

Plains Art Museum

Descriptive Case Study

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Art in Alternative Settings
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**“They built with stone
From their own broad fields,
And they gathered in
What the country yields.
They laid up rock
In a world of sand
In the innocent hope
That the work would stand”–**
From *They Built With Stone*,
Tom Isern, 2000

Introduction

Isern's (2000) poem on the cover page about a group of pioneers building a church in rural North Dakota in the 1900's eloquently relates the similitude of hopes and aspirations felt by



those that contributed to building the Plains Art Museum. The Plains relocation to a declining part of Fargo teaming with abandoned industrial buildings became a catalyst for reviving a dying downtown area (Brust, 2007). The rejuvenation of downtown Fargo that followed the opening of the Plains reveals a thriving educational and business area known for a variety of visual arts, film, literary, theatrical, and musical venues. Non-arts specialty shops soon followed incorporating the arts into their spaces. Continuing the legacy of Isern's (2000) pioneers in building for the future, the Plains is exploring its place in social and environmental issues by initiating, [*The Defiant Gardens for Fargo-Moorhead Project*](#), working to create a garden for its restaurant, a bee pollinator garden and an on-site hive and a self-sustaining water gathering system.

Supporting Literature

To prepare myself for the observation at the Plains, I read the book, *Case Study Research; Design and Methods* (Yin, 2009). Yin's book is a small but mighty paperback book effective in its use of real life examples to punctuate his recommendations. Yin's descriptions of the six sources of evidence; documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts; were helpful in preparing my interactions when entering the site (Yin, 2009, p. 102). I garnered the ability to comfortably access and interact

with the staff and participants at the Plains from reading Yin's examples. Had I not read Yin's book I would not have thought to gather event pamphlets, news articles, or archived event reports which were valuable in providing me with the daily heartbeat of the Plains.

Accessing the Plains (Plains Museum, 2014) website was imperative to provide me with a feel for the organization. The website gave an overview of current and past events. As I looked for specific events pertaining specifically to art education, it became apparent to me that there was an educational component woven into every event. A fact later explained to me through interviews with the staff. The website is rich with past archives such as year-end reports that show a snapshot of the museums fiscal and programming year in a six page brochure.

Another website that was paramount in understanding the Defiant Gardens for Fargo-Moorhead Project of the Plains is the website for [ArtplaceAmerica](#) . ArtplaceAmerica has awarded a substantial grant to the Plains to provide several community projects involving social justice issues. ArtplaceAmerica is collaboration among 14 foundations, 8 federal agencies, and 6 financial institutions dedicated to strengthening the field of creative place making. Toward this end, Artplace has invested in projects in which artists and arts organizations play an explicit and central role in strategies to help shape their communities' social, physical, and economic futures (ArtplaceAmerica, 2014).

Additionally, to prepare myself for what to look for during my case study of the Plains, I read the article, *On the Horizon: Future of Education Museums & the Future of Education* (Kratz & Merritt, 2013). Kratz & Merritt suggest museums support the new core skills educational requirements by opening their doors and partnering with schools to accentuate the skills identified as 21st Century Skills: critical thinking, synthesizing information, applying lessons to the Real World, innovation and creativity, teamwork and collaboration. The Kratz &

Merritt article details current examples of programs in museums providing each of the 21st Century Skills they list. The Plains is at the forefront of current trends in museum educational and community outreach described in the Kratz & Merritt article, as I was able to find multiple examples of each of the skills.

Overview

The Plains Art Museum is located in Fargo, North Dakota which serves a metropolitan area of over 200,000 people. The Plains last Annual Report (2011) reports serving 45,833



constituents. The Museum renovated a turn-of-the-century International Harvester warehouse in downtown Fargo and opened to the public in October 1997 (Plains, 2014). The Plains Art Museum features 56,000 square feet of which 9,000 have security, climate, and light control properties.

The building is fully accessible and contains the Hannaher's, Inc. Print Studio, The Dawson Studio, Café Muse, The Store, the Goldberg Art Lounge, meeting and reception space, frame shop, wood shop, visitor services center, performance areas and permanent collection storage and care areas. In the fall of 2013 the museum opened the Katherine Kilbourne Burgum Center for Creativity. The Burgum Center is a multipurpose arts facility offering classes for the entire community, as well as studio and exhibition space for learning, discussion, and display of creative work. A sky bridge connects the original museum building with this 25,500 square foot expansion (Plains, 2014).

