



Beyond Still Life: Collection the World in Small Handfuls

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Abstract

This study uses portraiture methodology to understand how ideas travel among preschool children in an art studio. The researcher, also the art teacher, is watchful of the children's feelings, perspectives, and experiences, and analyzes her data through the writing. The researcher sees children co-constructing knowledge, negotiating truth, and redefining themselves while their relationships deepen. Buber and Husserl's reflections concerning our search for an identical other are layered in with anecdotal episodes of the researcher and the children. Relationships, influenced by the cultural and practical world, are in constant flux. External needs and desires impact subjective experiences, and pairs -- once engaged in shared consciousness -- rebound, searching for a mirror more in focus. In the preschool art studio, intersubjectivity, married somehow to repetition, sets forth the proliferation of ideas.

BEYOND STILL LIFE: COLLECTING THE WORLD IN SMALL HANDFULS

Outfitted in a navy blue nylon running jacket and silver striped tennis shoes, a small boy makes a beeline for a paint easel. He is 4 years old and beginning a three morning-per-week preschool program. His mother pokes her head around the doorframe telling me Otto has promised her a painting. I can tell Otto plans to be in and out of the art room as quickly as possible. He refuses to wear a paint smock.

I am the art teacher and the researcher in this study. For the past 10 years I have observed children use paint, cardboard, wood, packing materials, wire, paper, and cloth to render their ideas. I see images rise to the surface, and move back and forth among the children, to be revealed days later in a different medium. I know from my own experience as an artist that art is a responsive activity (Shahn, 1957). I hear conversations between the child and the art materials, between the child and the still life, and among their peers nearby. After years observing children in this context, interacting and producing artwork, I want to know how ideas travel among children. This paper shares my own observations and reflections in pursuit of such questions.

WHERE I LIVE

I have designed this art studio as a place where preschoolers can decide "what they will do and how they will go about doing it" (Colbert, 1995, p.37). The art room is well equipped and spacious enough for a dozen young children to work comfortably. There are assorted materials for woodworking, drawing, and painting, all accessible to small children. The room is rich with space and has a clearly defined organization to encourage children's independence and peer interaction. For example, in the painting area two easels are placed side by side while another two face each other. A wider double easel, also nearby, allows for either collaboration or for one child to spread out. Each easel has an attached tray holding 8 to 10 small jars of paint.

Wooden-handled brushes stick up in the line of jars, reminding me of exclamation points. Mounted on a counter behind the easels is a large roll of white paper, and next to the easels are three wooden drying racks. Two small sinks and a pegboard holding eight smocks are mounted at child height. There are large windows in this space filling the paint area with sheets of natural light.

Because my research question is organic and contextual, the site supports the in-inquiry. The art room, situated between classrooms, can be entered throughout the day, excluding lunch period. I believe this room works as a threshold linking the classrooms on opposite walls (Turner, 1987) and also creating a discrete space where upon leaving, the person is transformed. It is a place of rituals. Arnold van Gennep, a French folklorist, spoke of rituals as liminal, separating the mundane from the utopian (van Gennep, 1960), moving from "social

invisibility to social visibility" (Turner, 1987, p. 10). Turner calls ritual a "betwixt-and-between condition often involving seclusion from the everyday scene" (p. 101). The preschool art studio of this study meets such description. It is an atypical, non-real, public place where private exploration occurs, often followed by a narrative in a sort of cultural performance. This special space is closed in on itself, where personal transformation takes place as children exchange ideas (Turner, 1987).

As a visual artist I am intrigued that the studio is a place where children share meaning (Zurmeuhlen, 1974). I notice that ideas are appropriated at all stages of development. Meanings are appropriated from one corner of the room to another. I observe the emergence of a painting, a child's wet lines of meaning, built from someone's newest joke. I see the borrowing of hesitant first marks and the copying of completed projects. Intriguing ideas are spotted by glancing over a shoulder, a peek around an easel or from far across the room. I experience ideas in woodworking being translated into painting.

