

LANDSCAPES OF MEANING: FROM
CHILDHOOD ART TO GEOGRAPHIES OF SELF
AS ARTIST/RESEARCHER/TEACHER

(Appuyez ici pour voir le périple visuel /
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This visual journey, which revisits childhood art as an entry point to inquiry centred on my landscapes of meaning as an educator, represents a self portrait about identity and place that is told from the multiple subjective geographies of self. My collection of childhood artwork offers a different lens to understand historical conditioning and socially constructed perspectives. Although these works reflect common motifs, the thematic trends warrant further consideration, including themes that contribute to ways of being as an artist, researcher, and teacher today.

Keywords: childhood art, arts-based research, feminist research, identity and place, curriculum development

Ce périple visuel, qui revisite des créations artistiques de l'enfance comme point de départ d'une recherche centrée sur les paysages d'une enseignante, constitue un autoportrait axé sur l'identité et le lieu à partir de plusieurs géographies du moi. Cette collection d'œuvres remontant à mon enfance offre un prisme différent pour comprendre le conditionnement historique et les points de vue structurés par la société. Bien que ces œuvres reflètent des motifs courants, certains axes thématiques méritent de faire l'objet d'une analyse plus fouillée, notamment ceux qui contribuent aux façons d'être de l'auteure en tant qu'artiste, chercheuse et enseignante aujourd'hui.

Mots clés : créations artistiques de l'enfance, recherche axée sur les arts

SHARING INQUIRY

This visual journey¹ revisits childhood art as an entry point to inquiry, centred on my landscapes of meaning as an educator, and represents a self portrait about identity and place that is told from the multiple subjective geographies of artist, researcher, and teacher.² According to Philo (2003), “researchers can and should take advantage of the fact that all adult researchers have once been children” and as educators, we need to “take more seriously . . . the mundane reveries of childhood, those contained in . . . jottings, drawings, and play . . . as a source for future inquiries” (p. 7).

I present a very personal picture of my early learning experiences, and reflect on childhood art from an “epistemology of insiderness,” a position Reinharz (1992) refers to as “the starting point for feminist research” (p. 260).

By drawing attention to memory, reflection, and interpretation, I question: How does the experience of engaging with childhood artworks influence professional practice? Do childhood artworks reflect concepts of identity and place in adulthood? Are there implications for curriculum development?

MODES OF INQUIRY

Given the unique parameters of this inquiry and the questions I pose, I have chosen a blended approach of arts-based methods and a feminist perspective to provide the methodological framework for this exploration.³

Because childhood art is both the subject and object of this inquiry, I explore these works, as Sullivan (2006) suggests, to “enhance the direction and breadth of data representation” and in so doing, seek ways to “deal with complex realities [of] educational research” (p. 23). I engage in childhood renderings to inform my understandings about art and art making. From this standpoint, I “document the artworks in a systematic fashion” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 260), while at the same time, recall and continually reassess possibilities of the past. In this case, childhood art is a repository that guides my inquiry into geographies of the self.

WITH / IN DATA

I foreground myself by stating I am working from “subject positions” and “social historical contexts” that are “neither fixed nor static” (Norquay, 1990, p. 291). There are multiple interpretations possible of this body of childhood artworks. The meanings are not set.

The data source for this project is a collection of over 200 of my childhood artworks created in my primary school years.⁴ These works include line drawings in pencil and ink, depictions using colouring pencils or crayons, and classroom art projects involving materials like construction paper and paint.

As an inquiry laden with playfulness, childhood art helps me gain insight to aspects of identity and place that informs my roles of artist, researcher, and teacher today.

GEOGRAPHIES OF SELF

Within a theoretical framework of geographies of the self (Riley, 2003; Wylie, 2005), identity and place are central elements. Art making during primary school years symbolizes the physical and social-cultural realms of my private and public worlds. Home, school, and play areas, and the influence of popular culture are evident in my depictions. These sites of artful expression are common in childhood art, yet within these expressions, thematic trends warrant further consideration.

As Artist

Finding drawings on the back of language arts and math tests suggests art making quickly became an act of independence, perhaps of non-conformity, a means of filling the in-between time my own way by demonstrating a degree of autonomy within the classroom.

In a review of my first-grade report cards, I note that art was not my strongest subject. Instead, my “greatest strength [was] in number work” followed by language arts. Art was assessed as satisfactory, with the following comment: “She is interested in art, and displays creativity in this area.”

As an artist, I am interested in how my teacher interpreted creative expression and speculate that the order of subject importance reflected the curricular orientation of the day, with priorities of arithmetic and

readings and writing, instead of embracing the beginnings of art practice that continued to develop over a lifetime.

