



VOKE

Big Paintings Club: A Self-Initiated Approach to Teaching Painting, Materials and Techniques

“Liquid Thought”

“Can’t we just paint?” The appeal came from one of my fifth grade students. It was a simple request but fraught with complications because I worked in a school that was adopting a more traditional curricular approach. Besides, I was not the art instructor but a general classroom teacher. Many of the faculty and administration thought offering students creative agency was a waste of time. They preferred direct instruction requiring teachers to deliver material in a linear and methodical fashion. My educational philosophy centered on an organic approach where students became empowered and self-reliant but I had to be careful that my practices wouldn’t appear out of sync with the other classrooms. To mitigate this possibility I encouraged my students to include academic themes or elements in their creative endeavors. But as an artist and an educational researcher I knew better. I had read about the personal and pedagogical benefits inherent in the act of painting (Andrews, 2005; De Petrillo & Winner, 2005; Fiske, 1999). In fact art historian and art critic James Elkins described paint as, “liquid thought” (2000, p.5) and observed “There is no meaning that cannot seem to flow from the paint itself” (p.193). In my own artistic practice painting required developing strategies, finding solutions and solving visual conundrums. Painting was a joyful, reflective, and heuristically educative pursuit.

School Art

Children are seldom allowed to freely create in elementary school. Art teachers and general classroom

teachers assign prescriptive projects that narrowly restrict young students’ creativity. For the past 40 years the term “School Art” has been used to describe the type of art produced in school environments (Anderson & Milbrandt, 1998; Efland, 1976; Gude, 2013; Wilson; 1974). Since the mid-19th century “School Art” has become a systematized and institutionalized genre (Bresler, 1999; Efland, 1976). This genre does not take into consideration self-initiated art and the unique processes children use to create it (Hamblen, 1999). School sanctioned art privileges creativity that is product-based and teacher directed (Bresler, 1998; Grube, 2009; Gude 2007; Rosenblatt & Winner, 1988), while self-initiated art practices empower children by allowing them to direct their own discovery-based artistic inquiries (Bresler, 1999; Danko-McGhee & Slutsky, 2007), which they find relevant, meaningful, and engaging (Broome & Broome, 2010; Eger, 2008, Fiske, 1999).

Many of my students complained when it was time to go to art class. When asked why, they said, “at the beginning of each class the teacher takes a long time to explain how to do the project” (personal communication, May 2, 2014). They told me they were never given a choice in the types of projects they did. During my 17-years at the school, the art department assigned the same projects year after year. From early fall to late spring watercolor copies of famous Impressionistic paintings, Hockney-esque photomontages, Calder-like wire sculptures, Matisse style paper cutouts and portraits in the manner of Warhol’s silk-screens were displayed in the hallways.

This use of exemplars in school lessons and activities is a common practice. However, many exemplars such as trifold board displays found at sci-



ence fairs have become little more than hackneyed and ritualized products (Rufo, 2014). Exemplars used during art classes are often part of prepackaged curricular programs privileging the western canon and representing non-western cultures through a Eurocentric lens. (Chin, 2011; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). Visual art exemplars tend to transform “visual expressions of multiple and complex ideas to oversimplified uses of formal and technical qualities” (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004, p. 823).

Conversely, children are highly motivated when involved in self-initiated art making activities (Rufo, 2013). According to anthropologist and scholar Ellen Dissanayake, people take pleasure in and have an “intrinsic fascination of making visible marks” (Ellen Dissanayake, personal communication, June 15, 2011). It is crucial for creative learning to be intrinsically motivated (Jaquith, 2011) which is why I wanted to offer my students opportunities to engage in self-initiated creative endeavors.

This paper seeks to answer the question: What type of artwork will students produce and how will they go about their creative processes in a self-directed studio environment?

The Solution

I decided to create an after-school club called Big Paintings. I initially envisioned Big Paintings Club as a way for my students to explore the act of large format painting. I wanted to offer large format paintings because as children grow older their creative options diminish. It is common to see large easel painting activities in Pre-K and Kindergarten classrooms (Fromberg, 2012). However, “with each passing year that a child spends in school, art recedes further from the curriculum” (Cole, 2012, p.74). I was curious to see what a small group of fifth graders, unencumbered by the constraints and practices of traditional art room settings, would produce when given space, time and a variety of materials. Although the club was conceived as a way for students to create large paintings, that concept served as a springboard for new

approaches to creativity. Big Paintings Club provided a way for the children to start thinking about art as something more than the tightly prescriptive, bulletin board friendly drawings and paintings they had been accustomed to producing in school environments. It provided the students opportunities to engage in the artistic process free from school art conventions such as exemplars, templates, standards, rubrics, or teacher-directed instruction on materials and techniques.