From my long hours in this space, I recognize that relationships between the children are formed from co-constructing narratives. Robert Coles refers to this phenomenon as intersubjectivity, where one child's meaning links to another's, "in so far as individuals directly or indirectly call upon one another for assistance and rejoicing when the appeal is successful" (Coles, 1978, p. 72). Similar to Coles, Buber (1992) describes intersubjectivity as not the presence of two existences but of an emergence of something new from joint interpretation (Buber, 1992). I see such emergences throughout each day, and over the duration of their weeks with me in the preschool art room. I notice a child dotting an open palm with paint, then splaying daubed fingers onto a blank paper, stamping the handprint pattern onto their easel paper. A child nearby is intrigued and gives it a try, first using her hand then, varying the method with small sponges, foam donuts, and wooden cubes.

I also see these children's collaborations affected by repeated encounters with media: TV, movies, advertising, art works, computers, cell phones. I observe rich moments of intertextuality in the artroom. After Rogoff (1998), I interpret this intertextuality as a technological landscape that creates dialogue amid multi layers of meanings. For instance, at the paint easel a child will depict a prop seen in a popular movie. Others may witness the drying image, overhear the artist's narrative, or observe further generations of the prop. This young audience may respond by creating their own version, without ever seeing the genuine source, the movie. This third-generation symbol, far from the original object, may have been seen in multiple media: television, in an advertisement, or electronically online.

Connections involving the sharing of signs frequently occur among the children in the preschool art room, often the result of a narrator describing their work to an audience. Through this "community dialogue" (Smith-Shank, 2004, p. vii), the

transmission of a cultural symbol fosters collective memory and also acts as a springboard for new ideas. Among the preschool children I observe that particular images and the values these symbols represent are accepted amongst peers without question. For example, heroes win, strength is equated with right, and high-pitched voices are used by the vulnerable. These are but a few of the collective truths seen in the shared symbol-making in my preschool classroom.

Reflecting on piles of inelegant data, I wonder how to make sense of it all. Conventional methods do not fit my intimate position with these children or my natural affinity with narrative. I cannot stop thinking about the particular ways that children understand. For instance, the children are always inventing contrasting solutions to everyday problems, and like hallucinatory pink elephants, this evidence is unavoidable and nagging. In addition, the children affect me and my personal story shapes not only the children but also what I perceive as a researcher.

MY NUMBER

This study uses portraiture methodology with influences from ethnographic, case study, and participant-observation models. Portraiture methodology documents the voices and observations of children in the art studio and creates an interpretation of these perspectives and experiences in other words. Portraiture creates a visual narration of what has been happening. Similar to the artist enmeshed in aesthetic pleasure, the portraitist (researcher) uses literary craft to describe their experience to an audience. Bound to authorial voice, the choice of material is entwined in the interpretation. Inspired by curiosity based on past experience, the researcher and artist face a series of decisions. The selection of material and style of text impacts the imagery and makes the work intensely personal. Reflecting on their subject, the artist and researcher shift through contradictions, variations, and patterns, choosing allegories to best reflect the essence of their feelings. Furthermore, because the portraitist and artist's experiences are of innermost importance to the study, what elements they select or reject result in specific, temporal, contextual knowledge about a particular culture.

Portraiture methodology considers the researcher to be generous and critical, questioning and open to possibility. These are also qualities of good art practice. The researcher, like the artist, begins by recognizing a particular curiosity, a curiosity often social in nature. Within a cultural topic, the portraitist sets out to pull from the ordinary a pattern or schism. Through an exploration of the cultural, the author/artist does not attempt to create a juggernaut of universal truth, but to present a work of significance, a messy text, where the voice of the self "spills over into the world being described" (Denzin, 1997, p.225).

Portraitists and artists use aesthetic elements, like line, texture, rhythm, and color to portray the essence of the subject. Like artists consumed with self-inflicted aesthetic decisions, the portraitist's narrative analysis, full of sensory qualities, must select and reject, like verbal arithmetic, always striving for clarity of intent. Selecting a language, rich in the visual, the portraitist describes the study as if creating an image. The narrator illustrates moments with descriptive candor and, like passages from well-read novels, the reader understands the author's intent through imaginative empathy.

