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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

*LOOKING AT THE NATURAL/BUILT
ENVIRONMENT THROUGH THE
TEACHING OF ART*

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
EDUCATION IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DIPLOMA FOR
ART AND DESIGN TEACHERS

By

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JUNE 1999

Dedication

To my parents for helping me make things possible.

And to Fiona who has been the best flatmate and friend
any Dip. Student could ask for.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is entirely my own work and that it has not been submitted as an exercise for a diploma or degree in any other college or university.

Signed *Kathleen Mc Cafferty*

Kathleen McCafferkey.

1999

'Looking at the Natural/ Built Environment through the Teaching of Art.'

Art, learning and life are intertwined and inseparable. Within schools art education is a powerful means of educating students to develop an articulate and active response to their surroundings, through the making of art. This dissertation attempts to identify the importance of taking the student out of the isolation of the artroom and opening up her whole surrounding for the bases of image-making. The natural/built environment contains many inexhaustible primary resources such as parks, buildings, streets, nature all waiting to be explored. Parallel to the teaching of line, colour, form, texture, this first-hand environmental experience encourages the student to see - to 'really' see what she is looking at and allows time for the student to become sensitive, to understand and to care about her surrounding environment.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Peter Gargen for his continuous help and co-operation throughout this year.

Special thanks to the First Year students of Mercy College in Coolock for their contribution and understanding.

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Introduction

In June of last year, the Minister for the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Ms. Síle De Valera opened an exhibition by the 'Vernacular Architecture Building Survey' – a project funded by Dublin Heritage Group and FÁS. Within the collection of exhibiting works were architectural drawings, photography, historical research, sketches and painting in a variety of media of vernacular architecture in the Dublin West area. During her opening speech, the Minister spoke of the importance of these buildings, which play a vital role in our heritage. Contained within these traditional buildings are the skills, traditions and the local history of the previous generation. But the Minister continued to talk with great concern, as these buildings are being destroyed.

During my time working with this project as an assistant manager, I was saddened to realise the amount of vernacular buildings that have been surveyed and are now left in ruins or knocked down. This led me to think about the attitudes of our society as I was taken aback, to people in general, of their little concern²⁵ to what is happening to our surroundings – not on a global scale but locally – our immediate environment. In writing this dissertation, I took it as an opportunity to examine these issues which are a growing concern. They have influenced me within my teaching methods, which uphold a personal belief, that art for the student should exist outside the art room just as much as within. Education is concerned with the response we can make to our surroundings. In art education, it has a unique way of developing the young

people as a whole through heart, head and hand. Today, art has been instrumental in calling attention to numerous concerns of our society – it has become an integral part of life. Within school, art education is a powerful means of educating students to develop an articulate and active response to their surroundings, through the making of art.

Throughout this dissertation, these issues and concerns are addressed. In Chapter One, I introduce the basic ingredients of the artistic and creative process – our senses. Before the pencil hits paper it is that progression of discovery, which is important. Learning to see, listen, touch and smell develops the student's power of perception thus helping her * to explore, relate and to express herself within the surrounding environment. I continue by explaining visual awareness and direct experience, which play a vital role in the making of art, within the classroom.

The aim of the second chapter is to encourage the student to move out of the isolation of the art room and look to the primary resources of her surroundings – the natural environment/built environment. Our environment which one frequently takes for granted contains inexhaustible sources of ideas for the basis of image making within the art room. It is an ideal opportunity for the student in the development of visual awareness and in witnessing the direct experience of her environment, allowing the evaluation of her responses and uses them to create and express. Parallel to this first-hand environmental experience is the teaching of issues concerning our society such as physical and cultural concerns. Students can become aware of these issues through their art

making. I close this Chapter with back-up information on Irish contemporary artists who use art as a means of expressing their individual attitudes towards our environment. Within the final chapter I reiterate my argument by exemplifying a practical application to a class of First Year students.

* For convenience I will use “she/her”. But “he/she” and “his/her” are understood throughout.

Chapter One

‘The Basic Ingredients Of The Artistic Process’

According to ?

In the last number of years, we have witnessed a continuum of change in the issues that shape and mould our understanding of what constitutes Art now. It has become the artist's function ~~to~~ *'examine, digest and interpret our surroundings, to give us ways in which to react to them, evaluate them, and in various ways to come to terms with them.'*¹

In this country we are becoming aware of the change from the deterministic approach, i.e. development of skills without providing any opportunity for the student to use these skills in art experiences that involve creative thinking, to a more enlightened art education where the student's awareness of her own experiences is utilised for creative expression.


The Junior Certificate was introduced in 1992 and took the place of the Intermediate Certificate. *'Its general aim is to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual – aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, social and spiritual.'*² With the Art, Craft and Design syllabus, it places emphasis on the ideas, the feelings and the visual qualities of the student. It is a unique way of developing the young person as a whole through heart, head and hand. The exam takes the form of a project, where a list of project titles given to students in January of the year of the examination. Previous students of the Intermediate Certificate had to produce their artwork in one day. The Junior

¹ 'The Artist and the Built Environment'. Introduction

² The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. *'Junior Certificate Art, Craft and Design.'*

Certificate syllabus is structured so as to ensure a balance between experiencing, making and understanding.

