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Karen Hampton

khampton@kdhampton.com

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Historical Memory and Empathy in Studio Art Classroom

Karen Hampton

khampton@kdhampton.com

During the fall of 2002, I was a guest instructor at California College of Art and Craft in Oakland, California, and was asked to create a course inspired by my artwork and research. The course I created was titled, “Slavery, Internment and Transcendence,” subtitled “Artists of Color Who Use Historical Memory.” The course involved the study of contemporary artists, their artwork and the historical context in which the artwork was inspired and fashioned

Students were taken inside the artist's world, learning to analyze artwork from the perspective of historical memory. By using “sense of place” curriculum, which included an understanding of landscape and power dynamics, students learned the skills necessary to deconstruct the artist and his or her artwork. Armed with a deeper sense of self in society, students were then challenged to tell their own stories within the medium of their choice. My goal was to see if students could use historical memory as a source of inspiration for artwork. I was concerned that my students develop the skill set necessary to understand and use intuitive empathy as a tool for developing their own artwork. They learned to harness an emotional response to a subject and develop a connection between artist and subject. The bond that was created carried over and was felt between artwork and its viewers. Students shared papers and original artwork containing powerful stories from their childhoods, of their communities, and of their cultures deeply rooted in their souls. I believe that the synthesis of historical research and empathetic vision is a powerful tool when developing historical narrative in art. This teaching experience has confirmed for me that awareness of and the ability to use historical memory is central to classroom instruction in studio art.

My theory on this artwork stems from self-study of my own experience as an artist. Armed with an undergraduate degree in Art and Anthropology and a particular interest in the study of one's own culture, I embarked on an adventure, testing my theory that through the sharing of stories in a safe setting one learns to feel the safety to share his or her own story. I really hoped that by embarking on this quest and presenting my own artwork and that of my peers I could make an impression on my students. These were conclusions that I reached after many years of substantial soul-searching. Through my own art experience, I came to understand historical memory and intuitive empathy. Only through deep analysis did I come to understand the value of these two factors as healing tools for the artist and society.

“Historical memory” is the process by which oral histories are used to shed new light on conventional sources and topics. It is the primary tool that these “Artists of Color” use to demonstrate a different historical truth which has previously been omitted, distorted, or reorganized to support individuals, ethnic groups, political parties, and even nations in power.

My primary goal with this course was to expose my students to the lives and stories of artists new to them and inform them about how an artist uses these tools. Secondly, I hoped to share with my students the power and strength Artists of Color gain by confronting painful historical experience in their artwork.

Opening day for “Slavery, Internment and Transcendence” began with a challenge. When I walked into the classroom and met my students, I found out that the course was mislabeled in the catalogue and everyone believed that they were taking a class on world religions. So, my goal for the moment was to talk fast and, hopefully, keep them interested in returning after lunch. It must have worked, since they all stayed with the course through the end of the semester. We met

every Friday for six hours and the day was divided in half, mornings devoted to lecture and afternoons to research and artwork.

A major challenge that met me at the door was the demographics of the class. I don't know what I was thinking, but somehow I imagined that I would be presented with a diverse class of students. Instead, I saw, at least on the surface, three students of color: a Japanese student, a Japanese-American student and an East Indian student. My remaining 12 students appeared to be exclusively of European descent.

Slavery, Internment and Transcendence

With this course, I was interested in exploring the diverse processes used by artists of color to extract or harness an emotional response from their audience. My hypothesis when approaching this project was that, through the process of deconstructing artwork, the artist's life, and the historical context in which the work was produced, I could strengthen my students as artists and help them to become a more compassionate and enlightened audience. I wanted them to see race as an issue and I wanted them to know the many ways in which race impacts the lives of artists of color and, therefore, plays a role in their artwork.

The artwork that I was interested in exploring was not medium specific. It focused on artists of many different media; including painters, photographers, writers, film makers, installation and textile artists. This style of art is rooted in the Identity Art Movement of the 1970s, but really did not begin to take form until the 1980s. *Slavery, Internment and Transcendence* was about the creation of an art movement, but also about the processes these artists used to distill their artwork. I was interested in how they combined historical research, intuitive empathy and an understanding of place to give meaning to their artwork.

