Autobiographical Portraits of Four Female Adolescents: Implications for Teaching Critical Visual Culture

Sheng Kuan Chung
University of Houston, USA

Abstract

An autobiographical portrait is an artistic representation that shows not only a person's physical characteristics, but also his or her personality, knowledge, history, and/or lived experiences. Understanding student autobiographical portraits not only helps art teachers gain insight into their students' prior knowledge of and experiences with art, but also allows them to use such insight for relevant instruction. Based on constructivist learning theory and with attention to the future implementation of visual culture art education, this study analyzes visual and verbal autobiographical artifacts produced by four adolescent female students to gain insight into their personal interests, knowledge and experiences with art, and artistic development. Conclusions address implications for teaching critical visual culture.

Introduction

On the first day of class, like many art teachers, I greet my students, put names to faces, and get acquainted with them. Through informal or semiformal class conversations, I usually get a general sense of my students' interests, what they have learned, and what they hope to accomplish. But this type of informal/semiformal class conversation, though helpful, does not give me sufficient information to develop a relevant curriculum or make meaningful instructional connections. Hence, I have developed a process designed to gather insights into my students' interests, prior knowledge and experiences, and artistic development. Using constructivist learning theory, in this study I analyze the autobiographical artifacts (self-portraits and short written autobiographies) produced by four female students to draw potential instructional connections to and derive implications for teaching visual culture aimed at fostering critical citizenship.

Constructivist theory provides a basis for learning about my students and establishing a foundation for authentic instruction in my classroom. Learning is about making personal connections between ideas, experiences, and skills; it is thus important to take into account the background and culture of the student in curriculum planning and instruction (Wertsch, 1988). The notion of making connections is grounded in progressive education philosophy and constructivist theory. Both constructivist and progressive educators maintain that knowledge derives from active student participation in constructing meaning; they therefore advocate that students be provided ample opportunities to activate and actively reflect upon prior knowledge and then synthesize it with new information (Bruner, 1973; Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1988). Making instructional connections to prior student knowledge and experiences is essential for teachers to facilitate constructivist learning (Bauersfeld, 1995). This study is thus concerned with the first step toward constructivist learning; that is, gathering preliminary insights into students' personal interests, knowledge, and experiences with art and artistic development with respect to future implementation of teaching critical visual culture.

Numerous art educators have adopted a constructivist approach to art education with an emphasis on authentic learning (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2004; Chanda & Basinger, 2000; Kundu & Bain, 2006; Milbrandt, Felts, Richards, & Abghari, 2004; Prater, 2001; Walker, 2001). Constructivist educators regard prior student knowledge and experiences as basic ingredients of authentic learning that further propel students to develop new understandings. To facilitate authentic learning, art teachers must have a sense of what their students have experienced, what they know, and what they are able to do. Contemporary art educators such as Tom Anderson, Laura Chapman, Paul Duncum, Kerry Freedman, and Kevin Tavin, just to name a few, have all advocated a strong connection between the study of art/visual culture and students' lived experiences. Simpson (1996) echoed:

> Becoming sensitive to what learners know from experience, and what they
> bring with them to art class, is invaluable to teachers. Teachers with this
> information about their students can make planning choices that will allow all
> students to participate fully in a lesson. (p. 58)

Knowing something about the knowledge and experiences students bring to class is invaluable for art teachers not only in order to increase student participation and make instruction relevant, but more importantly, to identify the emerging issues and challenges associated with newly proposed art education orientations such as visual culture art education (VCAE). Duncum (2001) maintains that the shift from teaching fine art to visual culture is the result not of changes in art education pedagogy but of a new emphasis on different subject matter. Rather than seeing art as a product of artistic expression, VCAE emphasizes the visual like all other texts as a form of communication (Chaplin, 1994). It seeks to expand the traditional art boundary to encompass all human-made visual artifacts (Freedman, 2001), embodied visual memories (Irwin, 1999/2000), and contemporary everyday cultural sites--the Internet, television, shopping malls, and video games (Duncum, 2002). VCAE proponents (Duncum, 2001; Freedman, 1994) argue that these cultural sites/sights convey prevailing, if not unchallenged, values, beliefs, and attitudes that insert strong influences on what we know about the world.

According to Duncum (2002), images are sites of ideological struggle among different social groups. It is thus essential to examine the sociopolitical functions and influences of the images. Visual culture education offers students an opportunity to critically understand their everyday, multimodal cultural sites/sights so that they have the critical knowledge (i.e., multiliteracy) necessary to resist questionable ideologies and become informed citizens in an increasingly image-saturated arena. Nevertheless, when it comes to teaching visual culture, as art teachers we cannot avoid the unsettling politics of curriculum development (Chung, 2006): What and whose visual culture do we teach? Is it a teacher-structured visual culture, student-centered visual culture, adult visual culture, or the visual culture of youth? Resonating with constructivist learning theory, Wilson (1997) suggested that visual culture educational programs develop collaborative pedagogies in the form of proposals initiated by both students and teachers. Wilson and Thompson (2007) pointed out that if art educators were to direct their attention to the entire range of visual texts, a better place to start would be the study of the visual culture produced by youth. Children have much to offer when it comes to teaching teachers about their emerging and important cultural sites/sights/signs. Studying the images produced by young people allows art teachers to understand their students' visual culture, thereby allowing them to make relevant curriculum connections.

