

Making a Difference through Art

Pam Stephens

How often has art made a difference for you or those you teach? A game-changing event recently occurred for me when I visited a local art exhibition. The exhibition was so moving that I rescheduled my classes so they could see the show. Not surprisingly, many of my students experienced the same response as I did—they were spellbound. This was artwork created simply for the joy of expressing ideas and feelings, yet these were artists that none of us knew and whose names we did not recognize.

An Engaging Experience

Displayed on the gallery walls were unpretentious drawings, paintings, and weavings. Sculptures with the same unassuming resonance filled the gallery's floor space. Intricate and brightly colored paintings hung next to rows of notebook paper covered entirely with circles. Mixed-media pieces and fabric appliqués told stories about everyday life, while fantasy graphics with cosmic humor (as described by the artist) explored imaginary worlds.

My students became completely engaged with the artwork, and time passed so quickly that when I announced that only a few moments of class remained, sighs of disappointment were heard. I called students to gather for a closing discussion.

"What single word would you use to describe this collection of artwork?" I asked.

The terms, *pure*, *real*, *genuine*, *straightforward*, and *truthful* immediately were shared.

"What does this tell you about the artists?"

The same terms were suggested.

The Hozhoni Foundation

The artists featured in this exhibition were participants in programs offered by the Hozhoni Foundation in Northern Arizona. This highly praised foundation offers opportunities for older teenagers and adults with physical, emotional, and developmental disabilities to freely express themselves through outlets such as music therapy and art-making. The Hozhoni art staff is composed of local artists who give guidance without interfering with creative decision-making.

The Hozhoni Foundation mission statement serves as a model for those of us who teach in traditional settings: "Ultimately, every person, whether with emotional, physical, or developmental disabilities, has not only the opportunity, but the right to experience life to its fullest." Inclusionary practices richly reward all concerned. Most importantly, as art educators, we should remember that inclusion, by its very nature, should be ongoing so that integrity and respect are cultivated among those we teach.

I encourage you to embrace these concepts and to consider how inclusionary practices can make a positive difference in your own classroom.



Edward Haswood, *Blue Face Self-Portrait*, mixed-media on paper.

For my students, who are yet to teach on their own, the exhibition helped them to see that the only limitations in art are those that are imposed upon art-makers. Allowing ample space for personal expression opens many doors that will make a difference.

Do you have a story to share about how art makes a difference in your school, your life, or the lives of others? Please share your ideas on the *SchoolArts* Facebook page to contribute to this important conversation. ☺

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www.hozhoni.com