As explained more fully below, my syllabus and reader included artists representing Latino, Asian and African American cultures. During the semester, students were assigned three projects that would deeply explore issues of race and the “other in society.” They were to: (i) create a response (either written or visual) to a presentation, research or reading; (ii) make a presentation to the class on an artist of color; and (iii) the final, each student was required to create new art work that internalized the lessons he or she had learned from the experience of the “other” in society. I wanted them to come to class prepared with open minds, my final words on the syllabus were to “come and participate with ambition, focus and passion, because this was going to be a deep experience.”

The Artists

My goal was to expose the class to a wide variety of artists, from a number of different cultures and mediums. The primary criterion that I used in choosing artists was that they be contemporary artists who view their artwork as a political statement about culture and tell their story through the lens of historical memory. The class syllabus was divided into three sections; artist manuscripts, guest artists and my process as an artist. The artists included in the syllabus were; Kara Walker, Julie Dash, June Watanabe, Carmen Lomas Garza, Ruth Asawa, Mildred Howard, Maya Lin and “Visiting Artist’s” Fan Warren and Alex Donis.

All of the chosen artists use their artwork to speak about identity consciousness. Students engaged both Fan and Alex with questions about race and race consciousness. They wanted to know what stimulated their art making process and how they turned race from a negative to a positive tool in their artwork. Student presentations further broadened the view of historical

memory by introducing to the class filmmakers Wang Kai-Wai and Rubin Ortiz Torrez, as well as Blues musician Lonnie Pitchford. Because these were waters I had never crossed, I could not have anticipated the degree to which the students would become engaged and committed to the class, and challenge me to further investigate the true meaning of transcendence.

The Students

I had no idea what the experience of teaching a course like “Slavery, Internment and Transcendence” would be. Many emotions ran through me, including fear and trepidation. As mentioned above, never having taught at this college before, I wishfully anticipated what the class make-up might be. In my fantasy world, I imagined that students of color would support my hypothesis and help me draw the other students into the subject. To my surprise my students were a little different than I expected. There presented my first challenge: how to draw them into the subject and evoke passion in them? I soon learned that their empathy would draw them into the subject and that they would begin to see how issues of race are a reflection of the "other" in society and how the class opened up doors for them to share their own stories.

As is frequently my experience, my best teachers are my students. From this group I learned to see the "other" through bigger eyes, to see passion from a deeper place and I learned lessons that I will carry through out my life. I would begin to see the "other" as the child with dyslexia, the child growing up in rural New Mexico where she was the only white person, the child growing up searching for self as she reflects on her deeply racist southern grandmother, on the Indian child growing up in a Mormon household. What developed between me the teacher and spirit guide, on the one hand, and my students, on the other, was pure magic. We broke down and opened walls of isolation and created channels for healing between cultures. Usually I feel happy if I can open up 1 -- maybe 2 -- hearts but this course changed a number of lives, including mine.

Sense of Place

One of my primary tools I used to decipher our subjects and the artist's approach was the use of a "sense of place" curriculum. Sense of Place is an anthropological approach to learning that relies on clues remaining in the land or landscape. For my students, it was developing an understanding of how these Artists of Color deconstruct historical clues and markers and transform them into inspiration for new works of art. An example of how I used this for the class was our study of the site-specific installation about Bidy Mason, created by Betye Saar in Downtown Los Angeles. Reading for the course began with two essays titled, “The View From Grandma Mason's Place” and “Rediscovering an African American Homestead,” from “The Power of Place,” from Dolores Hayden's “Urban Landscapes as Public History”. Both essays addressed the research presented at a public workshop at the University of California at Los Angeles. November 21, 1987. This research served as the foundation for the site specific installation on the life of Bidy Mason in downtown Los Angeles, by Artist Betye Saar. I chose to use these essays to demonstrate the role of research in deconstructing the story/artwork.

The essay entitled "The View from Grandma Mason's Place" begins: "One pioneer's life cannot tell the whole story of building a city. . . ." Bidy Mason's experiences as a citizen of Los Angeles were typical -- as a family head, homeowner, and churchgoer. Yet they were also unusual, since gender, race, and status as a slave increased her burdens. She arrived in Southern California in 1851 as the lifelong slave of a master from Mississippi and won freedom for herself and thirteen others in court in 1856. Her case gave Los Angeles's Judge Hayes a chance to make

a decision against slavery, in favor of California's new constitution. When Bidy Mason won her case and chose to settle in Los Angeles as part of the small African American community there, her special medical skills, learned as a slave midwife and nurse, provided entry for her into many households, rich and poor, of every race and ethnicity.

