had heard her speak of as well as some whose heads were simply in the correct position for my work. I added humor inspired by one of my students who was being silly as high school girls will do, and had one of my mom's friends dancing away from the choreographed group and off the canvas.

My research and work did not end with the completion of the painting. One of my cohort classmates at Georgia State University asked why the girls were dressed like Indians. A simple explanation would be that perhaps it was because it was near Thanksgiving and perhaps they were re-enacting the Pilgrims and Indians. When I asked for the opinion of the county historian, Gene Morris (personal communication, November 17, 2013), as to his knowledge of Native American history in Henry County and if he had an opinion on why the girls might have dressed like Indians, he responded to my inquiry as follows:

Though I have no maps or references to offer; I have always been told, the roads our ancestors used to enter the county in the 1820's were along the routes of Indian trails. I have thus far been unable to confirm this; however, the geographic evidence is substantial.

- Keys Ferry Road comes in from the East and extends to the Seven Islands Trail at the Ocmulgee River, a major known trail. If you continue west through Lovejoy, Fayetteville and Newnan you arrive at Whitesburg, very near the McIntosh Reserve on the Chattahoochee River.
- Old Jackson Road, which was the major road in from the South before the construction of the railroad in the 1880's, extends to Indian Springs. If you continue North

from McDonough on Highway 42 you are traveling in the direction of Standing Peachtree and the Etowah Indian Mounds.

- Highway 20 intersects the Hightower Trail, a noted Indian trail on the other side of Conyers and the Northeast original boundary of Henry County. If you continue traveling to the Southwest on Highway 155 through Luella, you will cross the McIntosh Trail, a major known trail from Indian Springs to the McIntosh Reserve.
- The only documented Indian trail in the county is the Strawn Trail, which we know as Panola Road.

Back to your original "speculation"; yes it's interesting that the point where these roads or trails intersected was chosen for the county seat, in 1823. That was likely no coincidence.

The county seat that he refers to is, of course, McDonough, and the square is where the roads intersect. It was a personal journey to do the research necessary to make this collage-painting come to fruition. I can only say that when I began and continued the effort, the pieces both figuratively and literally fell into place. During the creation of this piece, my students became more involved with the creation process, and I became more willing to openly discuss the narrative with them, although I was hesitant to reveal that these images included my mother and her friends since I would have dated myself to near prehistoric age in their eyes had I admitted that my mother was in the ninth grade in 1931!

As invested as I was in the previous works, I had no idea how time-consuming and what an emotional journey *My Family Tree* (Figure 8) would be. In an effort to preserve family memories of my childhood home that was about to be demolished for development in the area, I began a painting of the home including the giant oak of 135 years that used to grace its environ-

ment before a storm took it down in July of 2010. I had plenty of photos of the house and the tree, but I was determined to at least begin the painting while the house was still standing. Here is what I wrote as I sat in the yard in front of a barely begun canvas:

Wednesday, October 9, 2013

I'm at my childhood home with my easel and canvas ready to paint with two giant machines behind me, set to claw into this home from the early 1900's, but more importantly, from my family's history, on Monday morning. I drove past earlier today and was taken aback at the sight of the equipment, waiting like vultures for the inevitable death. When I arrived this afternoon, two surveyors were marking the land to be cleared. It makes me sad but more determined to document this moment. I hear birds chirping merrily to my left in the woods and noisy vehicles to my right, with what was once a lovely home nestled in between its past and its doomed future. I was here a couple of days ago as well, but the melancholy was punctuated by friends stopping by while I was painting, one to take photos and the other to haul a very, heavy, watering trough-turned-planter to my house. Then, a student stopped by to say hello. The air conditioning repairman drove by and honked, as did others.