The Plains focuses on Modern and Contemporary art periods for their collections and exhibitions. While the Plains engages and acquires national and international artists for

exhibitions and its collection, it is committed to supporting regional and local artists. The Plains is proud of its Midwestern heritage and initiates projects that support various interpretations from the region. The Plains is one of only two museums in the state accredited by the American Association of Museums, noteworthy in that of 16,000 museums in the United States, this institution accredited only 750 (Plains, 2014). The Plains Art Museum is a nonprofit 501 (c) 3 organization governed by a board of eighteen directors. Funding comes through public support grants, membership dues, charitable gaming, restaurant proceeds, private donations, admissions, museum merchandise sales, investment income and revenue from facility rental. A staff of twenty four encompassing the departments of administration, curation, collections, education, development, communication, facility/maintenance, charitable gaming, visitor services, events, and accounting supports the Director in the mission at the Plains. An extensive group of volunteers are also involved.

Programming at the Plains does not always fit in to neat categories which add to its specialness for discovery on a yearly basis for members or one time visitors. In looking for art education at an alternative site I was delighted to find all facets of the Plains facility and events interwoven with intentional and unintentional educational benefits. They provide outreach in the form of [art cases](#). The museum's art cases provide art education resources to classrooms in the



Figure 1. Plains Art Case, Guilty of Being Indian (Mankato) (Grades 9-12)

region. The Plains serves a very rural area and in lieu of being able to visit a museum the cases provide a miniature exhibition of works by regional artists (Plains, 2014). Included in the cases are education guides. Subject matter of the cases pertains to the regional heritage of the area. The art

cases are loaned with no charge including free shipping both ways thanks to support from the Wyeth Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the William Randolph Hearst Endowed Fund for Education, and the North Dakota Council on the Arts (Plains, 2014).

The Plains has contracted with the Fargo School District to provide art experiences at the museum throughout the school year for students in its twelve K-5 elementary schools. It employs a continuum of ten to twenty on-call teaching artists that work under a director of education, a manager of youth programs, and the clay studio manager.

The museum may have seven or more long term exhibitions occurring at one time. Complementing the exhibitions are lectures, gallery talks and art instruction to match the exhibit theme. Additionally, the museum store mirrors the exhibition subject with books and items for sale. Several small exhibitions may pop up in the main gallery for short term interactions. The museum provides group visits with volunteer docents. Transportation is available for free to classrooms, outside of the contracted elementary schools, within the Fargo-Moorhead area through Metro Area Transport (Plains, 2014).

The museum provides educational classes to the public in [printmaking and clay](#) throughout the year. Individuals or groups may attend a class in a variety of mediums. There is a variety of [classes](#) on an ongoing basis for adults and children. Additionally there is [open studio](#) time for artists to utilize the printmaking and clay studio facilities.

Description and Discussion

I selected three art education events to observe at the Plains. The first was an evening event called [Honey Happenings and Buzz Lab Preview](#). The event, part of the Plains' Defiant Gardens project, kicked off the Buzz Lab initiative to garner interest from teens to participate in an internship for the summer of 2014 to help create a pollinator garden for bees on the grounds

of the museum. Teens will be paid \$250.00 for the week of learning and building the Buzz Lab. The event filled the main floor atrium. Stationed at individual tables were entomologists, professional bee keepers, hobby bee keepers, food coops, and representatives from local seed banks. Displays included actual insects, products made from the bee honey and wax, and informational handouts to educate and inform the attendees of actions they could take to ameliorate negative environmental issues affecting the American Honey Bee. The children and adults enjoyed the insect displays which allowed a closer look at the bees than customarily experienced in a natural setting. Small embroidery hoops and floss were available by a group that supports natural fabrics and fiber use. Demonstrations of the screen printing process produced prints of the honey comb and bee emblem for the Buzz Lab project. The younger attendees received the prints. One project at a table of insects showed how to use a special board used for nesting by leaf cutter bees for an art project by varying the length of and coloring the tubes the bees use. One of the museums teaching artists was available to promote the Buzz Lab internships and promote a printmaking workshop held later in the week as an off shoot of getting young teens to think about the bee's connection to food production. I noticed the teaching artist was very vivacious and knowledgeable in her interactions with the public. The on premise restaurant provided treats and beverages for purchase. The gift shop of the museum mirrored the public event by offering books on starting and keeping a beehive, pottery commissioned by local artists with the subject matter of bees, wax candles and honey food products. The event was very casual and informative. Each station was busy with attentive community members of all ages. It was clear in the conversations I overheard that attendees learned bee facts they previously had not known. I learned that a honey bee can recognize human facial features and that not every plant you buy at a greenhouse has pollen that is good for bees. I was able to visit with the head of the

arts education department, the teaching artist for the printmaking demonstrations, the artist designing the pollinator garden for Buzz Lab, and the Community Engagement Liaison person. All staff members were extremely well informed and up to date on current issues in art education; using contemporary art, art for social change, art for sustainability and art for community engagement.

