

Miracles in Park Aak

by Kurt Wootton



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ThPark Aak

Park Aak is an ecological park located in Xcunya, a small town outside the city of Merida with primarily a Mayan population. Together Park Aak and Habla host visiting artists and educators from around the world who offer free workshops for the community.

One of my first encounters with milagros was in the house of Frida Kahlo in Mexico City. A wall near her kitchen displayed a range of scenes painted on tin with a few lines of text underneath each. Since then I've seen milagros, also called ex-votos, in many different places around Mexico: markets, antique stores, and traditional folk art museums. Although originally sacred objects displayed in altars and shrines, now they are reinterpreted by contemporary artists as a significant motif in contemporary Mexican art.

Traditionally milagros are small painting depicting a saint intervening in a difficult situation amongst mortals. The milagro often combines a sense of the spiritual or magical with the day-to-day. One milagro depicts a car crash and then a saint descending from the sky, the horrific remnants of steel and metal contrasting with the play of light and the bright colors of the saint (see the example from the Museum of Folk Arts in Mexico City on the first page). Typically a family would place this milagro in an altar to thank the saint for saving the lives of those involved in the crash.

Habla works in partnership with Park Aak to offer ongoing literacy and arts workshops for the rural community of Xcunya, just outside of Merida, Mexico. Sarabeth Berk, a Colorado-based visual artist, was visiting Habla from Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Aspen, Colorado. She and Habla co-director Marimar Patron Vazquez taught a Saturday workshop for kids in Xcunya.





The students wrote stories about miracles, read the book *Frida* by Jonah Winter and Ana Juan, and then created their own Milagros.

Procedure

1 Building Community and Reading.

Creating always emerges from a context. In order to foster an environment rich for creation, Marimar facilitated a variety of ensemble building activities that worked to build a safe space in the classroom and helped the students to think deeply about the theme of miracles and how we might see that word in different ways. They explored many questions: What are the miracles we see every day? What are miracles in the natural world? What miracles are associated with your religion? What miracles have you witnessed in your life? What miracles do you hope will occur in the future?

After exploring these themes, Marimar read the story of *Frida* to the students, and asked them the questions: “What is the miracle in

the life of Frida?” “Is there something in the life of Frida that has a relation to you?” and finally, “What is the miracle in your life or in your family?” The students each spoke about miracles in their lives and then began to create their own milagros

2 Creating. Sarabeth demonstrated a model of her own milagro. Traditionally a milagro can be made with any materials: tin, wood, or even cardboard. For this experience the teachers prepared paper that could be folded into a small box (see the accompanying photo for Sarabeth’s model). Other possibilities include a shoebox, a matchbox, or any variety of found materials. The students used a combination of crayons, colored pencils, and/or colored markers to create the image of their miracle inside the box. They then added text to accompany the image in the tradition of milagros. Finally Sarabeth asked them all to take a piece of aluminum foil and illuminate a part of their box. The aluminum foil gave the Milagros an important added dimension.

3 Performing. At the end of the class, the students sat on benches in front of their families. One-by-one the students stood up and displayed their boxes telling their families about the miracles in their lives.





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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