My dad used to sit on the gazebo (about 12 years ago) and comment that more cars go past here in a day than used to go past here in a year. But after all, he had been living here nearly 65 years. Now, I sit looking at a bird house that he built, falling apart, but having lots of character because of it. Soon, it's all to be in shambles only to be reborn as a Chick-Fil-A restaurant. Letting go is difficult. Creating this collage-painting is my way of documenting the life of this place and holding onto some things that cannot be demolished. It is therapeutic for me.



Figure 8 My Family Tree
30" X 40", Collage and Oil Paint, 2014

The process of creating this work of art has been arduous. There are many photos of immediate as well as extended family under the old, oak tree as it stood beside the house. I spent hours searching through old albums belonging to my grandmother, mother, and me. I was able to find photos from the 1930's to recent history, all taken under that oak tree. There were missing links that some of my cousins were able to fill with their own family photos, still mostly under that oak tree. There were more outdoor photos before flash photography became common. I was forced to include a few indoor photos in order to include all the family and in order to document some important moments in time, but each photo is cut from templates that I made from actual leaves from the seedlings of the old oak. The collaged leaf-photos are in clusters based on the period of time and the part of the family that they represent. I did not even come close to completing the collage-painting before the house was demolished, but I was able to get a series of videos of the demolition taken both by cousins, who were able to be there near the beginning of the demolition, and by friends and me after school when the last walls were coming down.

I brought digital copies of some of the photographs that are in the painting and all the videos to school so that a student-volunteer who is interested in broadcasting production could edit the videos and upload my photos into one video to share with my family. She and I worked together to further edit the video which has become supporting documentation for this process of creating the art work based on my need to preserve this family history. The lesson that I intended my students to see is that art can require research and effort and that it can tell a story. The lesson that I did not realize that I was teaching is that art can be a therapeutic way of embracing life. In fact, my students were immersed along with me during the creation of this piece. The student-editor of the video and I struggled to hold back tears as we watched it. The classes working on narrative art watched the video with me and watched the art from its beginning to its

completion; they also watched the demolition and development of the property and discussed the continuing narrative, not just the family history of the place but the reasons for allowing the development to take the family home. I have lived this creation of art with my students.

I must add that the painting would be incomplete without its frame. My niece's husband Graham Garrison retrieved some door molding from the family home before it was demolished. Then, my friend and handyman Dan Patrick built the frame from the molding; the frame enhanced the art in a personal and sentimental way.

I detailed my process of creating these works of art in order to show that it was the process itself that enhanced my growth as an artist and enabled my finding a deeper, personal identity. Through the creation of these narrative and symbolic works of art, I found a deeper personal identity through the research that required finding facts, photos, and most importantly people with whom I shared a commonality. The research and the creation of the art evolved together as I discovered details that further enhanced the creation of the art; the research and creation of the art were an intimate process that evoked emotion and inspired the art. The satisfaction of the finished project was relevant to the personal investment of time, effort, and energy.

4.2 Impact on my Teaching

My embarking on this journey of personal discovery forced me to create art in the midst of an ever-demanding environment as art teacher. The difficulties of maintaining the demands of art teacher and struggling to maintain some momentum in creation of my art cannot be underestimated. Bringing the art into the classroom and showing my process of creation certainly turned the heads of my students, but the unexpected effect was my increased tolerance of their explanations for not always meeting my deadlines for the completion of their work. Consequently, I was challenged with modeling a good work ethic and meeting of deadlines, as they realized that I was

in school, too. I have often explained that deadlines are important in an art career, but now I have attempted to model, not always as well as I would have liked, the importance of meeting deadlines at school. I perceived an unintentional effect on the students in that they could see that I valued not only the creation of art but also continuing my education; I was modeling an attitude of importance toward learning.

After assigning narrative art in mixed media (collage and painting) for a class of Juniors and Seniors, I found that it was a challenge for them to find and size the images for collage in spite of the generous lead time that I gave them. Also, I saw both positive and negative reactions to the medium of collage-painting. From my perspective, their narrative art was for the most part very expressive and meaningful, and I was impressed by the written versions of their stories that we created after the art was finished.