As Researcher

As a researcher, I engage with childhood artworks as metaphorical representations. Because I am the culmination of my visual past, I interpret my lived experiences with the intimacy of knowing and being both child and adult.

Physical Landscapes. Childhood expressions of landscapes include known spaces of home and garden, and imagined spaces of farms. I represented the natural world with an idealized beauty, indeed, as London (2003) states, "for most, childhood is a time of enchantment with nature" (p. 62). Many depictions articulate a pleasurable, sensory experience of the world, often through physical activity.

Socio-cultural Landscapes. Socio-cultural landscapes evident in this collection are defined by the interrelationships of the private world, the influence of home, and the public world of school, as well as aspects of popular culture.

People. In reviewing the collection, I note that more depictions represent one person or two people than groups, and one portrait in particular stands out for me as a researcher. I am especially interested in my self-description as a person, rather than as a girl. Social discourse at this time was dominated by the second wave of feminism, and although feminist perspectives were not part of my home life, in the majority of my depictions, girls were adult-like and attired in pants. The form and content of such drawings are additional visual indicators of the development of identity at an early age, rooted in conceptual understandings beyond home.

Animals. There are a large number of animal drawings in the collection. I feel many of these depictions originated from my playtime with a favourite toy: a miniature farm set with animals, fencing and buildings. Images of a horse in motion with a turned hoof are consistent with one of my play pieces, a horse with a leg I bent back to suggest galloping. Duncum (1985) states children create such drawing from their own playful, narrative worlds, and while embedded in fantasy, drawings also reflect "the context of the lives children lead in our culture" (p.

44). The influence of television and the western genre of the time likely contributed to these expressions.

Mobility. Mobility was the most surprising theme within the artworks. The form and content of mobility brings to the forefront a number of possibilities. Emphasis on vehicles like cars and boats, themes often associated with drawings by boys, reflect the middle-class values of the society and the community in which I grew up, and, I believe, mirror values embedded in the curriculum. Neither walking nor buses appear frequently within these artworks, although both were common forms of mobility in my private world as a child.

As Teacher

By engaging in this inquiry, I have reconnected to layers of the primary school experience, and my depictions serve as a conduit through which I now impart lessons learned as a child, about how to teach children. This makes the elementary classroom a site where, as in my case, art facilitated processes of meaning making through symbolic representations.

When teaching art to future teachers, I stress the critical importance of recognizing the autonomy of each child, and the importance of complexity in art making they, as teachers, offer children. I encourage pre-service teachers to deeply reflect on their own journey through art, from grade one to the present, as a means to contribute to their insights as teachers of the next generation. As Grumet (1988) suggests, "curriculum is our attempt to claim and realize self-determination by constructing worlds for our children that repudiate the constraints that we understand to have limited us" (p. 169).

EDUCATIONAL INSIGHTS

For me, childhood artworks offer another way to understand historical conditioning and socially constructed perspectives. By engaging in geographies of self, a different view emerges on to how we make sense of our lives, and how we re/construct identity and place over time, as Nicholson (2001) suggests, "the importance of childhood" and the "legacy of those formative years as well as the prevailing ideas that helped to shape those experiences," can continue to influence adult life (p. 28). In this case, visual expressions from childhood represent a starting point for

engaging in both the past and present and memory and perception, and in this way, raise more questions about the potential of childhood as a source of inquiry.

A key outcome of this process is the understanding that there are many “opportunities for transformation” through art within the educational system, for children and adults (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 215). Perhaps by questioning dimensions of self as an artist, researcher, and teacher, we may find, as Richardson (1948) wrote nearly sixty years ago, that only when “a teacher [has freed] the artist’s vision within a child” does a teacher inspire a child “to find a completely truthful expression” of the self (p. 60).

NOTES

¹ As an arts-based researcher, I draw upon creative modes of expression, including video, still images, and music to render inquiries. Willis (2002) suggests such forms of expression can “heighten engagement” by an audience (p. 11). Conle (2003) notes that “an audience’s reception of data presented through performances or images” is part of the curricular function of research (p. 4). The images and music in this video are intended to offer an aesthetic experience, from which viewers might create meaning from their own situated perspectives.

² This video summarizes key aspects of an in-depth inquiry into my childhood artworks.

³ The framework of artist, researcher, and teacher is based in *a/r/tography* (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004).

⁴ Research into childhood artworks can frequently involve projects that examine a single or a small number of works by children in a specific time and place from which generalizations are derived (Bornholt & Ingram, 2001; Kendrick & McKay, 2002; Hawkins, 2002). A large body of childhood artworks produced by one individual is less common as a data set.

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