With a hermeneutical caliper, the reader reinterprets the portraitist's analysis, co-constructing meaning through an idiosyncratic reflection onto another's experience. The portraitist, like the visual artist, realizes there is no innocent eye, nor should there be, and therefore, finds no urgency to mask one's biases in the telling. Clifford Geertz coins the term "thick description" (1973, p.6) to define how both researchers and readers/viewers hold multiple realities and from these various perspectives discover truths (Frankfurt, 2006). Ben Shahn calls the multiple codings that create meaning "an audience of individuals" (1957, p.39). I picture the halls of kindergartens brimming with all sorts of individual lives. The remainder of this paper shares portraits of few of those individual lives inhabiting my preschool art room.

OTTO

A small boy faces an easel, picks up a brush jutting from the orange paint, and makes a dot in the center of the paper by pressing the brush flat. The bristles fan out against the white sheet. He puts the brush back into the jar and announces he is done painting. He turns to leave. I call after the boy, suggesting he title his painting and was that a pumpkin he made? He shrugs, not looking back. I learn the boy's name -- Otto. Every day for the next two weeks Otto makes a dot painting. By week 4, keeping to the same easel, Otto paints 12 orange dots and is working on his 12th piece of paper. Otto paints silently. I feel mismatched and rapport is strained. "What are you painting? A design? Pumpkins?" On this 12th day Otto announces, "The dots are pumpkins." Whether Otto speaks from my suggestion or not, by naming the orange dot, Otto connects a painted mark to a form in the world. I tell myself Otto is on his way to realizing the whole world can be represented through paint and brush.

On the 15th day Otto paints Batman, Batman Beyond, both in city settings. I see Otto developing "a repertoire from which to improvise" (Bateson, 1994, p. 10). He concentrates and works from memory. He begins with a solitary gray Batman Beyond (see Figure 1) and soon his paintings include walls for Batman to climb and variations on capes. Otto spends an increased time at the easel and seems more comfortable facing a blank piece of paper. I watch Otto move beyond his single color of orange to grays and blacks, the colors of Batman, to a wider palate of greens and reds. At the easel Otto reflects, stepping back and forth,

adding to earlier strokes. He describes his painting, filling me in on who's who in Gotham City.

OTTO AND MARLYS

Otto's early easel narratives are brief like his portraits, one- or two-sentence stories. "They fight bad guys." Within days as the Batman paintings fill out, so do Otto's stories. "That looks like a face and that looks like another face and the red guy looks like he is going like this. The orange guy is reaching overhead, to the sky. There are two houses behind. One house is far away and one is closer. That's grass all around." In our easel conversations Otto seldom gestures while he narrates, standing stock still with a deadpan expression. He speaks with little inflection, matter of fact, even in the most lively of tales. Batman is the series but Otto's stories extend beyond the adventures of a superhero. His easel stories divulge tales about his brothers, his grandfather, and heaven. "Sometimes I go to heaven and I visit my grandparent that died in a war and they played with superheroes." adventures of a superhero. His easel stories divulge tales about his brothers, his grandfather, and heaven. "Sometimes I go to heaven and I visit my grandparent that died in a war and they played with superheroes."

One morning I am bent over interviewing a small child about her tabletop cardboard house. A swelling fills the art room, a rising and falling of cheers from the adjoining classroom. I look up to spy a half-dozen children reenacting an X-Men battle in the play loft. Marlys, a fair-haired child like Otto, wears an enormous navy velvet sombrero adorned with gold braid, and waves her arms rapidly underneath the loft staircase. Otto is on the stairs above her, also flapping. A child in the distance yells, "I really have aqua vision. In my hot tub it is 18 feet and I open my eyes. You can look under without any goggles and without any glasses. My goggles are kid size so they don't hurt."

In the art room Otto stands fixated as Marlys stirs her jar of tempera with a long-handled paintbrush. Extending her arm upwards, Marlys is almost on point to reach to the top edge of her paper. The very tip of her pencil thin-brush holds little paint, so Marlys dips her brush over and over to have enough color to make an 1/2 inch thick blue line across the top edge of her paper. Marlys describes her procedures. When the how-to stops, perhaps to consider what's next, she paints a blue border around the perimeter of her paper. Otto hurries to his own easel to create a centered 7-inch gray Batman. In Marlys' performance and Otto's that follows, I see a celebration, perhaps, in the discovering of another "similar in type to my own" (Mensch, 1988, p. 32) as the children share a mutual passion to easel painting.