American art critic Harold Rosenberg famously conceptualized Action painting as “an arena in which to act” where each painting became “not a picture but an event” (1960, p. 25). I thought this would be a good place to begin. Instead of pre-established paradigms I sought to provide an open framework and malleable structure wherein my students could approach the act of painting in their own way.

Big Paintings Club was scheduled to take place for an hour on Friday afternoons over the course of four consecutive weeks. Six students enrolled in the club and each was supplied with 4 by 4 foot sections of heavyweight double-sized paper, one 4 by 4 foot hardboard panel, art and house paint brushes in a variety of sizes, rollers, putty knives, pencils, latex house paint and school grade tempera paint. My approach could not guarantee specific outcomes nor adhere to a set criterion of learning standards. I could only promise that the students would be allowed to engage in the creative experience similar to contemporary working artists. Lisa Wainwright, from the School of the Chicago Art Institute, describes the artist’s studio as a space where “creative play and progressive thinking” serve as a platform “to reflect, critique, and innovate” (2010, p. ix). Using play as a pathway to innovation is difficult to put into practice in a place where schedules, timelines, rubrics, and assessments are prevalent.

Even as an afterschool program Big Paintings Club was a radical departure from the norm. I supplied the materials and set up the space but what the students did with the materials and how they worked within the space was left up to them. I made it clear that they were working as artists. Their time was their own. They could paint if they felt like it. They

could show up or not. I simply offered studio space where the students were allowed to create on their own terms. I acted as a mentor, facilitator and documentarian.



Figure 1.

I responded to questions and offered thoughts and ideas but my primary role was that of a studio assistant. I helped pour paint, set up drop cloths, and clip paintings to the large Masonite boards. I fetched materials and cleaned brushes. After the students left I straightened up the studio space and readied the classroom for school on the following Monday.

While they painted I mostly watched and listened. If a need arose, I did my best to provide a



Figure 3.

an authority but as a resource available to support their

individual creative journeys.

When questioned directly, I gave feedback on aesthetics, methods or techniques. I was careful not to present myself as

individual creative journeys.

Each week I placed the supplies in front of the students and observed what happened. I used my iPhone to take photographic and video evidence of the processes and the final products. These electronic files along with my personal journal entries made up the data set for this study allowing me to examine the effects of artistic agency on the self-initiated creativity of elementary school children.

Week One: The Studio as a Place of Possibility

When they entered the classroom, the students found large white squares of stretch paper clipped to 4-foot square

Masonite boards propped up against two large butcher-block tables set end to end. New canvas drop cloths lined the floor and a selection of paints, brushes, and other supplies were placed on a third table.



Figure 2.

Since each member of the club had experienced my classroom environment for the past two years, they were aware that student autonomy and self-governance were fundamental aspects of my teaching style. I expect this is why there was little tentativeness on the students' part. They immediately chose a space to work, grabbed supplies and began painting. Within seconds the white surfaces were covered with large burgundy orbs (fig. 1), primary splats (fig. 2) and bright yellow handprints (fig. 3). The only advice I offered was that they consider using the house paint as a base when mixing colors since the "student grade"



Figure 4.

paint (fig. 4). One student chose to don a pair of the vinyl gloves, dip her hands in a shallow puddle of paint and spread it over the paper's surface in thick viscous glops. Dissatisfied with this effect she used a



Figure 5.

5). Another student used gloved hands to spread wide swaths of lavender across the surface. She added a layer of green arabesque tendrils by flicking a putty knife loaded with green paint. She then smeared the paint with the flat end of the blade creating an impressionistic effect as the lavender color field shimmered from beneath broad strokes of Kelly green (fig. 6). Two other students snapped and jerked their brushes in quick succession causing riotous multicolored skeins of paint to build upon the surface of their paper in webbed layers.

tempera paint tended to crack after drying when applied too thickly.

I found it interesting that each of the students produced non-representational works. The abstraction seemed to be borne out of physical interactions with the

putty knife in an attempt to scrape off the paint. Unsuccessful, she then mixed a large batch of carnation pink and plastered the surface of her painting using the paper plate as a trowel (fig.

This first meeting of Big Paintings Club set the stage, creating a baseline of painterly possibilities. The students were in control of the process. The materials were not set out on the table as part of a prescriptive recipe to follow but as potential tools of creative engagement.

Week Two: The Studio as a Place of Serendipitous Discovery

In an interview contemporary artist Carrol Dunham referred to the “collision of imagery” found in Sigmar Polke’s paintings (Alibis, 2014). This is how I viewed the second meeting of Big Paintings Club. The students scoured the room for alternate ways to apply paint and move it about the surfaces resulting in a collision of imagery as well as a collision of techniques. It was a time of testing and experimentation. One student found she could cover large areas quickly by using a paint roller (fig. 7). Another discovered impasto by taking a polyethylene bottle from the



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

science cabinet, filling it with undiluted paint, and using the spout to apply bold lines of paint directly to the surface of her work (fig 8). A third student used a spray bottle to apply layers of color. I suggested she first thoroughly mix the paint. Instead she filled the bottle with paint and water, screwed on the nozzle, and began spraying.