The second arts education observation occurred on a Saturday afternoon; the free printmaking experience connected to the Buzz Lab event. The six students arrived at the Plains for this free art class for middle school age students. Their instructor Melissa teaches full time at a small K-12 school thirty miles from Fargo, and teaches part time at the Plains museum. Melissa introduced herself and had the kids introduce themselves with an icebreaker game where they were to pick where they would rather swim and why; ocean, river, pool, lake etc. but first say their name. The ice breaker activity was a comfortable way for the kids to reveal something they felt was important about their selves and learn about each other. Melissa discussed printmaking and found that all the students had previously made prints of some kind with their art instructors at their schools. She explained they would be using food items to create their prints. She talked about how food was used in the past for printmaking and showed them posters of the Gyotaku fish printing process. She related the history of the practical use for making the prints to have on display at the fish markets so that the real fish could be kept cool instead of on display in the heat. They were shown the vegetables available that day for print making; broccoli, cauliflower, celery, green peppers, Brussels sprouts, and two kinds of squash. Melissa explained how the vegetables would be sliced and then inked with the brayer. Melissa sliced the vegetables and discussed the patterns that were possible. She then demonstrated how to ink the plate and apply the ink to the vegetable. She asked for the kid's input on how to apply the vegetable to the

printing surface, which allowed the kids to discuss what would need to take place to get a solid print. They had tissue, blank greeting cards, and canvas totes to print. She began by having them practice on the tissue paper, then cardstock, then had them refine their designs on the blank greeting cards. They were able then to plan for a more refined project on the canvas tote. Melissa allowed the students to discover and practice and create with the vegetables in any way they chose. They did not ask questions of the teacher about design choices. They were intent to discover on their own. They did not seem to need approval from the instructor for what they were creating. The workshop ran for three hours. I asked Melissa about the low numbers at the workshop. She said that there were originally nine signed up but with free events kids sometimes do not show up. Melissa and I talked about how students behave differently at workshops at other sites than they do at school. We agreed these students seemed very relaxed and focused. Perhaps, in that they did not know each other prior to the workshop, except for two sisters; any labels they exist under at their schools have melted away and they feel comfortable and safe.

The last observation allowed me to observe the contracted art classes provided to the Fargo school district. The director of youth programs, Brianna, met me at the front reception desk. After discussing what I would be doing she offered me two pencils as she noticed I was using a pen and she said they do not allow pens in the gallery spaces. She escorted me to the clay studio where I was introduced to the teaching artists. Some of the teaching artists hold art education degrees and some are artists with educational training. The teaching artists were very welcoming and encouraged me to look around. The teaching artists each had their own apron with their name embroidered on the front, which provided a nice professional touch to their role in the museum. I was to be observing four groups of kindergarteners that day. Each group would

have a gallery talk followed by a hands-on clay experience. The average size of each class was seventeen students.

The bus arrived promptly with the first of two groups that would attend the classes that



Figure 2. Artist James Rosenquist tribute exhibit.

day. Each group consisted of two classes. Two staff members from the school accompanied each class. The students were instructed to place their hats and gloves deep into their coat sleeves and the coats were loaded onto a portable wheeled rack as the students would move from the arrival area into the gallery and then to the clay studio. One group of students went into one

of the enclosed gallery spaces with one teaching artist and one group of students stayed in the reception area in front of an exhibit. The exhibit in Figure 2, created by regional artists, is a birthday tribute to the artist James Rosenquist, who is a North Dakota native. The teaching artist moved from painting to painting asking questions pertaining to the elements and principles of art. Using questions, the teaching artist allowed the students to explore what they were seeing in the paintings. The students sat in one long line in front of the row of paintings. I noticed the



Figure 3. James Rosenquist, *The North Dakota Mural*, 2010, oil on canvas, 13 x 24.

students not directly in front of the painting being discussed were not engaged in some of the conversations. When finished the teaching artist had the students stand up, back up and look upwards to see the large mural commissioned by the museum by James Rosenquist. I am not sure if the students connected how the tribute paintings related to the