Simultaneously, to my Ceramics and Sculpture class, I assigned a relief project in ceramic medium that had to be based on personal symbolism. Some students chose to create family crests, and others created reliefs that expressed something personal about the individuals. In my opinion, the images in the relief projects reflected thought and emotionalism. Again, I was impressed with the writing that the students did upon completion of the project.

Although I saw satisfactory results for both narrative and symbolic art among my students, I considered that I should possibly place more emphasis on the research process itself and less emphasis on the media, as it was the art works for which I had done the most research that ultimately became the most meaningful to me because of the intimate connection with the work and the people involved in the research. Therefore, the next assignment to a Drawing and Painting class of Sophomores and Juniors placed emphasis on *researching and writing* about the personal narrative and possible symbolism *before* we even began the projects. A heads-up before

our holiday break between semesters plus a couple of weeks of practicing painting techniques and learning to stretch a canvas bought time for the students to research their ideas and discuss family stories. Students had seen the collage-paintings done by the more advanced class, and some had asked to try the mixed media. I gave students the freedom to decide whether they wanted to do a collage-painting or an acrylic painting without collage, explaining that the process of finding and sizing collage images was fun but time-consuming and sometimes difficult, especially when meeting my expectations that they consider spatial depth in their placement of the images and that they paint into the photographs to better incorporate them into the painting. Frankly, I did not want these students to have any excuses for not getting their work done, knowing that some of them were less serious students than others.

In order to provide differentiation in the classroom, I often opt to give my students choices. In this case, students were not only given choices on the media, they were also given choices on the research in that they could choose a personal or family story, something that happened in their birth year, an historical event or a cause such as global warming, either of them from a personal point of view. I gave them a handout that defined narrative art and symbolism in art and that listed all the specifications of the project including the processes of researching as well as stretching the canvas in preparation for their art. In addition to classroom discussion, looking at examples of narrative art (many works from the previous class), a PowerPoint and demonstration of the collage-painting process should they choose to do it, and plenty of time to do the research, I also texted Remind 101 messages to the class to remind them to do the research and to go ahead and write their narratives and symbolism about their art. Experience had taught me that many students will not do homework without prodding. The last motivation was entering a heavily-weighted grade for the research and writing. I could not teach them the lesson that I had

learned about the impact of the research and personal investment of time and effort if they did not do the work and come to realize the meaningfulness that it could bring to their art.

The impact on my teaching was realizing that I could improve the chances of the students' creating meaningful art if I carefully constructed the process of introducing the concept of narrative art so that the students are apt to invest at least some time and effort into researching, thinking, and writing about their art before they actually begin it. On one hand, that order may seem obvious, but when we as teachers are caught up in the demands of testing to show improvement and producing art for shows and contests, we feel pressured to omit the obvious if it saves time. The impact on my teaching as I became more comfortable with bringing my art into the classroom and sharing the narratives and symbolism was realizing the importance of modeling that investing time and effort into one's art could create meaningfulness in the art and, in turn, in life itself.

Certainly, there were obstacles in getting students to bring images or do the research and do the thinking that is necessary for narrative and symbolic art, as one student even complained that I was making his brain hurt. The Old English proverb, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink" is applicable in the teacher and student relationship. We use much our energy and effort to motivate higher-level thinking and creativity.

Pente (2004) addressed the issue of motivating students to be creative. Identifying the need to tap into students' creative thought, she further writes,

The confidence that comes from *playing* around with materials in art to solve artistic problems can be transferred to curriculum planning. It means being able to enjoy a process of *playing* with theories and ideas until the right approach for a particular student is found. There is no set plan in this methodology; it is contextually driven. This spirit of

inquiry into both roles is the undertaking of the researcher. This research is useful in order to continue to create the next piece of art and to bring the process to my students. (pp. 98-99)

The interplay of roles of the teacher's figuring out ways to motivate and teach, the artist's playing with and experimenting with the creation of art, and the researcher's reflecting on the process and the results is an ongoing process that ultimately enhances students' learning.