One morning at adjacent easels Marlys and Otto are looking back and forth at one another's portraits, enjoying companionship and the sharing of ideas. Otto is painting his Batman series and Marlys is creating an assorted grouping of Green

Goblin (see Figure 2), Robin Hood (see Figure 3), Peter Pan, and Marlys never repeats an image. I wonder what they share through painting so I interview the two children.

Me: What is difficult about painting?

Marlys: To paint a bunny is hard. It's hard. Very hard.

Me: What's hard about a bunny?

Marlys: You know his big ears- his feet-he hops- it's hard to paint those.

Otto: It's hard to do new paintings.

Me: Is it hard to paint Green Goblin?

Marlys: Since he's green, he's easy. Just paint a person green.

Otto: Painting Batman is easy. You just have to paint a body and a head.

Marlys: I love to paint. I'll show you how to paint Green Goblin. (Marlys begins painting a green character with hands on its hips. She poses with her hands on her hips and looks down so she can understand what that looks like.)

Me: Have you ever seen Green Goblin?

Marlys: No, I only like to watch Peter Pan.

This interview does not tell me why the children share meanings, but it discloses particulars: that both find painting difficult at times, Otto finds beginnings difficult and solves this with repetition. Marlys finds painting bunnies troublesome but solves her problem through assimilation. These reflections, verbalized in the interview, are part of the larger ongoing exchange between the two. In the interview the two listen to each other's responses, answering me but also following the other's reflective remarks. This seems comfortable for them.

A month of reciprocal play passes and I find Otto and Marlys' relationship less hurried, less desperate. I see this ease in their bodies. The once furtive checking on the other disappears, replaced by a knowing. The children appear more assured with one another, seldom surprised. At adjacent easels Marlys describes her themes of Peter Pan, dragons, and Robin Hood. Otto has scenes of Batman, Batman Beyond, and Batmobiles. I observe curiosity in the other's story and the tales become longer, more detailed. Through this back and forth of easel painting, Otto and Marlys begin borrowing each other's characters. Green Goblin gets his own portrait; the Batmobile heads off to Neverland. The children see their actions influencing the other. I see the borrowing of symbols, the mutual narrative. And even broader, Otto and Marlys share a common existence.

I am wiping down the counters. Around the perimeter of a small sink are six small plastic horses. I gather the toys and stop to look at Otto's newest painting. Marlys' themes are embedded into Otto's composition. It is clear her concerns are added to Otto's consciousness. Intertextuality, or interpreting cultural signs, has worked its way from Marlys through Otto to present itself as his meaning on the easel paper. Unlike a month earlier, Otto doesn't need Marlys standing next to him for the borrowing to occur. I am reminded of Mary Catherine Bateson who

writes, "The willingness to assimilate what has been seen or heard draws other life into increasingly inclusive definitions of the self" (Bateson, 1994, p. 10).

In the block corner Otto and Marlys build body-sized platforms to curl up on. Marlys pulls her knees to her chest and pretends she is sleeping. Otto lies next to her on his own bed, knees bent, his head facing upwards. He seems to be daydreaming. Both children share truths in a particular subject matter. Yet their friendship stems from a curiosity of the separate facts each knows about those truths. As the children react to each other's beliefs, their limited experience expands to create new meanings. This personal inquiry has terrific potential, for all imagination of one is open to the Other.

I peel the wet Batman Neverland painting off the easel and attach it with wooden clothespins to the drying rack. It is clear Otto's work has a style change. I attribute it to his reinterpretation of Marlys' themes through "intuitively given data" (Mensch, 1988, p.31). James Mensch (1988) describes how early relationships begin with a bodily pairing. We realize we cannot know the other's ego, but an initial physical identification lays the groundwork for imagining like-mindedness. Husserl (1963) believes the parallel appearance, in action and manner, must persist for a pair to progress to a shared "commonness of the world" (Mensch, p. 33). After all, what one knows of oneself is transferred to the Other, the relationship thickens and both are immersed in a collaborative life, each picking up on the other's passions and peculiarities.