This classroom investigation extends Tavin's (2001) proposal on studying visual culture politically so as to empower human agency for social reconstruction, a view also shared by

Duncum (2002), who advocated studying images based on such critical questions as: "How, for example, do we represent race, class, gender, and unequal power, as well as what we leave unrepresented and why?" (p. 20). Duncum (2002) further stated that VCAE departs not from a prescribed lesson, but from students' lived experiences, and art education needs to validate and reframe itself within students' lived experiences in light of historical precedents and theory. In other words, teaching needs to be conducted through continued dialogue between the teacher and student. This classroom investigation is an attempt to understand students' visual language and an effort to analyze that information politically in order to make individualized connections to VCAE aimed at promoting critical citizenship.

Methodology

The case study method was employed in this classroom inquiry. The four female participants as a group constituted a case in which each participant was seen as a micro-case. According to Bromley (1990), the case study method is a "systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest" (p. 302). In orchestration with Bromley, Yin (1994) defines a case study as an empirical investigation that examines real-life situations within their original contexts. Educational researchers (e.g., Simons, 1980; Yin, 1994) have used multiple sources of evidence through the case study method to examine real-life phenomena within a specific context. Yin (1994) and Walsham (1993) insist on the effectiveness of case studies for understanding theoretical propositions from different sources of raw data. They assert that an underlying assumption of case studies is an interpretive epistemology that values new insights into understanding a contextual phenomenon. Stake (1994) articulates the case study method: "… [A] particular case is examined to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory. The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else" (p.237).

Setting and Participants

The main purpose of conducting a case study is to gain insights (Stake, 1994), in this case, into the artistic development, personal interests, and knowledge of art of the four girls. Following constructivist learning theory and with attention to the future implementation of critical visual culture art education, I began this study with an art lesson on identity that I gave to a class of 10 junior-high-age students (six males and four females) from diverse cultural backgrounds at a Saturday art school program in the United States. I participated as the teacher-researcher. Designed to obtain data, the art lesson consisted of visiting a museum with a focus on identity issues, writing an autobiography, and creating self-portraits. I recognized that a more careful examination of the autobiographical portraits of students in a mix-gender class should include both male and female subjects that make up the dynamics of the class. However, including all students in this classroom study might inevitably lead to gender comparisons and could easily stray away from the focus of this inquiry. I chose to study artifacts by four girls partly because various studies have shown that females are more likely

than their male counterparts to be disenfranchised in the classroom (Einarrson & Granstrom, 2002; Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996; Wheldall, Bearman, & Kemp, 2006).

Data Sources and Analysis

I analyzed and interpreted the visual and verbal autobiographical artifacts produced by the four female students (first individually as a micro-case and then collectively as a case) to find consistent and emerging themes from which I could then draw relevant individualized curriculum connections to teaching critical visual culture. I also included data from my class observations and discussions with these girls to my analysis and interpretation of their artifacts when deemed relevant to the issues under discussion.

As a teacher-researcher, I am also fully aware that my unique cultural background and social experiences would play a key role in what I chose to observe, analyze, and understand during and after my classroom investigation. My interpretations of any gathered artifacts inevitably contain, more or less, my biases formulated by my own personal and professional history. Nonetheless, the first-hand insights generated from this classroom investigation are essential to an art teacher's relevant or meaningful instruction. I should note that making gender comparisons between artifacts created by boys and girls is not a focus of this study; rather, this study serves to illuminate the insights from four individual girls with respect to developing and teaching relevant visual culture for social reconstruction. The art lesson started with a museum visit and then moved from autobiography-writing to creating self-portraits.

Analysis and Interpretation

Museum Visit and Perceptions of Art

The students first visited an exhibit at a local art museum entitled *Dream of the Audience* by Korean-American artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Cha has been recognized by the art world for her pioneering genres of performance art, stamp art, and mail art.[1] In *Dream of the Audience*, Cha weaves together intercultural themes—language, memory, dislocation, and alienation— derived from her personal experience. She combines her family history, autobiography, poetry, and images in a number of media such as performance, video, ceramics, textile, paper, and other found materials. An important feature of Cha's works is her expression of multicultural identities by linguistically deconstructing multiple languages (i.e., Korean, English, and French) to find her own voice. Given that one of the lesson goals in my classroom was to allow my students to express their identities both artistically and verbally, Cha's work was an appropriate exemplar for them to reference.

---

[1] Mail art uses the postal system as a medium to deliver its message in the form of illustrated letters, decorated envelopes, zines, or postcards.

