

Epiphany at the Busch-Reisinger

By Pete Stidman

When Anne Kindseth, Ed.M.'07, and Jennifer Chua, Ed.M.'07, started their internship teaching an art workshop for sixth-graders from low-income families at the Epiphany School in Dorchester, Mass., they expected some challenges. What they found was an oasis of learning.

"I remember walking out after my first session with the class in complete amazement," says Kindseth. "All the students engaged themselves in the paintings and articulated such stunning and sophisticated observations."

The two recent graduates interned through the Ed School's Field Experience Program, a for-credit internship program that allows master's and doctoral students to get real-world experience and, in some cases, conduct research. Their internship was with Step Into Art, an art education program that partners with local schools (in this case, the Epiphany) to create relationships between children, particular works of art, and the museums that house them.

Kindseth and Chua guided the Epiphany sixth-graders through discussions about general art concepts and brought them to the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard to learn about specific paintings. They also visited the class on a regular basis to continue discussions while the students created their own paintings (with guidance from their art teacher, Sierra Rothberg). At the end of the semester, the paintings were hung in Busch-Reisinger.

Step Into Art creator Abby Rischin found her inspiration to start the program in 2005 after observing her children at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

"It was just a great place of wonder for them," she says in May,

between handshakes and child-wrangling at the Epiphany students' year-end exhibition at the Busch-Reisinger. "We started to develop ritual returns to the same works of art. We thought of certain works as friends."

A week before the Busch-Reisinger show, the students gather in Rothberg's art class during their recess hour to curate the show.

"Why you all hating?" says one Epiphany student, Austen. And then, to strike back at his offending classmates, he points at various paintings spread out on a large table. "Horrible, ahem. Horrible. Horrible."

"The only one better than mine is yours," declares one girl, pointing at the work of Darissa, another student.

Kindseth competes for their attention with another student who is fixing her hair outside in the window reflection. It takes only a few seconds for the kids to stop making fun of the student and start thinking art.

"We're at some serious crunch time with the show opening in one week," says Kindseth. For the past two months she has visited the class only occasionally, while Rothberg has kept

them on task with their paintings. "I'm sure you're all going to have a lot of questions."

Austen's hand shoots up. "Don't you think mine's the best?"

"Which of these other paintings do you like?" Kindseth asks him. "What do you think is good about them?"

Building up to a discussion about how curators use common themes to group works of art together, Kindseth gets them talking about the paintings they saw with her at the Busch-Reisinger two months earlier.

"I remember one with a lady. She was sitting on a couch and then this guy was painting his wife," says Malique.

"There was one with a face with different colors and a piano and a cat behind him," offers someone else.

The room is a cacophony as kids step on each other's words recalling the paint-



Anne Kindseth and Jennifer Chua at the final exhibition

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Marcelo, *The King*

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ings: *Self-Portrait with Cat* by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *The Actors* by Max Beckman, and *To*

the Convalescent Woman by Erich Heckel. All three paintings address identity, a concept the kids are just starting to explore.

According to Chua, they were even more eager when they visited the three works in person at the Busch-Reisinger in February.

“One student said that in the window in Kirchner’s self-portrait there were soldiers coming,” says Chua. “She said, ‘It looks like he’s trying to get out. The soldiers were coming and Kirchner was stuck.’ It was a beautiful interpretation.”

Looking at their paintings spread out on the classroom’s main table, the students explain the inspirations for their own work.

“I really love my family, so I tried to put them in my painting,” says Darissa about her self-portrait, a triptych.

“Mine is about dreams,” says Omar. “I’d like to be on the dollar bill. I’d like to get a Ph.D. in engineering and chemistry. I’d like to play something in sports.”

“It’s me because I’m the king. I drew two different cities,” says Marcelo, pointing to two circular windows in his portrait. “One’s, like, a project city. This one’s like New York or something, a rich city.”

More than one painting includes an upward mobility theme. While some of Boston’s lowest MCAS-performing public schools struggle nearby, and surrounding neighborhoods experience rising levels of violence, the Epiphany offers a free-tuition education to a handful of kids chosen by lottery from the lowest socioeconomic strata.

“It’s amazing,” says Kindseth of the school. “Twenty percent are in foster care, some 16 percent were formerly homeless, and almost half don’t speak English as a native language. Almost all of them have recently experienced violence.”

“Epiphany is not targeting kids who are already motivated, kids already testing on grade level,” says Rev. John Finley IV, head of the school. “We take the lowest-testing kids from the lowest socioeconomic levels, but they graduate doing work two years ahead of their class.”



Darissa, *My Own Triptych Portrait*

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The school takes a holistic approach to giving students a boost in life, offering healthcare for the kids and financial counseling and housing assistance for their families. Extensive after-school programs give parents ample time to work. According to Finley, around 60 percent of Epiphany’s families transition out of poverty.

“I drew it like a house because Epiphany is my home,” says Ngoc about her painting of the school at sunset. “I’m there 12 hours a day.”

Rischin plans to divide Step Into Art’s programming between more affluent suburban schools and schools like Epiphany — urban schools that have more time to invest in their students. She loves involving Harvard students.

“Anne and Jen are tremendous. It has been a pure joy working with them and the whole Field Experience Program.”

For Chua, one of the most important features of Step Into Art is that it brings the kids into new spheres of influence. She grew up in New York City’s Chinatown, an insular community she was glad to expand upon.

“I know people even now, you get them four or five blocks out of Chinatown, they can’t find their way home,” says Chua. “All those programs that pulled me uptown to see movies and museums were really important to me.”

Equally powerful, say Kindseth and Chua, is drawing kids out by

encouraging them to discover meaning in art and giving them the worthy goal of a museum exhibition.

For kids like La Anna, whose painting *Guidance* shows a benevolent sun smiling down on a pair of upraised hands, the Step Into Art program provides a path to express formative experiences that are often left unsaid.

“My parents got me through a lot and helped me make good decisions,” says La Anna at the class’s final exhibition. “My uncle had died. My parents told me, ‘He still loves you and he’s looking down from heaven and smiling.’”

☒ *To get information about hiring an intern through the Field Experience Program, go to www.gse.harvard.edu/fep.*

— *Pete Stidman is a Boston-based freelance writer and director of the Alliance for Community Journalism.*