Great progress has been made with the Art, Craft and Design curriculum. But have we forgotten the basic ingredients of artistic and creative process – our senses? More time has been given to students to explore and develop their 'given titles' but does it still put emphasis on the end product rather than on the learning processes which give the student the opportunity to enrich her individual awareness and understanding of the world of nature and man?

Within the Junior Certificate syllabus,  it states: '*Students' work should be evaluated as a whole with equal emphasis on both process and product.*'³ This process is the design process but before a pencil hits paper it is the progression of discovery that is sacred. An increased development of the sensory mechanism e.g. learning to see, listen, touch, smell, develops the student's power of perceptual and critical observation, thus helping her to explore, relate and to express herself within the surrounding environment. Visual awareness and direct experience are the core of this progression of discovery. These areas are the starting point of the student's reaction to the world around her and develops to a stage where the student is beginning to evaluate these reactions and is able to use them in a positive way i.e. relating the learning in the classroom to the world outside. The various art media and processes function as the '*means*' through which the student gives concrete form to what she sees

³ The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. '*Junior Certificate Art, Craft and Design – Guidelines for Teachers*', p.6.

and experiences. The art elements line, colour, form, structure, texture are the means that enable the student externalise them.

What Is Visual Awareness?

It is developing in a person, an ability to perceive and understand the visual relationships in and around her environment. The artist uses her perception to the full capacity to create and deal with what she sees and feels. Everyone can perceive, it is what links us to our surroundings. It is our perception that aids the processing of information taken in from the surrounding environment. It is then up to us to make a subjective response either to use this information in an active or inactive fashion. The artist feeds from this '*information*' that is absorbed and basically cannot live without it. The artist is constantly visually aware and not only looks but '*sees*' what is happening in his/her surrounding environment. But we should not leave it solely to the artist to do the seeing for us. We are all individuals, all with different and unique ways of seeing and interpreting our surroundings. But just how many of us are '*seeing*' what is happening around us? We can look but not see. As the German artist Oscar Kokoschka once said:

"Young people everywhere must learn the forgotten art of seeing life with their own eyes".

We are as a generation being swallowed up by visual media which is getting more advanced as this chapter is being written.

If we are going to teach young people to become visually aware, where could we begin? We can begin in the art room. But many students still see the art curriculum in terms of making pots, printing fabrics or painting portraits, rather than as a milieu for the discovery, understanding and communication of ideas. Of course, it is very important that the student may learn to pot, print or paint but it is also an opportunity to be taught to see. Visual awareness is one of the essential basic ingredients of the artistic and creative process. We cannot ask students to express themselves if we have not taught them to stop, see and feel their surrounding environment. It is up to the Art teacher to help the development of the student's visual language as a way of understanding, feeling and expressing, and of relating her personal development to his/her everyday world.

It is not a matter of formal lessons about line, colour and tone in the art room, in the hope that students will then automatically apply this knowledge to everything they see. It is a matter of learning their vocabulary through seeing and experiencing something – the impact of the silhouette of an office block, the pattern of the tiled floor, the texture of moss on a brick wall. These cannot be learned from someone else's description. They have to be seen, felt, smelled.

What Is Direct Experience?

Direct experience coincides with visual awareness. It is when a person takes part in the actual event e.g. walking through a building, visiting a park, etc. and using her senses to collect information. It can be argued that the concept of experience in art education has to be reconsidered. It is not the experience of slides, books, materials, and expressive media that is so important but the experience of life itself.

Recently, a group of 5th year students in my school, were reading and learning about Gothic architecture in their Art History. I took this opportunity to integrate a Gothic painting project with them. When asked to discuss Gothic architecture, the class knew the theory but the lack of feels of awe and splendour was noticeable; this could be experienced only when standing in the middle of a Gothic building. As a result, the students were brought to St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, where time was spent recording their feelings and exploring the Cathedral through observational drawings. From their responses and analysing their writings, it was noted that student became more aware and better able to appreciate Gothic architecture. expand.

Media skills are of no great value until the student achieves knowledge of and insight into the subject under consideration. The misconception occurs when skills in art i.e. the ability to use tools and media to carry out a certain process, is treated in isolation from the equally important skills that relate to 'means' rather than 'ends' – feeling, seeing, hearing must be integrated with the doing.