My students explored Cha's work in groups using a list of prompts I provided to guide them through the process. The prompts instructed them to speculate on how Cha had created her art in terms of media and processes; to articulate their personal reactions to her work; and to describe, analyze, and interpret her work in terms of art elements, design principles, and possible messages she intended to convey. Each group shared its findings with the class. During their presentations, the students showed awareness of the range of media, tools, design principles, and techniques used by Cha. They used adjectives such as "sad," "disappointed," "depressed," "angry," "suicidal," and "heartbroken" to describe Cha's poetry and photographic images. Because multiple languages were presented in almost every piece of Cha's work, some of the students perceived her pieces as somewhat perplexing. Nevertheless, her work gave the students an idea of how a language and story could be embodied in art—specifically, how Cha manifested her complex personal history and multicultural identities in her work.

From this museum activity, I also found that my use of a modernist framework in an analysis of postmodern art such as Cha's work was somewhat problematic and limiting for my students, which might have influenced their interpretations. Overwhelmingly, the students' interpretations focused on the formal qualities of Cha's work in relation to the expression of different emotions; this was also consistent with their views of art expressed later in this study and evident in their artworks.

My students used sketchbooks regularly to visualize their ideas and make spontaneous pencil sketches in my classroom. From my classroom observations, I found that their sketches showed an overwhelming emphasis on the visual manipulation rather than the story or meaning that they intended to convey. When asked to describe their art, one student, for example, put it, "There really isn't a message in the picture. It is just a picture." When asked what they are interested in learning about art, they pointed out the conventional media of drawing, painting, sculpture, and pottery, with most indicating pottery. Because they approach art from the traditional media-centered mindset, they are unlikely to connect art with issues of great social importance without proper guidance. Teaching visual culture is a paradigm shift in both art learning and teaching. In order to implement VCAE critically, art teachers need to help students connect their personal positions and cultural experiences to critical questions of greater social importance. Art teachers must provide means for enabling students' transformative thinking and action.

Autobiographies and Self-Portraits

After the museum activity, I had the students write a short autobiography in the classroom.[2] This writing task was tied in with the subsequent self-portrait activity. My hope was that the writing task would (a) guide the students to articulate personal information before proceeding to the next phase involved with creating their self-portraits; and (b) allow me the teacher to uncover different layers of information about these adolescent students' interests, prior knowledge and experiences, and artistic development. I selected the autobiographical artifacts of the four female students and individually compared their written autobiographies with the self-portraits they created to find consistent and emerging themes. My analysis and interpretation of the students' self-portraits were supported by their written autobiographies as well as relevant data from classroom observations and discussions.

Suzy's Love of Nature and Family

Since her birth, Suzy's family has moved to a number of places throughout the Midwest United States.[3] Her family runs a franchised restaurant and had just recently relocated to a town near the university where my class was held. Suzy misses the last place she lived because she enjoys living in a quiet suburban neighborhood. In her writing, Suzy expresses how much she loves her parents and her ten-year-old brother. She attributes her interest in art to being given the opportunity to experiment with different types of media in her fourth-grade classroom. Making pottery and computer-generated art are Suzy's favorite activities. She visits the art museum once a year on school fieldtrips. In the classroom, Suzy is inquisitive and eager to try new tools and methods. She is passionate about painting because she can use bright colors to depict her dreams and fears. She says, "Art is your imagination of something that you draw. It can be your dreams or your fears. It could be happy or sad. It is the show of your emotions."

Despite being instructed to make her own self-portrait, Suzy visualized her relationship with her brother in a mountain landscape sketch (see Figure 1). She drew a close-up of two giant mountains, pine trees, and clouds, and personalized the sun as the smiling face of her brother rising from the horizon between the two mountains. In this sketch, she demonstrates an understanding of pictorial distance and depth by using overlapping and varied sizes, as in the pine trees and the clouds. The arrangements of pines trees and clouds also show her interest in perspective. Shadows are purposefully added to the trees and mountains to give them a three-dimensional look. White clouds are scattered on the tops of the mountains. This sketch shows

---

[2] To ensure the flow of this writing exercise, I gave students question prompts to consider. The prompts asked them to describe themselves and their families; their interests; the art classes they had taken; their favorite art/music CDs; their favorite pop stars and personal idols; their leisure activities; their favorite images/posters in their bedroom or study room; their favorite TV programs, magazines, Web sites, and newspaper sections; the things or persons that influenced them most in life; and their primary concerns in life.

[3] To protect the participants' identities, this article uses pseudonyms.

that Suzy is meticulous about composition and formal execution in making her art. She incorporates natural elements to express the importance of her brother in her life.

Figure 1. Suzy's portrait of her brother.

Suzy's interest in nature is also manifested in her underwater portrait sketch. She portrays herself standing on the bottom of the ocean with dolphins and seagulls surrounding her (see Figure 2). A school of fish is swimming past her legs, showing a more sophisticated overlapping. Pencil erasure marks evidence her struggle with and intention of drawing them realistically. A successful work of art, according to Suzy, needs to "have some kind of emotion. It should be creative or original." Suzy's sketches show her concerns with realism and formalist design principles and her prime interest in exploring relationships between humans and with nature. Instead of focusing on herself, her first sketch depicts her brother, who is part of the landscape as the sun rising or setting and given great prominence. Both her sketches show that humans are interacting with, situated in, or part of nature and her interests in exploring different relationships with, for example, her close family and the natural environment.