4.3 Enhancing Student Learning

My reflections on my own processes of creating narrative and symbolic art have influenced my teaching as indicated above. Finding meaning in art is the bottom line for enhancing student learning. I have noticed that without some direction, students often find random and meaningless images to copy just to produce a work of art for a grade. Assigning narrative and symbolic art forced students to think more critically and creatively for the moment. It was my hope, having observed my art and having experienced creating their own art of meaning, that the students would extrapolate the meaningfulness of investing themselves personally in their art on a deeper level as they worked on future projects.

From my point of view, conversations seemed to indicate that students were at least thinking about meaningfulness in their art. I asked the more advanced class that had first created the narrative art to submit a proposal for the next project that they wanted to do. While one student argued that art does not have to have meaning, another student simultaneously struggled over various ideas in the search for which idea would be most meaningful, all of her ideas showing depth in symbolism and narrative. It appears to me that, if these students were *discussing* meaning in art, they have gotten some message of its importance whether or not they chose to pursue meaningfulness in their art in their subsequent projects. In my opinion, seeing their peers

thinking about and planning their art should have some impact on those who have resisted such thoughtfulness. Meantime, my narrative art that I shared with the class continued to speak loudly without any commentary on my part. It is truly by example that we best teach.

“The power to lure an audience into an alternative experiencing of the world suggests the capacity of the arts for doing that which other discursive formations cannot” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 167). If the arts can have such powerful capacity, then using narrative and symbolic art in the classroom, in my opinion, can further deepen this meaningful experience because of the inherent problem-solving and thinking that enhance student learning.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Growth as an Artist and Finding Personal Identity

I expected to discover more about myself as an artist and my personal family history as I worked on these projects, but I did not realize the depth of meaning that I would find in my work. I am encouraged and motivated to continue my work as I have still much to document and to discover. The challenge is to balance one's time so that the artist within the art teacher has the opportunity to emerge. Art teachers know how teaching can consume one's life and leave little time for social life or even the necessities, but adding the dimension of artist and researcher complicates the balancing act. What I have discovered is that I have to find time to do what I was born to do.

5.2 Growth of Student Artists

Bringing my art into the classroom initially caused a stir. At this point, students expect to see my work in the classroom and expect to see something always in process. I think it is good for them to realize that I am a working artist and that it adds credibility to my teaching. I emphasize to my students that I do not always know how to do what I am about to do—that art is a process of discovery, an important message. Students are always anxious to see the finished product since they have been involved in seeing the progress of my work. Reflecting on making my creation of art a part of my role as teacher has been a positive experience. As teachers, we realize that our roles extend far beyond the subject that we teach. We offer guidance and character-building throughout each day. Sometimes, we encounter sad faces or other emotions. Often, students share stories of experiences that impact their lives. Having them see that art can be a vehicle for telling their stories and expressing their emotions can have an impact on their learning. I spend a lot of time helping students develop their drawing and painting techniques and

encouraging their imagination for new ideas, but this process of creation and reflection on narrative and symbolic art has broadened my expectations for students to search for meaningfulness in their art. Searching for meaningfulness also develops problem-solving skills in how to convey the narrative or symbolism that they want to explore and communicate. Researching, thinking, reflecting and searching for deeper meanings can help students find their personal identity just as it has done and continues to do for me. That is not to say that every student is going to search for or find that deeper meaning or personal identity, but my hope for them is that they will at least develop a personal voice with some expression of meaning in their art work. I encourage narrative art and symbolism as a vehicle for finding this meaning.