Because of her decision not to mix the paint the resulting oscillations of cobalt blue, lilac and lavender was reminiscent of Monet's late works (fig. 9). This led another student to test the effects of partially mixed paint. She shouted, "Rufo look, it looks cool if you don't mix it all the way" as she rolled broad strokes of cerulean blue and titanium white over a damp field of carmine red (fig. 10).

Week Three: The Studio as a Place of Cross Pollination

The students were talking excitedly about their paintings as they arrived for our third meeting. A student who had witnessed the effects of paint applied

via the spray bottle the week before now asked if she could be the first to use it. Wanting to begin anew, she turned her painting around revealing a pristine white surface. As she squeezed the trigger, streams of burgundy splattered and dripped causing others who were watching to exclaim, "It looks like blood!" and "That is awesome." (fig. 11). She then covered the surface in wide swaths of blue and used a roller to work into the wet surface with yellow that created wide strokes edged in apple green (fig. 12). Once that layer began to set up she scumbled over the surface with a pale pink. Recalling how another student used strips of sandpaper to scrape away at the surface of the paint

she took out a few pieces of sand paper from our tool cabinet and instead of using them to smooth down the surface of her painting she smeared the paint and created broad waves of parallel lines (fig. 13).

The students alternately painted and watched others paint while offering comments



Figure 9.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.

and appropriating techniques. When one student donned vinyl gloves to splatter paint others tried it out as well. At the supply table they shared ways to pour, mix, and add paint to their palettes (fig. 14). One girl wanted to make a “paint bomb” after hearing stories from older students who had created them a few years earlier (Rufo, 2012). She began by making pod type satchels out of copy paper, filling them with paint and tossing them at her painting. The technique did not work as well as she expected because the thickness of the copy paper prevented the pods from bursting on impact. Meanwhile, another student found she was able to create a superb splat effect by soaking a tissue in paint, rolling it into a ball, and then hurling it at the painting (fig. 15).

As the session wound down the student who developed the spray bottle technique got a small smear of alizarin crimson on her hand. Thinking the color resembled the zombie skin from the drama television



Figure 15.

series *The Walking Dead*, she decided to cover her whole hand and arm with the paint. She then grabbed her right arm with her “zombie” left hand and said with obvious relish, “It’s like a walker grabbing my arm!” (fig. 16).

Week Four: The Studio as a Place for Inspiration

Five out of the six participants showed up for the fourth Big Paintings session. Four felt their paintings were completed. Out of the four, three chose to play Monopoly and one decided to experiment with watercolors on small sheets of paper. The fifth student tossed a few more acid-green paint bombs at her painting then asked, “Rufo, what do I do now?” I responded, “What do you want to do now?” “I don’t know” she replied as she walked over to the supply table and slowly stirred a newly opened gallon of paint. She noticed how the paint dribbled off the end of the stick in thin meandering strands when lifted out of the can. This inspired her use the stir stick to drizzle thin strands of paint directly onto her painting. This new layer of webbing reinvigorated her work. Eventually



Figure 17.

she used the stick to fling the paint creating a surface resembling contemporary painter Pat Steir’s energized “calligraphic arcs” (Sheets, 2012, p.105) (fig. 17).

Toward the end of the session the girl who was using the watercolors transitioned to painting designs on one of the tabletops and was eventually joined by the Monopoly group. The girl who was dribbling paint picked up an old sneaker and asked if she could cover the bottom of it with paint to create prints on the table. I told her she could and suggested that she might want to use a brush to make sure the paint was spread evenly. Ignoring my suggestion she used the stir stick to slather blue house paint over the upturned sole. She then brought the dripping sneaker over to the table where the girls were painting and pressed a series of six sneaker prints across its length. “Somebody’s been walking on the table,” joked one of the other girls (fig. 18).



Figure 16.



Figure 18.



Figure 19.



Figure 20.

Week Five: The Studio as a Place for Further Experimentation

The large format paintings finished the previous week were now rolled up, secured with rubber bands, and propped in the corner of the doorway ready to be taken home. Big Paintings Club was originally scheduled to take place over the course of four weeks. However, the students asked that I extend the club. The next two sessions continued in the same way. There was no set agenda or activity. Materials were made available and the students used them as they saw fit.

One student chose to apply paint to a plastic container and then see if she could peel it off once dry. Another student

played a videogame on her iPod while the others set about painting tabletops. A few minutes later two of the girls decided to create a series of drip paintings on colored construction paper (fig. 19).