From Suzy's visual and textual autobiography, it can be reasoned that a relevant visual culture lesson for Suzy might include critical examination of images/cultural sites depicting various human relationships (e.g., close, distant, just, or unjust), and how such relationships shape our collective social landscape as a whole. That is, conditions of social interaction and exchange that form our identities and affect our social being. Suzy and others with the same interest could collectively examine images/texts in advertising, movies, games, and paintings that portray various unjust human relationships, and be informed from their critique of the gender, social class, and race differences conveyed in these images/texts. Afterwards, they could

partake individually or collectively in creating an art series expressing their view of human relationships to the social landscape. To carry out an individualized inquiry such as this one in a public school setting, Suzy or the group could approach it as a semester-long independent project guided by the art teacher.

Figure 2. Suzy's self-portrait.

Dana's Passion for Sports and Pop Culture
Dana, born in Missouri of Malaysian and Filipino descent, enjoys playing the violin and steel drums. She likes the neighborhood where she lives because she can "hang out" with her "cool" friends from school. She loves going to school because it is a place where she can socialize with friends. Dana often listens to pop music with a headset during studio time. In

class, she is reserved unless she has a question, but she is an active player on a local soccer team. Besides sports, Dana likes to draw with a variety of media and tools. Dana exhibits a great interest in art and recalls how she used to draw on the walls of her bedroom when she was about three. She writes, "From the art class, I've learned more about expressing emotions and ideas into something other than music or voice or body language." Sports equipment and musical notes are repeated themes in Dana's drawings. For her, making art is a way of expressing herself, and the scope of art goes beyond painting and drawing. As she says, "Art can be music, cooking, or math. Even playing sports is an art." Dana's self-portraits consistently depict her everyday activities such as playing sports and drums, and listening to popular music.

Figure 3. Dana's self-portrait.

In one of Dana's self-portraits, she portrays herself getting ready for a soccer game (see Figure 3). The game is symbolically orchestrated with noticeable cheers coming from steel drums expressed through musical notes and cloud-like shapes. The musical notes reaffirm Dana's passion for music. She writes, "friends" in the heart shape, which unveils the

importance of friends to her. Popular media like pop music and sports are the two dominant themes in Dana's sketches and are highly relevant to many youths. In another of Dana's portraits, she uses dark blue as the background for a number of images, including a headshot of the rock-'n'-roll star Elvis Presley, a picture of a pop music band, a Coca-Cola logo, and a school building with montage effects. Some portions of the images appear to dissolve into the dark blue background. In the center of this piece, Dana has placed an image of herself kicking a soccer ball (similar to her first self-portrait discussed above) in full motion with two oval-shaped circulating beams behind her that instill a noticeable energy into her act. This self-portrait represents visually the things and activities that she enjoys every day.

From Dana's artifacts, we see that for relevance to her world, she could examine media culture sites or practices such as sports events and music videos to explore their social and personal implications and impacts. Because of her interest in sports, Dana could look at the ways in which the mainstream media conduct sports broadcasting businesses based on gender. She could probe such questions as why all-male sports events dominate the mass-media networks (both print and electronic) whereas all-female sports events such as women's football are rarely, if ever, nationally broadcast. Is this because of the differences of physical capability between males and females, or overt sexism? On the other hand, female bodies are exploited in hip-hop music videos selling their sex appeal.

Professional women's sports are segregated from their male counterparts on many levels and in many social practices. Dana could be guided to inquire about the stereotypical gender-determined roles perpetuated in American media culture such as in sports and music videos (e.g., player and cheerleader in American football games; singer and dancer in hip-hop music videos). At the completion of her inquiry, Dana could be encouraged to report her findings and engage her peers in critical discussion of how such sexist media images affect their perceptions of and different expectations for males and females in society. In addition, Dana could interrogate other sexist social or cultural practices that are still prevalent in an American context and develop informed resistance to such stereotypes.

Eileen's Interests in Comics and Gymnastics

In her written work, Eileen describes her family members and the activities she enjoys most. She lives with her parents and a younger brother. Eileen's father is a stay-at-home dad, and her mother travels frequently for work. Eileen plays clarinet and belongs to the school's gymnastics team. She has enjoyed making art ever since discovering coloring in preschool. Eileen is one of the more advanced students in my classroom mainly because she can effortlessly refer to information from art history whenever talking about art. Eileen is a natural storyteller. Her sketchbook is filled with pencil sketches of personalized comic characters, musical notes, characterized birds, flowers, portraits of Santa Claus, and herself performing gymnastic moves. Eileen's sketches show most characters in action as if they were performing

onstage. In some of her bird sketches (see Figure 4), Eileen characterizes and humanizes her friend's birds in their fictional adventures and appears to have embodied her own personal experiences in them. As Eileen articulates her perception of art:

> I think that art is a way to free yourself of what others think of you and what you do; with my comics I like to make immature or stupid jokes that I would not usually tell in public. It is also a way to express yourself. (personal communication, September 20, 2003)