5.3 Synthesis of the Roles

This process of synthesizing roles in a/r/tography has been enriching for my students as well as for me. At first, my inclination was to do strictly an arts-based thesis to answer to my need to explore and document visually a personal and family history through my local culture and my need to search for personal identity in this process. Soon, I realized that synthesizing my roles as artist, teacher, and researcher was inevitable, as I was naturally trending toward that end. Once I read the book *A/r/tography, Rendering Self Through Arts-Based Living Inquiry* edited by Irwin and Cosson, I knew that this methodology would fit my lifestyle and philosophy of teaching. Just as I take my teaching wherever I go, I realized that I was beginning to bring my art process and creation of art into the classroom as I pursued studio classes of my own. To observe and reflect on my own narrative and symbolic art, its impact on my teaching, and the resulting enhancement of student learning was an inevitable path for me, no matter what I called it. I found creating my narrative art uplifting, and it is my hope that I will have some influence on encouraging other educators to not only create narrative and symbolic art but to also bring it into

the classroom, sharing the impact of finding meaning in art for both teachers and students. The playful yet laborious interaction of these roles of artist, teacher, and researcher taps into a high level of creativity and deep thought that leads to learning in each role. The result is that this creativity and thought become catalysts for enhancing student learning. This integration of roles of artist, teacher, and researcher does not happen in a vacuum; it happens in the classroom where students can witness my growth and hopefully find inspiration to pursue an artistic growth of their own.

The difficulties or roadblocks come in the search for time to be in the artist role. The demands of teaching with all its inherent deadlines and meetings can consume not only your days but also your nights and weekends. If you are taking studio classes, there is time set aside for the artist, albeit precious time taken from some other need. In my case where the artist role is part of my thesis, I have to find the time to create art. It is not going to happen during the classes that I teach, as I am meeting diverse needs of students during that time. I recommend committing the artist in you to creating art for some deadline such as a show or competition. Do whatever motivates you to get some art done so that you can share it with your students. It is important for them to see the artist role, especially in creating meaningful art so that they can emulate that importance in their own work.

5.4 Recommendations for Further Research

When I consider my perspective of the impact on student learning of narrative and symbolic art, I realize that it would be interesting to begin the study of narrative art and symbolism in the introductory classes and continue the study in subsequent classes (school years); that study could be interpreted as appropriate for elementary or secondary level as long as there are a series of classes. It would be interesting to do a long term study and observe if the students' art be-

comes more meaningful in time without making “narrative art” and “symbolism” a requirement or an assignment. I have already seen some students extrapolating the concept of meaningfulness in their art although it was not particularly an assignment; some, in fact, insist upon it, only since our study of narrative and symbolic art.

For me personally, I can hardly wait to begin narrative artworks that I have envisioned, such as the story of my great, great, great, great-grandmother’s kidnapping by a native American tribe, my cousin who prevented a train wreck and ultimately became FDR’s preferred engineer, the family picnics at our fish pond, my dad’s love letters to my mom, and my numerous trips to Hawaii. As I create my art, I will share not only the art but also the enthusiasm with my students. I believe that this use of narrative and symbolic art will become a staple of my teaching as much as it has become an inspiration in my own art. As I create and teach and reflect on these processes, allowing each to inform the other, I synthesize these roles. Therein lies the truth of my thesis. The roles of artist, teacher, and researcher are forever intertwined.

Naths (2004) journaled, “I reflect and I attempt to map out my journey as an artist, teacher, and researcher. Sometimes I feel as though I am going around and around in cycles, overlapping, revisiting, coming back to the same questions” (p.121). She wrote of the “cycles of learning” and used the metaphor of weaving as she wrote, “...artist, teacher, researcher. These strands are woven and entwined, forming a fabric that is strong and uniquely mine” (p. 121).

I recommend that artists, teachers, and researchers embrace the synthesis of these roles and search for your personal meanings through narrative and symbolic art. I think that you will delight in bringing this meaningfulness to your students and encouraging them to find expression that is uniquely theirs as they explore their personal stories.

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