As the session continued the tabletops became great monotone slabs of pale blue, white, and dark red.



Figure 21.

Two of the girls picked a handful of giant rhubarb leaves from the school garden and began using them to make leaf prints on one of the tables (fig. 20). This activity caught on and soon the dark red tabletop was covered with large pale blue botanical leaf impressions (fig. 21). Others used a wet into wet technique to add butterflies and flowers to the blue tabletop (fig. 22). The girl who was playing video games became inspired by all the creative activity and used a three inch wide commercial paint brush to add thick ribbons of white on the blue tabletop which reminded me of de Kooning's late paintings (fig. 23). Meanwhile, the girl who painted her arm to resemble a zombie added blue butterflies interspersed with lavender polka dots to the white tabletop [Image 24].

Week Six: The Studio as a Place for Multifarious Creativity

By the sixth and final meeting the students were engaging in a wide variety of painterly activities. In addition to rhubarb leaves, pretzels were being used to stamp images onto the tabletops [Image 25]. In other places latex paint was applied in thick globs so that it could be peeled off and used as stickers when dry. The classroom wall under the whiteboard



Figure 22.

was first painted white and then a decorative border was added. A student painted her hands a silvery blue to look like a statue (fig. 26). Works on construction paper from the previous weeks were taped together to create large multi-paneled works (fig. 27). More tabletops were painted, this time with cartoon heads and figures intermingled with abstract splats (fig. 28). Students used palette knives to scrape through layers of



Figure 23.



Figure 24.



Figure 25.



Figure 26.



Figure 27.



Figure 28.

paint to reveal old markings underneath (fig. 29). Even bricks found outside the backdoor of our classroom were used as a surface on which to paint (fig. 30).

Conclusion

The school year was quickly drawing to a close. The calendar became filled with the usual assortment of performances, picnics and closing ceremonies. No more Friday afternoons were available for Big Paintings Club. The students requested that I offer the club the following year and I told them that I would do my best to accommodate their wishes.

I learned a lot by watching how the students interacted within a creative studio space when they were allowed to be in control of their learning. They were not required to watch demonstrations, follow templates, adhere to predetermined methodologies, create on demand, or become apprehensive about hierarchical assessment tools. The most

striking insight for me as a teacher was the similarities between the working processes of my students with those of contemporary artists. Like adult artists, the students enjoyed creating according to their own



Figure 29.

schedules (White, 1995) and working at their own pace (Kent, 2011; Myers, 2010). They developed new techniques by considering commonplace materials in novel ways (Kent, 2011; Mendelsohn, 2010; Milliard, 2010; Myers, 2010). Surprise and serendipity was part of their creative processes (Milliard, 2010). They were not afraid to work and rework their paintings to “create surfaces of wondrous nuance and complexity” (Myers, 2010, p.72).

The act of making art necessitates individual and collective agency. Big Painting Club gave students a chance to direct their own creative learning. A “learner-directed classroom” (Jaquith & Hathaway, 2012, p. 127) encourages student-initiated creative endeavors whereas the School Art Style merely promotes “an orderly, systematic agenda for the production of objects” (Thompson, 1987, p. 19). Authentic art instruction “ties art to real life and the real life practices of the contemporary artworld” (Anderson & Milbrandt, 1998, p.13) but this type of instruction is missing from our classrooms. There remains a disconnect between the way art is taught in schools and the way it is practiced by working adult artists (Herrmann, 2005).

So why then does the school art style continue to hold sway? I believe the School Art Style is indicative of the “dynamic conservatism” (Schon, 1973, p. 48) entrenched within the American schooling system. Dynamic conservatism is a phrase coined by the organizational theorist Donald Schon (Bonnyman, 2004) and refers to the way in which social systems resist change. In a school environment it is

easy to remain within the status quo but difficult to elicit change. In my teaching experience I have seen teachers celebrated for having their students produce appealing and familiar school products while others were vilified for daring to propose truly transformative initiatives. Yet transformation requires innovation and innovation often happens through serendipitous

occurrences. We need to rethink the role of creativity in our classrooms.

The educative opportunities in Big Paintings Club went beyond what traditional curricular approaches can offer because the students were empowered to take control of every facet of their learning. Students directed the process and were able to work according to their own timelines, desires and needs.

Their creative journeys were wholly dependent upon the context of the situation and the personal and collective experiences of the students within the space. They had time to discover, test, reflect, collaborate, appropriate, converse, and revise.

The participants of Big Paintings Club were allowed to examine the act of painting in fresh and surprising ways. The abstract expressionist painter Joan Mitchell once said, “there is no one way to paint” (Albers, 2011, p. 104). My students and I agree.

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Figure 30.



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