When asked what characterizes a great work of art, Eileen responds:

> I don't think that there is one set of criteria for a "great" work of art. For me, I just judge a piece of art mainly on whether it looks like the artist put some work into it, and I tend to look at their use of color. (personal communication, September 20, 2003)
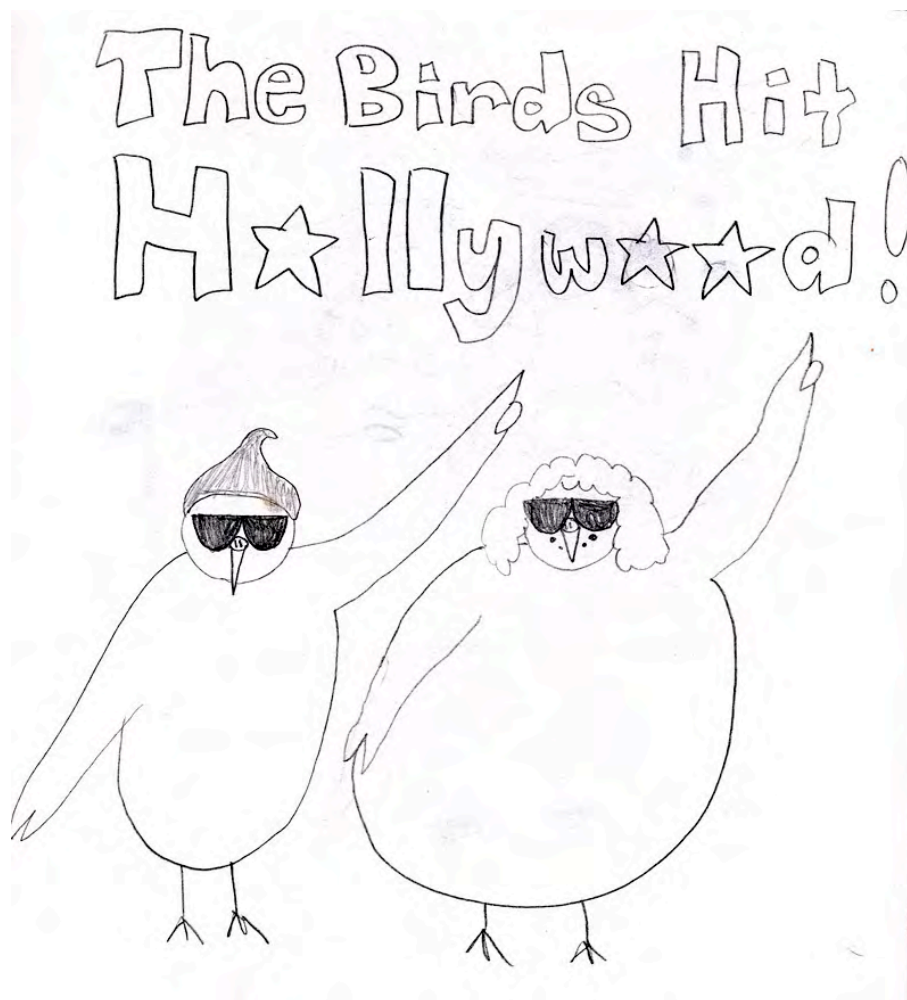

Figure 4. Eileen's characterized birds.

In her self-portrait (see Figure 5), Eileen depicts herself swinging on a high bar surrounded by flying musical notes and free-flowing roller coaster tracks. She positions herself at the center of attention and vibrant energy. The portrait shows her enjoyment of gymnastic sports and the amusement park. Eileen mentions not being interested in drawing realistically, although a tendency to do so is evident in her sketches. On the face of this portrait and in some of her other sketches, she either writes "my face here" or avoids depicting facial features. This phenomenon suggests that Eileen is conscious of her shortcomings and is struggling with drawing realistically. Eileen's sketches show her main interest in visual narratives, her concern for rendering figures in motion, and her fascination with comics or *manga*, which is shared by many adolescent students I have taught over the years. Young adolescents enjoy making, copying, and talking about cartoon characters in my classroom. Noting that the Japanese manga is part of the global videogame industry dominating and influencing the western comics culture, a lesson on manga could guide Eileen to investigate this cross-cultural phenomenon by looking into the context of the Japanese *manga* (Toku, 2001) and that of the American comics. To begin, Eileen could be asked to gather several examples of Japanese *manga* and several American comic strips to compare and contrast them, and then use the
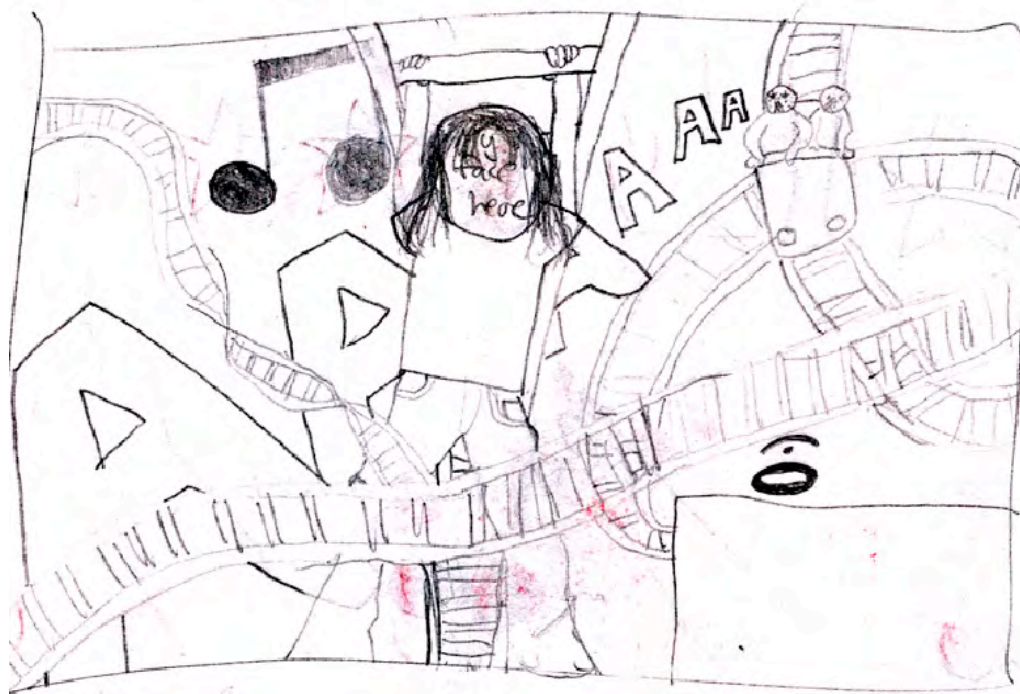

