

Now in my sixth month of the fellowship, I feel secure in the progress of my two projects, through the Artful Transformations Program and Adult Basic Education program.

The Artful Transformations art therapy Program (ATP) includes one-on-one components of case management, Sunday-night phone calls, and art mentorship but the central and most important aspect of the program is group art making, colloquially called “group.” The girls who participate in ATP come from a range of experiences and backgrounds, but all struggle in some way. Mental health illnesses, self-harm or substance abuse issues, surviving violence, and difficult home situations characterize these struggles. On any given day three to eight girls come to ATP after school, snack, hang out, and make their own art during the hours before group starts at 4pm. At that time the interns and staff facilitate the often-difficult process of migration into the art room, a smaller, more intimate room with art-making materials, tables, and chairs. Each group session opens with “circle up,” an exercise that warms up the group, asking each girl to state her name and answer a question posed by anyone who volunteers. The questions are simple, such as “What is your favorite flavor of ice cream” or “What is your favorite animal,” but reveal pieces of the girls’ personalities. As the co-leader of the photography workshop, I then launch into the focus and tasks of the day with my co-leader, one of the girls in the program. Kat has been in the program for four years now and jokes that she has been there longer than the program director. She is sixteen and “graduating” from the program in the spring. As a way to ease her out of what has become an important part of her life, the staff suggested she teach the workshop with me since she is a skilled photographer herself who works at an area non-profit that focuses on youth art enrichment and employs youth. Teaching the workshop will be her culminating project of her time at ATP.

Kat and I have led just two workshops, but the emerging material has been extraordinary. Watching the girls interact with the cameras and then witnessing their first attempts of making a photograph have been fascinating. As a photographer, it is easy to forget that simply holding a camera can be awkward. However, despite this awkwardness, I have seen the girls truly engaged in this learning process, and honestly, it can be quite challenging to interest them in any activity. Each girl brings a lot from home and school into the space. But in the space and in the practice of learning a new skill, many of the girls let down their guard and allow creativity to emerge and hardship to recede.

The girls are learning how to use medium-format Holga cameras, which use film and can be unpredictable though can also create striking photographs. Holgas provide the opportunity to learn the basics of photography and force the girls to be very intentional about what they are capturing. In the interest of being cost-effective, we limit the number of exposures each girl makes, also emphasizing this intentionality and creating a break from the click-happy culture of point-and-shoot digital cameras. Holgas, as film-based cameras, also serve the function of creating photographs that are not used solely on internet-based media sharing sites, such as MySpace, but photographs that have their foundation in art.

Some girls have approached the cameras with curiosity, others with skepticism, but all have experienced looking through a viewfinder, adjusting controls, and pressing the shutter button, an experience that seems foreign to them despite the prevalence of cameras in our culture. There is something almost comical about the shyness and apprehension many of the girls exhibit when putting the camera up to their face to make an exposure. Even in the most dismissing of comments, I’ve seen wonder in the action of holding a camera in one’s hands. In listening to the girls’ desires, Kat and I realized there was a great interest in making collages. In response, we created photobooks

so the girls could collage their photos with magazines and other materials to make a more accessible, hand-held account of their process of learning photography.

In just two workshops, I've learned a tremendous amount and continue to adapt what I've learned to future workshops. It is a challenge to interest and engage each girl, especially when their personalities can be quite different and their moods at any given time can contradict the last workshop or even the last ten minutes. I value Kat's presence because she can relate to the girls more directly, and it is obvious the girls respect her immensely. In fact, a profound moment exhibited this respect just recently. Kat and I were meeting to discuss plans for group when one girl came in and told Kat that she had told her mother that Kat had purchased her own computer by working at the non-profit. In the presence of her peers, she then said to Kat, "You're a real role model." Rarely do grand, positive pronouncements happen in that space, and it was extraordinary to witness.

In the next workshops, I will be focusing on my photography with the girls by making the large format portraits of them, which they will then draw on and manipulate to make the project very collaborative.

My work with the Adult Basic Education (ABE) students has continued to be encouraging in listening to responses from the students themselves. I have continued to interview and to make portraits of each student who volunteers, due to the insistence and vouching of Karen, the counselor. I ask what brought them to the program and what factors prohibited them from completing high school in the past. I ask about the challenges of learning later in life, their goals, their successes, and what specifically about the ABE program is enjoyable.

While some students have needed little prompting and others have challenged me to use my ingenuity while interviewing, all have amazed me with the intimate details of their lives. Many preface a trying and difficult story with, "I've only told a couple people this." Owning your voice and using that voice to represent yourself knowing that someone is listening, wanting to understand, and willing to share a human moment is a basic emotional need. It seems, though, for many of these students, they haven't been asked these questions or perhaps just not by a stranger in a confined space. But nonetheless, in every interview something powerful happens when I see someone trace back the defining moments in a life that add up to the present, to being back in school to have the opportunity to attain education and to have a different, a better life.

My goal is to interview twenty students. I have conducted fourteen interviews to date. Each student's story is his or her own, but themes of racial injustice, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, and educational inequality abroad have emerged. Some of the students are going through rehab programs, some were victims of Jim Crow growing up in the South, and some were never allowed to go to school. Collectively, they represent a diverse and dynamic student body.

My upcoming plans for the ABE programs include working towards the goal of twenty participants. Karen has continued to be my liaison into the community, and I know for certain I could not have made a project with this focus without her. I have considered also interviewing staff including teachers and volunteers, and I have already interviewed Karen, but I will wait to see how the project will continue to evolve and make the assessment later. In recently looking over the interviews and photographs, I realized how important the text is in telling the story. While I am thankful the text is so powerful, I want the visual to become a greater focus. With this in mind, I am going to present

each participant with his or her photograph and ask a question directly about the photograph to illicit a response based not on what I have been told about the student but on the student's engaging with the photograph. I am hoping this will bring the project full circle by relating back to the visual. I am interested in learning audio editing to also incorporate the audio from the interviews into the project. This is all quite the undertaking and I will have to continually assess what and where are best uses of the time I have, but I am thrilled with the direction of this work.

With my two projects progressing well, I have also been making plans for my exhibition, which will be opening on May 14 from 6-8pm. United South End Settlements is showcasing their programs this spring through a six-week event series, and I am happy that they have chosen the opening as one of the events. I have been working with the facilities manager envisioning where the ATP and ABE projects may go. I am fortunate here to have excellent space: crisp white walls, track lighting, and more important than all else, an appreciation for the arts at USES. I plan on placing the projects in the parts of the buildings that the programs work from so the participants can see their portraits and feel proud about what they have done with me. I will travel to North Carolina for two weeks in April to edit, print, and produce the ABE and ATP exhibit with Alex and Liisa.

The work I am doing with these two projects has become, to my delight, demanding in the last weeks and months. And while I am thankful to have an exhibit date set as well as printing dates set in North Carolina, I am quite aware of the time I have left and all that I want to accomplish in that time. I continue to come up with additional project ideas but know putting those ideas into practice will have to depend on completing the current projects to a level that I am capable and proud of. However, I feel pleased with where I am right now in my progress and will continually try to find ways to do more. But I also know how to be satisfied with what has been accomplished.