There is a history of good choices in the borrowing and both negotiate to an ever-widening shared experience. Can a child know another's psyche as well as he knows his own (Buber 1992)? I observe in their shared, contradicted, negotiated activity the children able to realize the world as public and their relationship to it. Through their intersubjective experience, they come to know the universal.

KNOWN AND UNKNOWN TO EACH OTHER AT THE SAME TIME

Edmund Husserl (1963), the father of phenomenology, writes that we all search for an identical other, a process he calls a "pairing" or "appresentation" (p. 139). It is in the "Other" that we mediate our truth. Through the community we know of collective memory and recognize the world is not just for me, but also for you. Shared experience creates personal autonomy, not from believing in the identical experience of another, but in the physical phenomena of "being with other conscious beings" (Husserl, 1963, p.92).

The pairing begins with an initial attraction based on physical and behavioral likenesses. This superficial attraction may or may not develop into finding a convincing other: the first meeting has the potential for leading to a significant bond or disinterest. To find this identical other "the way my body would look if I were there" (Husserl, 1963, p. 147) requires imagination, or thinking in metaphor.

Pairing is not as straightforward as predicting what the back of a chair looks like after seeing the front. Otto must rely on his imagination; his intuition must predict a deeper semblance located in the Other's psyche. Otto and Marlys do check their hunches, but people with their invisible psyches make the knowing less direct and more iffy than craning around a piece of furniture.

Martin Buber describes intersubjectivity as "imagining the real" (Buber, 1992, p.75). Intuiting, according to Buber (1992), is an intimate dwelling place where one's spirit flutters within the life of another (Buber 1992). In an "intersubjective experience" phenomena either have, could have, or lack intersubjective validity (Russell, 2006). In other words, truth learned on our own falls short. Others have the potential to affirm our experience. Like a centrifuge, we separate the likelihood of mutual truth, and as sediments range from heaviest to lightest we assess an echelon of possible meaning with others. Husserl dubs the layered debris "appresentational stratum" (1963, p. 125).

As new acquaintances chosen for common looks and themes, Otto and Marlys imagine the likelihood of a friendship. Weeks of mutual narratives pass. I observe this deepening relationship surpass the cataloguing of another's quirks and enthusiasms. It becomes a seasoned relationship with Otto and Marlys bound in knowing each other's uniqueness. Intersubjectivity does not jeopardize each child's authenticity. The self is the starting point. Entering into a shared experience, the children hold to their idiosyncratic natures even though they become enamored with another. Through intersubjective activity, each discovers openness to life, more choices, more ways of being. Yet intersubjectivity exists only in a different in degree from what each child experiences individually. Husserl (1963) describes intersubjectivity a way of knowing self or a form of subjectivity (Husserl, 1936/1970 & 1929/1969).

THE SABER ARTIST

Otto begins a stiff relationship with the Audrey, the initiator or the light saber series, who says, "These are not paintings of pop-sides. Lucy thinks that. It's not true." I can see Lucy's point. Audrey's paintings look like long stripes of color on a stick. Audrey, an authority on Star Wars, totes a new Star Wars backpack. She describes the light saber variations to me as she completes each painting. Three mornings a week wet paintings dangle side by side on the drying rack. Both Otto and Audrey are busy cataloguing light sabers. Their style is different; Otto hesitates to describe his work, slipping in and out of the art room, leaving behind two or three variations. Audrey, to better describe her work, mimics full light saber battles. If Otto is nearby, he watches Audrey's performance whispering commentary, standing back.

For 2 months Otto paints 28 light sabers, each a particular color, handle, and number of activating buttons. Otto stops often to reflect, then in a monotone

explains the nuances of each specific sword. Like the earlier orange dot and the Batman Beyond series, the light sabers are painted full page, methodically and lying parallel on the paper like railroad tracks. Otto is perfunctory, and once he makes his mind up, the procedure seems rote. I feel I am watching a train conductor clip tickets.