Figure 5. Eileen's self-portrait.

Internet to search for more information about them. Questions for her investigation might include: What are the characteristics of *manga*/American comics? What is *manga* and why is it so popular in Japan? How does it differ from comic books in the US? Why are Japanese children attracted to *manga*? Why are many American young people so fascinated with *manga*? What are its social and personal impacts? Using her cross-cultural inquiry on

manga/comics as a knowledge base, Eileen could examine other cross-cultural and globally marketed products (e.g., Barbie dolls and World of Warcraft video games) with respect to cultural appropriation, assimilation, resistance, and domination, and how they affect our economic and collective aesthetic/media landscapes and views of peoples from other cultures.

Family and Nature in Mai-Lee's World

Mai-Lee, a 13-year-old Chinese girl who always shows enthusiasm for learning, is more outspoken than her peers in the classroom. She speaks Chinese at home, and English is her second language. Mai-Lee recalls attending school in Beijing until second grade. Her family immigrated to the US for employment in New York City and lived there until she was in the sixth grade; eventually, they settled in a town near the university. Mai-Lee said she had never taken art classes seriously, seeing them instead as recreation. She said, "I got into art because I was bored." After taking my art classes, Mai-Lee realized she has some talent for art because, as she says, she can draw realistically.

Mai-Lee and Suzy share many similarities in terms of family migration and their love for family, as well as their fascination with nature. Mai-Lee's sketchbook contains pictures of birds, animals, mountains, and trees cut from magazines. She uses these pictures as visual resources for making drawings and sketches. In her sketchbook, she has drawn numerous pencil sketches of a giant panda in the woods and birds flying overhead. Mai-Lee is also interested in music-related themes. She has pages of sketches depicting a cello surrounded by free-flowing musical notes. Her sketches show techniques such as using different proportions to show distance and overlapping to add depth, as well as her understanding of space by using the foreground, middle ground, and background in the picture plane. She is meticulous about composition and use of drawing techniques.

Mai-Lee defines art as a realistic representation resulting from one's "imagination" and believes that a great work of art should have a realistic quality and "feeling in it." Instead of focusing on herself, Mai-Lee's self-portrait is of her family, thus reiterating their importance to her. Without her family's sacrifice, Mai-Lee says, she would not have survived. Mai-Lee includes the 10 members of her extended family standing on a flying magic carpet and facing the viewer as the center and focal point of her portrait. She positions the earth as seen from a satellite as the background image. The earth, surrounded by shining stars and nebulas, occupies almost the entire pictorial space. The flying magic carpet suggests her family's relocation to different parts of the world. A two-story house is located on the edge of the earth. Flowers of varied colors, shapes, and sizes are spread out around the flying carpet and people. For Mai-Lee, family and home are important. She says, "I would be lost without a

home." Despite the instruction to focus on a self-portrait, Mai-Lee sees herself as part of her family and has created a family portrait instead.[4]

Mai-Lee's work highlights the theme of migration or globalization in broader terms. Globalization plays a key role in transporting workforces and transmitting commodities, services, and information among people in very different geographical locations. Mai-Lee could easily find the theme of globalization pertinent to her study, knowing that she has been affected by this force. A relevant lesson for Mai-Lee could explore globalization in relationship to visual culture. How does globalization help articulate visual culture as mobile, constantly adapting, evolving, and seeking new outside influences and ideas? What are the new globalized cultural locations and how do they affect our everyday consumptions and construction of cultural identity (e.g., our sense of cultural belonging)? Some of the relevant cultural locations in an American context might include transnational cybermedia sites, local ethnic stores and restaurants, cultural festivals, and theme parks that feature ethnic displays and replicas of world landmarks. Mai-Lee could be encouraged to critically examine one of these sites in relation to her cultural origin and with respect to cultural resistance and assimilation manifested in the visual artifacts of the site. Mai-Lee would pay attention to how the site had evolved into a new hybrid location of visual culture.