Rosenquist painting but they did pick up bits and pieces of art vocabulary, reinforced vocabulary they learned at school from their art teacher and garnered exposure to a variety of visual effects in the paintings. The two groups of kindergarteners then switched places; the first Rosenquist group went into the main gallery and the other group was seated in front of the Rosenquist tribute paintings. I followed the first group into the gallery to see the presentation they would receive. Before both groups entered the gallery exhibit the teacher artist instructed them in how to move through the gallery respectfully and safely. The exhibit the students saw is titled [*Creative Actions: Selections from the Permanent Collection*](#). The teaching artist had the students sit down in a tight group around a painting by David Bradley, 1987, portraying a Northern Minnesota Native American family. The teaching artists questioned the students about what they were seeing in the painting and why the artist may have put those objects in it. She had the students compare and contrast with objects they had in their homes. She then passed around examples of some of the objects shown in the painting to give the students a tactile experience with certain natural materials represented by the artist in the painting. The teaching artist then guided the students through the rest of the gallery exhibit. The two groups met in the front lobby again to proceed to the clay studio. The walk to the clay studio is quite long and the students passed through several areas with art displayed. Figure 4. portrays the students moving through a mosaic mural emulating the path of a bumble bee imbedded with found objects. As you can see in this photo these teachers did not allow this group to touch this very tactile exhibit. Teachers from other groups allowed students to touch the bee path.



Figure 4. Bee Path Mosaic

As an art educator it was fascinating to me to observe the different engagement styles of the teaching artists, classroom teachers and support staff. The gallery talk in front of the Rosenquist exhibit was more engaging when the teaching artist had the students sit in a ‘scootable’ tight group in front of each painting rather than in a long stationary line in front of the series. The gallery talks when students were able to ask questions engaged the students more. The gallery walks that were less directed and structured produced more imaginative questions as well as this quote from one little girl “I think I’m going to cry, it’s so beautiful” as she gazed at a transparent non-objective sculpture. It was fascinating to me how the adults with the groups shaped the museum experience for the kindergarteners.

The kindergarteners congregated together in a room near the clay studio and received a snack. As they ate their snack the teaching artist reminded them they would be making a clay pocket and talked about the future clay projects each grade makes. In keep with the pocket theme she read the book “Katie No Pockets” by Emmy Payne. They were also shown a Curious George book and asked if they noticed anything about the art in both books. They learned that H.A. Rey had created the art work for both books.

The students separated into their individual classes and entered the clay studio in two separate rooms. The teaching artists had the students put on oversized shirts to protect their



clothing. The lesson for the clay experience was well organized. The students followed various instruction styles to create their ‘house pockets’. Again it was fascinating to see the different engagement styles of the adults. I noticed a coordinated lesson plan guiding the presentation to the students, which led to all of the kindergarteners creating a successful project. As an art educator

it was interesting to me how there were four adults in the room facilitating a lesson that I would have presented by myself. I would not have been able to complete the glazing portion of the lesson plan in one school art period. This method of providing a more complex clay project is very successful in that the amount of adults helping and extended time frame seemed to contribute to successful projects. The youth art program director and the art education director confirmed that teaching artists received instructions in scripting the concepts covered in the lesson plans for the gallery talks and project implementation. The scripting allowed for the individual teaching artists to engage the students in their individual styles while still resulting in a positive experience for the students.

Implications for the Field of Art Education

After interviewing staff in most of the departments I realized that there is an art education component to every event. All the departments are coordinated to present a cohesive view and support of each event. Kratz and Merritt (2013) paint a picture of how museums in the future will need to innovate to support education outside of schools. The Plains is already programming in ways suggested by the Kratz and Merritt article. The contract with the Fargo Public Schools enhances the numbers of future museum goers. Making the museum an accessible and comfortable place ensures that future parents and policy makers in the area will support the continuation of art programs within and outside of schools. Providing service learning opportunities like the Buzz Lab internships enhances the chance that students will see their importance in affecting positively an entity outside of themselves. The Defiant Gardens of Fargo-Moorhead Project demonstrates how organizations and individuals can affect community change outside of traditional missions and walls. The programs I observed support in school art education as they are examples of where art experiences can continue past the classroom door.

The Plains makes their programming look effortless but behind the smooth working facility they share with other museums a past history of economic down turns. The Plains is insuring against future challenges by presenting programming and art education experiences that will build relationships for support from the community. As the Isern (2000) poem hopes; the Plains will stand.

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