In taking my students through this experience, I saw my role as their spirit leader, guiding them along an inside track of discovery, a world where they could acknowledge their own emotions and feel empathy towards the stories of the "other." In a way it was like a call and response. Many of my students did not know many people of color intimately and had never experienced cultural alienation. I wanted to make them feel and think about the other person. I chose these artists for my students to study because they create artwork that transforms historical moments into creative statements about society.

Looming Large

Mid-way through the semester I was sharing my art work and how I use the narrative to speak. First we had a fieldtrip to "Looming Large: Contemporary Weavers of the Vanguard," at the Bedford Gallery in Walnut Creek. I saw the fieldtrip as an opportunity to share my full process. My work on display at the Bedford was about family, race, survival and love. They had the opportunity to hear about the inspiration for my artwork and how I use my artwork to heal a lot of pain in my life. Because I don't think to talk about it very much, I really did not anticipate how much that would help them process intuitive empathy. The week following our fieldtrip I shared my graduate school thesis "Indigo, Black and Brown: Reflections From an African American Female Perspective." "Indigo, Black and Brown" was my memoir about my experience conducting research on African American Women Slavery and Weaving. My thesis recorded my experiences conducting fieldwork in the Carolinas and Virginia in 1999. In my thesis I also addressed how, upon my return, I filtered these experiences and tried to gain an understanding of African-American history and how to transfer its spirit to cloth.



Karen Hampton, "Invisible Child," 6" x 69"
Photo: Karen Hampton, 1996; Artist's Collection.

As I had hoped, the show provoked dynamic discussions about my work and weaving. My students were "getting" the concepts of historical memory and intuitive empathy. As my students began to comprehend intuitive empathy, the question remained -- would they be able use intuitive empathy in their own artwork?



Karen Hampton, "Mi Familia," 28" x 28"
Photo: Sybila Savage, 1994; Artist's Collection.

Students' Work

Research and Analysis

Research as a preparation for artwork was a new concept for a large number of my students. Many had run from traditional academia with the hope that they would never have to write another academic paper. Even though many of my students fought this assignment, they went on to complete some good research and taught me about several artists, musicians and filmmakers with whom I had not been familiar. Each lecture developed into deeply intellectual discussions. I observed that when a student did not carry his/her own weight, the class went after them.

I have included two examples from their research assignment. Both of these approaches were unique. One of my students, Chanpory, introduced us to the world of filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai and his film *Chunking Express*. For Chanpory, having been born in India and growing up in West Oakland in a Mormon family, his study and deconstruction of Wong Kar-Wai's filmmaking style was the opportunity for him to share his insight into what it means to be an Asian artist and walk the line between East and West. Chanpory concluded that Wong Kar-Wai claims his power as a filmmaker by allowing the viewer to transition from spectator to participant. He shared with us his analysis of how Kar-Wai's style differs from the usual fare on the Hollywood screen. Looking at three raw contemporary lives Chanpory, concludes that Wong Kar-Wai's strength is that, through his understanding of culture, he is able to harness the best from Chinese and American cinema.

Mani shared with us a member of her family. She taught us about the Delta Blues musician Lonnie Pitchford born in rural Mississippi. Lonnie made a one-string guitar called the "Diddley

Bow" at the age of five. In 1974, Lonnie became an overnight wonder when the Smithsonian Museum discovered his ability to bring the material of the legendary Robert Johnson to life. In sharing this story, Mani was able to take us into her family's world and how her mother, a Blues producer, discovered Lonnie and how Lonnie became a major part of Mani's growing up. Mani was able to convey how hard life in rural Mississippi is and how a privileged Caucasian family learned and grew because of their association with Lonnie Pitchford.

New Artwork

Through the semester the class grew tighter and tighter. As we viewed and analyzed works of others the sharing got deeper. The class was transformed with stories. My students, who I originally wondered whether they could begin to see and feel empathy, got it! We had explored issues of internment from the inside and the outside. Two students were of Japanese ancestry and chose two very different ways to approach the work. Akemi prepared some very thought provoking research on June Wantanabe and her dances about internment. Next, she created a website for children on internment, including resources.