In a constructivist setting, teachers serve as facilitators in making learning and instructional connections. From the analysis of autobiographical artifacts of these four young girls, I have a relevant basis upon which to help these girls identify meaningful topics or issues for exploring the pleasures and politics of their everyday visual spectacles in order for them to become informed, critical citizens.

Reflections

A case study like this classroom investigation is necessary for an art teacher to understand the VCAE theory and to identify its promises and emerging challenges. This study has allowed me to gather insights about my female students in order to make relevant connections to teaching critical visual culture. Interestingly, the students' self-portraits actually embody their autobiographical stories and reveal consistent patterns from which implications for VCAE can be drawn. Their autobiographical artifacts reveal that they are close to their friends and families and enjoy pop culture media, sports, and nature. These four girls rarely have the opportunity to visit a museum, and they define art in limited and general terms; for them, art is a way of expressing feelings and emotions, and anything can be art. As Suzy pointed out earlier, "it can be your dreams or your fears. It can be happy or sad. It is the show of your emotions." Another student elaborated on the same view: "Texture, shape, and color afford feelings and emotions. Bright colors such as yellow and pink would be happy. Dark colors

---

[4] Mai-Lee's work contains a photograph of herself. To protect her identity, her work is not shown in this article.

such as grey, black, or dark blue can make a picture seem sad or mad." Although acknowledging that art can be used to express feelings and emotions, they are more concerned with realistic renderings and visual manipulations than with conveying feelings/emotions in their art (in other words, emphasizing form more than content).

The students' sketches yield critical information, specifically, that they are more concerned about the formal qualities of their artwork, such as using perspective to add depth and draw realistically. They are highly aware of their shortcomings as they wrestle with the anatomy of an object and try to overcome technical difficulties. The students also like to dramatize events and humanize animals or objects in their sketches. They depict characters in great detail and full motion; the portrayed characters are, more often than not, embedded with personal or cultural significance. These findings may not be surprising; however, they evidence the studio-centered paradigm in which these students have been taught in the artroom.

On the other hand, this study sheds light on the challenges and promises of visual culture art education in general. Exploring popular visual or media culture appears to be a relevant way of teaching art to this age group. For example, my students showed preferences for rendering everyday household objects, action film characters, and television cartoon figures, as well as incorporating their routine activities into their artwork. Their fascination with popular media culture is manifested in their art. However, they approach subjects of pop culture mainly from an artistic viewpoint, not as a bridge to addressing issues of critical importance. Again, the ways in which my students create and interpret art are greatly influenced by the studio-centered art education paradigm that focuses on the formal aesthetic qualities of art, with most students accepting the idea that art is about making pictures. Indeed, they focus more on realism and have limited exposure to other art genres.

To approach visual culture critically, students will need to understand that their so-called "pictures" are sites of ideological and political struggle. Additionally, the students' use of formalist approaches to decode visual images (as shown in interpreting Cha's work in the museum) has also undoubtedly been influenced by their prior studio-centered experiences with art education.[5] Additionally, they perceive art-making as a leisure activity. Notably, the perception of art as an aesthetically pleasing construct or a leisure activity stands in sharp contrast to a critical visual culture orientation centered around important social issues. Art teachers need to recognize the persistence of and challenges created by conventional art practices and long-held beliefs by their students and themselves in the artroom when teaching

---

[5] After reflecting upon my own teaching, I realize that my use of a modernist framework in guiding students to analyze postmodern art in the museum is ironically part of the studio-centered art education force that I have questioned in this study. This realization reminds me of being constantly aware of my positions as I navigate between different art education orientations.

visual culture. It is necessary to move students beyond the notion of "making pictures" so that they recognize the political aspects of art/visual culture and how artmaking is a political/social practice. Students need to understand a work of art like any image, text, and human-made artifact, is a cultural site not only giving pleasure, but also involving political and ideological conflict between different social groups. Art teachers need to guide their students to examine sociopolitical parameters of visual practices.

Conclusion

Constructivist or authentic learning is possible if art teachers are willing to acknowledge students' prior knowledge and experiences and synthesize them with new learning possibilities. Understanding the visual culture students produce and what they know and are able to do is critical not only for making instructional connections, but also for developing and implementing a new art program such as visual culture art education. This study has allowed me to become informed of my students' personal interests and artistic development while drawing connections and implications for teaching critical visual culture.

