

Nanette's New Life - Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes

Just when I was thinking the title of this blog was outdated, I up and changed my latitude -- a bit -- with a move to Sarasota. Now I'm much more in the thick of the Southwest Florida arts scene. Hope you enjoy my musings!

Embracing Our Differences 2020 Exhibit



"I Have a Dream" by Shangxi Wu, an 11th grader from Pleasanton, CA

For the 17th year running, Embracing Our Differences has organized an international art exhibit that "uses the power of art and prose to promote diversity." Putting the exhibit together is a herculean task. This year the 50 works of art and quotes were chosen from 16,118 submissions from 127 countries and all 50 states. Each piece is recreated in billboard size for the exhibit, which is held in Bayfront Park in downtown Sarasota. The best part of all is that the exhibit is used as a teaching tool for students, with many teachers bringing their classes to enjoy and discuss the artwork and quotes.

I tagged along on a virtual tour of the exhibit given by Embracing Our Differences' Education Director Ben Jewell-Plocher. We started with Shangxi Wu's "I Have a Dream," the work that won the Best in Show - Student award. (The student's school receives \$1,000 for its art program.) A bit surprisingly (to me, at least) is that one of the selected quotes was perfect for this work. Marsha Danzig from Ohio had written, "Living life as an amputee is the ability to stand tall like a mountain, even when you have no feet." As we looked at the work, Ben asked us questions similar to those that would be asked of touring students. What do you notice first? What's the meaning of the rainbow? How do you know the man is homeless and an amputee? It's a clever way to promote critical thinking skills in young students.

The Best of Show - Adult award went to "Can I Touch Your Hair?" by UK artist Habib Hajallie. The detail in this self-portrait is both impressive and thought-provoking. The background contains information about the city of Freetown from a 1940s book entitled "Sierra Leone Studies." The capital city was founded in the 18th century by freed slaves from the United States, Nova Scotia and Great Britain. While it's difficult to tell from this picture, a map of the city runs across the artist's face. He is clearly connected to this place.



"Can I Touch Your Hair?"
by Habib Hajallie from Dartfor, UK

As to the more obvious aspect of the work, Hajallie has in fact been subjected to requests from people to touch his hair. While recognizing these individuals' intentions are likely innocent, he is always struck by their racial insensitivity. Even worse, such a request makes him feel like an animal that they want to pet. To read his entire artist statement, click [here](#).



"Subway" by Yuke Li of Woodside, NY

The Best in Show - Quotation was awarded to Osprey, FL 6th Grader Brian H., who submitted "If you stand by, then who will stand up?" The quote was matched with "Subway" by Yuke Li. As a huge fan of public transportation, I particularly like this work. And it's certainly true that subways and buses are great equalizers. As Li said in his artist statement, "In the subway, we are all passengers. No matter where we come from, no matter what religion we have, we are heading together in one direction. We are all the same."

Ben also highlighted a work entitled "El Sueno Americano" (The American Dream) by Clifford McDonald from Sarasota. McDonald is a teacher at The Visible Men Academy in Bradenton; his subject is one of his students. While it's hard to see in this photo, hidden in the boy's eyes are the American and Mexican flags. Ben shared that the boy came to visit the exhibit with his class. Not surprisingly, he was a bit nervous. Any concern was assuaged by the enthusiasm of his fellow students when they saw the photo.



"El Sueno Americano" by Clifford McDonald

The image takes on even greater meaning if you're familiar with The VMA. The tuition-free charter school educates at-risk boys in grades K-5. As its website explains, "The VMA vision is to lead boys towards the realization of their innate strong character -- boys who are family orientated, community conscious and globally aware." In a world in which test scores drive many educational programs, it's inspiring to find a school that strives to create well-rounded and socially conscious kids.



I'll leave you with the unintentionally apt "Solitude" by Romanian artist Andreea Zimbru. It's hard for this work not to resonate in these days of social distancing and self-isolation. The accompanying quote by Karlyn Knudson of Washington state reads, "It was a beautiful flower...until you smacked it out of my hand and called it a weed." It's all a matter of attitude and perspective.

If getting to Bayfront Park to take in the exhibit isn't an option, you can see more of the artwork and quotes by clicking [here](#). One bonus to online viewing is easy access to the artist statements. The website also includes lesson plans that might come in handy if you know someone who is home schooling their child.

Thanks once again to Embracing Our Differences for sponsoring this wonderful exhibit.