

Junkyard Portraits

by Karla Hernandez and Kurt Wootton



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Introduction by Kurt Wootton

I've always been fascinated by the possibilities of self-portraits ("auto retratos" in Spanish). To me they seem to be the natural translation to the field of visual art of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's work. Paulo Freire writes, "the reading and writing of words comes by way of reading the world." In order to develop our capabilities to read and write, we need to find the words to describe ourselves and the world around us. In Freire's view language is not something that is static, sitting in pages of books to be analyzed; it is something that is alive. When we harness the power of language we begin to create a narrative of ourselves in the world. It's interesting to me that Obama wrote his biography before he ran for political office. In *Dreams from My Father*, he seems to be discovering his voice through the words he put on the page, and, in a sense, creating himself through his own narrative.

The self-portrait is the visual equivalent of the biography. Through self-portraits students reflect on who they are and further invent who they are by presenting an image of themselves to the world. Because we've seen many



artists teach self-portraiture to students of every age, when Karla Hernando and Sarabeth Berk introduced this multi-layered process of creating self-portraits involving sculpture, photography, and text, we knew we had a new best-practice to document and share.



The Habla Summer Lab School brings together kids, teaching artists, and educators from around the world. For four weeks every summer in Mérida, Mexico, artists and educators design and pilot new practices in education conceived collaboratively by the international teaching team. This practice "Junkyard Portraits" was developed by Mérida teaching artist Karla Hernando Flores, the coordinator for Habla's lab school, and Sarabeth Berk, a teaching artist from the United States and the coordinator for the education programs at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Aspen, Colorado.



The Voice of the Teaching Artist: Karla

Sarabeth Berk, a teaching artist from the United States, and I collaborated to teach Habla's summer lab school for local and international kids. Our concept for the summer was "Opening Spaces." Since the summer school was four weeks we subdivided this larger theme into four smaller ones: personal spaces, group and family spaces, community spaces, and mythic spaces. Parallel to our lab school, Habla was hosting a teacher institute around the theme of "Cabinets of Wonder," so we had this in mind as well when we began to conceive of the arts experience in our classroom. We knew that self-portraiture is often

used in classrooms, but we wanted to reinvent it, to give it new life. We believed that kids could approach themselves as if they were cabinets of wonders. We first imagined how the final art objects would look. At first we had the idea that they could create full representations of themselves with paper-mache. This idea developed into using found objects from the community. We decided to find our objects in a junkyard that we discovered outside the city of Mérida. While we were at the junkyard, it started to rain, but we didn't care. We kept walking around the yard looking for objects and putting them in our car.

I found myself feeling like a little girl again, imagining what my own sculpture would look like with all the objects. I found myself picking up round things, and unconsciously Sarabeth was picking up larger objects, objects that had square shapes. That was important for us both as artists and teachers. We were imagining the possibilities for creating our own work. We knew that if we could inspire the same feeling in the kids, it would be a wonderful process. We believed that kids could approach themselves as if they were cabinets of wonders.



Procedure



1 Visiting the junkyard. There is often a scarcity of art materials in small towns around Mexico. Teaching artists we've met often find other ways to collect and use found materials. This eclectic gathering of diverse materials not only saves money but is ecological as well. The materials are recycled through the art-making process. "Junk" becomes a beautiful sculpture in mom and dad's home! With this impulse in mind Karla and Sarabeth scoured a junkyard looking for scraps of metal, gears, springs, rods, and anything else that looked interesting. They brought this metal back to Habla in boxes and stored it.

2. Traditional "Self" Portraits. To introduce the idea of portraiture, the teachers asked the students to begin with a traditional portrait wherein each student, only using a pencil, drew a portrait of another student.

Then the subjects of the portraits received their portraits from their partners as a "gift of art." They then used pastels to add color to their own portraits thus creating a back-and-forth interpretive movement between the two artists and between the two subjects.

3. Recreating the Junkyard. The teachers scattered all the objects from the junkyard throughout the gardens at Habla.





Karla explains, “We wanted the students to go on a hunt for objects. We wanted them to realize they were selecting their objects, so we didn’t want them neatly organized. We wanted to recreate the feeling of finding them for the first time in a junkyard.” The students brought them all back to a common area on the sidewalk, and then as a class organized them into categories that they determined.

4. An Eclectic Design Process. The students then selected the objects they wanted to use to make a self-portrait of their whole body (not thinking about the face and head at this time). Some students found boxes and ended up not only working with the outside of the body but the inside as well, finding organs, the stomach, the heart, and including it as part of their portrait. They assembled their pieces in the form of their self-portrait on the sidewalk.

5. Joining. The teachers had several tools available (a drill used under close supervision, wire, and string) for the students to assemble their junkyard portraits. While some students were working with the tools, the teachers had the rest of the students drawing their junkyard portraits. This allowed the teachers to work with smaller groups working with the tools rather than the entire class at one time. The students had to wrestle with ways to make their sculptures stand up. Karla explained, “This was very important for us, for the students to figure out how to solve that problem, to put them together in a way so they would stand.”

6. Clay faces. Since the junkyard portraits lacked heads, the teachers decided to have the students make the heads out of clay. Karla explains, “We didn’t have mirrors, so instead we asked the students to feel their own faces, to sense with their hands what their features and head felt like, where the

curves and indentations are, and to recreate themselves in the clay.”

7. Photography. The teachers gave the students digital cameras and the students put the clay heads and the mechanized bodies together and then took photographs of their works of art. They also posed with their sculptures and took “duel self-portraits” of themselves and their junkyard creations.





8. Description of Sculpture. Karla and Sarabeth then asked the students to look at their sculptures as characters, separate from themselves. The students wrote descriptions of their characters: what it looks like, what its personality is like, where it lives, what it does. In this sense they were stepping outside of themselves and writing about who they are from a completely different perspective. This wasn't a process of reflection, because the students weren't reflecting on themselves or seeing their own reflections. It was more of a refractive process. Refraction implies they are seeing a version of themselves

transformed into something else, with elements of the original. Light refracts when it passes through an object at an angle and comes out differently than when it went in. The students' conceptions of themselves morphed when they used various materials to recreate themselves. Standing back from their objects, they viewed something that was both of them (having the original elements of who they are) but with elements of something that is completely strange. Karla explains, "We felt it was important for them to stand back from their creations and see it as both 'other' and 'of themselves.'"



9. The Exhibition. The students' families came on Friday and walked into a room of junkyard sculptures all propped up against the wall. With each sculpture we also hung the students' original self-portraits, the photographs, and the written descriptions. The students also presented a performance as a class to the families where they explored the theme of wonder. The room became a cabinet of wonders.



Habla is an educational center and lab school based in Mérida, Yucatán, México, dedicated to fostering school environments that promote the success of all students from multiple cultural backgrounds. For teachers, artists, and school leaders, Habla offers: cultural and language experiences, teacher institutes, and an annual international educational forum.

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