A constructivist approach to critical visual culture will position children as active agents interrogating different forms of visual culture in the process of deconstructing injustices, expressing their own creative voices, and struggling to create a better democratic society. This approach departs from, validates, and utilizes children's existing knowledge and skills as cultural producers and consumers by further empowering them to critically reflect upon their everyday aesthetic experiences and cultural consumption. Children need to think critically about the pleasures and politics of visual spectacles in their everyday visual culture and analyze how these spectacles are created, shaped, and embedded with specific, and even questionable, values and points of view. Knowing students' artistic landscape is a fundamental step toward facilitating meaningful and critical visual culture art education.

References

Anderson, T., & Milbrandt, M. (2004). *Art for life: Authentic instruction in art*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Bauersfeld, H. (1995). 'Language Games' in the mathematics classroom: Their function and their effects. In P. Cobb & H. Bauersfeld (Eds.), *The emergence of mathematical meaning: Interaction in classroom cultures* (pp. 211-292). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Bromley, D. B. (1990). Academic contributions to psychological counseling: A philosophy of science for the study of individual cases. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly, 3*(3), 299-307.

Bruner, J. (1973). *Going beyond the information given*. New York: Norton.

Chanda, J., & Basinger, A. M. (2000). Understanding the cultural meaning of selected African Ndop statues: The use of art history constructivist inquiry methods. *Studies in Art Education, 42*(1), 67-82.

Chaplin, E. (1994). *Sociology and visual representation*. New York: Sage Publications.

Chung, S. K. (2006). The challenges and promises of visual culture art education. In P. Duncum (Ed.), *Visual culture in the art class: Case studies* (pp. 109-116). Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan.

Duncum, P. (2001). Visual culture: Developments, definitions, and directions for art education. *Studies in Art Education, 42*(2), 101-102.

Duncum, P. (2002). Visual culture art education: Why, what, and how. *The International Journal of Art & Design Education, 21*(1), 14-23.

Einarrson, C., & Granstrom, K. (2002). Gender-biased interaction in the classroom: The influence of gender and age in the relationship between teacher and pupil. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 46*(2), 117-127.

Freedman, K. (1994). Interpreting gender and visual culture in art classrooms. *Studies in Art Education, 35*(3), 157-170.

Freedman, K. (2001). Context as part of visual culture. *Journal of Multicultural and Cross-cultural Research in Art Education, 18*(1) 41-44.

Irwin, R. (1999/2000). Facing oneself: An embodied pedagogy. *Art and Learning Research Journal, 16*(1), 82-86.

Kundu, R., & Bain, C. (2006). Webquests: Utilizing technology in a constructivist manner to facilitate meaningful preservice learning. *Art Education, 59*(2), 6-11.

Milbrandt, M., Felts, J., Richards, B., & Abghari, N. (2004). Teaching-to-learn: A constructivist approach to shared responsibility. *Art Education, 57*(5), 19-24, 33.

Piaget, J. (1973). *To understand is to invent*. New York: Grossman.

Prater, M. (2001). Constructivism and technology in art education. *Art Education, 54*(6), 43-48.

Sandler, B. R., Silverberg, L. A., & Hall, R. M. (1996). *The chilly classroom climate: A guide to improve the education of women*. Washington, DC: National Association for Women in Education.

Simons, H. (1980). *Towards a science of the singular: Essays about case study in educational research and evaluation*. Norwich, UK: University of East Anglia, Centre for Applied Research in Education.

Simpson, J. (1996). Constructivism and connection making in art education. *Art Education, 49*(1), 53-59.

Stake, R. (1994). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp.236-247). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Tavin, K. (2001). Swimming up-stream in the jean pool: Developing a pedagogy towards critical citizenship in visual culture. *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education, 21*, 129-158.

Toku, M. (2001). What is manga? The influence of pop culture in adolescent art. *Art Education, 54*(2), 11-17.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walker, S. (2001). *Teaching meaning in artmaking. Art education in practice*. Worcester, MA: Davis.

Walsham, G. (1993). *Interpreting information systems in organizations*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Wertsch, J. V. (1988). *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wheldall, K., Bearman, R., & Kemp, C. (2006). Differential teacher attention to boys and girls in the classroom. *Educational Review, 58*(3), 339-366.

Wilson, B. (1997). *The quiet evolution: Changing the face of arts education*. Los Angeles: Getty Education Institute for the Arts.

Wilson, B., & Thompson, C. (2007). Pedagogy and the visual culture of childhood and youth. *Visual Arts Research, 33*(65), 1-5.

Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

About the Author

Dr. Sheng Kuan Chung is Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director of Art Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Houston, Texas, USA. He holds a B.Ed from National Hsinchu Teachers College in Taiwan, an M.A. from New York University, and a doctorate from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, all in Art Education. Sheng has written over 30 chapters/articles published in prominent national/international scholarly outlets in the UK, the US, and Taiwan. He is also a practicing artist with three decades of exhibit record. Sheng has served as an art judge for the National Scholastic Art Competition and a grant reviewer for the Texas Commission on the

Arts. His research interests include social reconstructionist art education (multiculturalism, visual/media culture, and social issues) and Asian aesthetics. He is currently on the editorial board for *Art Education*, the Journal of the National Art Education Association in the US.

International Journal of Education & the Arts

Editorial Board