Their contrary painting styles reflect differing forms of repetition. Audrey, like Otto, paints in a series but she tears through topics. In a year she covers Harry Potter, light sabers, Robin Hood (see Figure 3), the Hansel and Gretel witch (see Figure 4), family members, Halloween, outer space, swamps, designs with grids, designs with curves, bells, hearts, favorite stuffed animal portraits. Otto's themes are limited, scant portrayals of pumpkins, Batmen Beyond, light sabers (see Figure 5). As the light saber series concludes, Otto has catalogued at least 20 varieties of swords. Audrey completes 32. Audrey is a prolific painter juggling other topics while the light saber theme abounds. I urge Otto to take risks and he expands his sabers to include a hand holding the saber. This begins a brief series of hand-reaching paintings (see Figure 6). I notice particular handle details, once so fascinating, are now omitted with the inclusion of the painted grip. His final Otto saber painting is a hand reaching for the hilt.

Thumbing through Otto and Audrey's stack of saber paintings, I observe joint inspiration, a similar method of working, yet the celebratory play that I observed between Otto and Marlys is absent. The focused activity of Otto and Audrey at first seems solipsistic. The two paint side by side, appreciating each other's faithful renditions of the light saber, glean information from one another but acting like strangers. I see little curiosity about the other. Perhaps I misinterpret their stillness. Perhaps I am observing individual intentionality mediated through the intersubjective experience (Russell, 2006). Maybe intersubjectivity is the shared intent, the comfort of a common goal.

In the spring Otto and Audrey produce a preschool gallery show of fifty-two 36" by 24" light saber paintings. The work stretches down the hallway almost to the glass entrance. I see children up and down the hallway staring up at the work. I interview Otto's mom at the opening. She tells me that prior to preschool Otto was shy, not speaking to other people unless his older brother did. Every night in bed Otto prays for all the bad guys to become good guys.

APPROPRIATION

One morning I notice that Marlys paints a witch flanked by a light saber. Otto has long since left the art room but Marlys continues adding to her portrait. The witch's light saber is identical to Otto's pinned to an adjacent easel. The "collateral experience" bound to intersubjectivity makes learning possible (Smith-Shank, 1995). Within the shared experience lies the theory of semiotics, the idiosyncratic and peer interpretation of a sign. Light sabers, a shared sign

between the children, arises from the movie Star Wars, and alludes to the performance of a duel or power. This is intertextuality, the referencing of text to another (Smith-Shank, 2004). Furthermore, the art room is a threshold, a changing environment, weaving lives together, and through the availability of another it creates a cultural group. I am part of that tapestry, and my experience alongside that of the children spins collective memory.

I wonder what I am missing. What I see in the art room are a child's ideas, interspersed with fragments of another's, the hurly burly of activity as pieces of lives rub up against another, scraps of billboard, a blur of color, a remnant of something buried, an odd-sized corner -- fragments may be shared from the media, adults, other children's histories, little narratives, cultures. In having a friend we learn isolation and absence. We discover we are separate beings, discrete from all that is not ourselves. Ideas are the field where children play out their individual subjectivities and whether expressing antagonism to one another's ideas and plans, suggesting an alternative, or overlapping facts, new meanings come from the collaboration. Maxine Greene (1995) writes, "Reality is multiple perspectives and... the construction of it is never complete, there is always more" (p. 131). This is how childhood must be, a continual passage, and a collaboration reflecting on partial truths, ready to be transformed by the new, a kind of intimacy.

Standing at the easel the children draw and redraw their own lived worlds. Across sociocultural differences, the children peek at the differences of others, "to make connections in experience" (Greene, 1995, p. 55). Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in "Narrativizing Visual Culture" stress that innovations and change in art are born "between and communities and cultures in the process of dialogic interaction" (2004, p. 46). They describe a postmodern environment where multifarious groups see their own truths alongside those of another, and the recognition of social and cultural separateness. In this preschool art room bounding with polycentric collaboration, a plethora of ideas travel, cultural memory is negotiated, and intersubjectivity is unavoidable.

- Figure 1. Otto's Batman Beyond
- Figure 2. Marly's Green Goblin
- Figure 3. Audrey's Robin Hood
- Figure 4. Audrey's Hansel and Gretel witch
- Figure 5. Otto's Light Sabers
- Figure 6. Further Light Sabers

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