With a name like *Slavery, Internment and Transcendence*, you might think that things would be pretty heavy most of the time. This class was definitely a very unique experiment. We had really heavy sharing and deep moments. What I think is that those 15 weeks held many little gems of self enlightenment. One such story was a paper Brett wrote titled, *Julian Little*. It was the re-memory that was triggered during the semester as he remembered his childhood and how he was functionally illiterate until the 8th grade when his secret escaped and, in addition to his regular school day, he began a special program for the next three years. He contrasted this with a child to whom he feels particularly close, who had many learning disabilities and his search to find a way to help that child. Brett felt so inspired by Atsu's (another student's) final project -- a clay bust -- that it inspired Brett to explore a medium that he was unfamiliar with to help him further explore his emotion and feeling.

The final project that I want to share is about the video documentary made by a very sweet, happy, student of mine, Bethany. Even though we met many times in preparation for her trip, I could not have been prepared for the incredible fortitude she demonstrated. Through Bethany's lens, we were introduced to her South Carolina family during Thanksgiving break. She led us on an intimate journey into the mind of her grandmother as she questioned her grandmother on her views about race. As Bethany lay across her grandmother's bed, we were given a peak into all her grandmother's little "treasures" as Bethany explored the meaning of her pick-a-ninny tea towels and black memorabilia, which filled up her bathroom. What was so amazing was how strong Bethany was -- daring to explore her grandmother's beliefs and openly share her grandmother's blatantly racist views with us. Instead of shame, Bethany rose and became a true researcher and went on to have her grandmother guide her into her dead grandfather's life in the KKK, which included her showing us where he hung his robe and hood.

Conclusion

The classroom became a safe haven for all of us that semester, even though the room was in horrible condition and the video equipment was in poor condition. It was a place where we would convene to share stories from our lives in a safe environment. It was a place where the open mind could flourish and views could be explored. Artwork produced during the class was strong and spoke of humanity and dreams. I believe that the words of Japanese exchange student, Atsu, say more about the power of historical memory and empathy than any words of mine

could. As a Japanese national, having grown up in Japan, Atsu was accustomed to a very homogenous community, where every one is polite and speaks with a very soft, controlled, voice. Her knowledge about American culture came from television. Television taught her all about Caucasian culture in America, and very little about the African American and Latino communities. Here are some excerpts from a letter she wrote me, addressing her experience in the class:

It's funny and horrible at the same time that I never really felt like black people and Latinos were same as me. . . . My country has been under big influence of USA after the losing war. And what we see in Japan is a lot of Hollywood movies and TV dramas that were mostly with white people. I, as a kid, learned from early age that white people were the ones to look up to. And all I knew about black people was their history of slavery in USA and how they had been out-caste in the country.

When I came here, I was with a middle-class family who was Caucasian. . . . Where all I saw were white people. I also belonged to a language school, which demanded a high tuition. That means people who attended classes there were from middle and upper class. Again, all my friends were Caucasian. I did see black people. I was commuting to Berkeley for school on BART or the bus, they were right next to me and talking or singing very freely. I remember thinking, "I can't stand how loud they are!" That is very Japanese-like: we love and are aware of silence more than anybody...This class opened me up to the experiences of colored people. After Mani's presentation, I became very curious about jazz and the blues....the class discussion that followed every presentation really helped me to learn how to speak about people. I learned how to be sensible and thoughtful, because I realized our subjects' sensitivity.

When the semester began I hoped to make a difference in maybe a few students' lives. Maybe encourage one or two to experiment with historical memory, maybe get them to look at artwork a little differently and maybe push their own art a little more. I never could have anticipated the collective power found in combining historic research and empathic vision. It changed my life. I gained an even deeper respect for historic memory use in narrative artwork and the healing power it holds for the artist and society. Even though I have been using it in my artwork now for 16 years, I never could have imagined the deep bond created when a classroom becomes a sensitized experience for the class.

This class was a challenge and a joy for me to teach. The challenge was that I had to expose myself and my theory of my artwork to my students. My most difficult thing to share was my life and how I came to understand historical context; power is conveyed through not only the historical but also the emotional setting of the story. I will conclude this talk with a quote from a letter another student wrote to me following the class:

I just wanted to say thanks again Karen for a wonderful semester, I really enjoyed class and feel like I took away a lot of interesting perspectives. Plus it has definitely helped me in my personal growth which has been an integral part of my art making.