The student in other words should be encouraged to look at her environment and 'see' it in terms of her senses; to select from what she sees by establishing relationships between what she 'sees' and 'feels'. Robert Witkin explains in '*Art and the Built Environment*', how the use of expressive media can help the student to organise and understand her experience:

*"Art is one of the few subjects in the school curriculum where an affective approach to study is valued and where the relationships of the world of the self with the world of objects and events is continually explored. Art education is concerned with the development of the immediate sensuousness as our way of receiving the world, and the processes we use to symbolise, externalise, understand, order, express, communicate and solve its problems. It is located in the belief that visual/tactile ways of knowing/thinking/feeling are one of the most important ways of receiving, organising, understanding and transmitting impulses, feels."*⁴

Once again the issue arises, how many of us are using our multi-sensory abilities? Diarmuid Larkin writes, in '*Art Learning and Teaching*' about our way of life and the way it has conditioned us to perceive through a linear 'particular', approach rather than a multi-sensory, continuous, all-at-once, relationship with our environment. He continues:

*'A linear empirical approach influences our perceptions so strongly as to constrict our experience of our environment in a multi-sensory way.'*⁵

⁴ Witkin, Robert. '*Art and the Built Environment*', p.25

⁵ Larkin, Diarmuid. '*Art, Learning and Teaching*', p.10.

Those who retain this multi-sensory ability are usually found to be artists or others with exceptional aesthetic sensitivity. However, we are not catering solely for an artistic elite, but for students. Students who are exposed to a wide range of experience are more likely to be self-assured. Through regular repetition and reinforcement of the student's natural experiences, she builds concept about herself and her environment, and the relationships between the concepts of art are realised.

A greater understanding and depth of awareness can be brought about by helping the student to recall her experience and by drawing her attention to what she already knows. This can be done by asking questions that will help the student to recall in vivid details thoughts, perceptions and feelings derived from her experiences. Another approach could be to suggest to students to go outside, choose a small area of the yard and to record visually what they see and feel. They can make sketches of all the different shapes and objects in the area, or take rubbings of textures and use them in designs. Some students can focus their attention and study the colours and the effects of changing light conditions. There are numerous ideas for the basis of image making.

Drawing:

Visual awareness is looking at things that are often ignored. The basic skill of drawing involves visual enquiry and is an ideal opportunity to increase perception and observation skills. Drawing imposes a different rhythm or experience. Having drawn something, the thing drawn acquires a value. If a

student draws something, she has to look very hard at it. It is the making of judgements that the long-term process of drawing is of great value in increasing a consciousness of the environment. The ability to produce accurate type drawings is not the aim but to look and see is, and through time and practice the student will notice a development within her own work.

Expression:

*'Visual awareness is making that experience become conscious; the student observes, identifies, compares, contrasts, relates the visual relationships which forms the total impression.'*⁶

Making sense of experience means acting upon that experience. Expression is the result of thoughts and feelings that are developed according to the student's reaction to her experience. Experience includes her reactions to external environment, natural and man-made as well as her internal reactions, emotions, and dreams. Expression goes beyond the area of subject matter to the area of tools and materials used. The art programme equips students with manipulative skills in expressing themselves with art materials. Experience with materials can open up a range of expressive possibilities. Students should develop a fluency and flexibility with a few of these tools and media and have the ability to select the tools and media most suitable to her, to express her ideas and feelings.

⁶ Witkin, Robert. 'Art and the Built Environment', p.30.

Teaching art is not simply about the development of skills in drawing, painting, craft etc. it is more. The aim is to encourage students to see, feel and record. The natural or the built environment – the student's immediate environment outside the art room door; contains inexhaustible sources for inspiring students in their artwork. Parallel to the teaching of line, colour, form, texture, the environment also allows the student to become aware and understand her surroundings and enables her to relate personally to the world in which she moves. This will lead the student to realise that art is a vital link between herself and her world. Art has been instrumental in calling attention to numerous issues and concerns of our society e.g. physical and cultural concerns. The personal growth of the student can be opened up through her art learning as today, art cannot be separated from other aspects of life, and it is an integral part of life.

Chapter Two

Using The Natural/Built Environment

As A Resource

*'Education is concerned with the response we can make to our surroundings. Experience, knowledge and understanding can change the nature of our response. An articulate and responsible active response can only be made by a visually articulate population.'*⁷

Education through art concentrates on the creative side of the student. The art teacher must motivate the student to establish this creativity. It has already been found that the basic ingredients of the artistic and creative process are our senses – to see, listen, touch, and smell. From visual awareness and direct experience the student will be able to evaluate the responses and use them to create and express. Feelings arise from direct experience, so that any extension of sensitivity requires opportunities to react emotionally and identify with her feelings. To extend sensitivity, students need direct experience with objects and people. Students learn through experience, but through experience of what? Within the art room, it is often a second-hand experience through books, slides, etc. Our environment which one frequently takes for granted is a good starting point – either the natural environment or the built environment. Both are waiting to be explored and contain inexhaustible sources of ideas for the basis of image making. In the Art, Craft and Design Junior Certificate syllabus, it states:

⁷ Green, Peter. *'Art and the Built Environment'*, p.25.

'The starting point (or subject matter) for each learning experience is crucial in developing the student's capacity for focused personal response. The motivation should be visually oriented and derive from the student's direct experience of the natural, social or man-made environment'.⁸

In schools the tendency has been to promote environmental study as a geographical, historical, scientific or sociological study. Environmental education should not only involve a knowledge of the physical world, but should be concerned with how people feel about their environment – either it is natural or built, how they relate to it, how they are affected by it and how they affect it.

Today's education is concerned with the student and her total growth as an individual. This personal growth of the individual can be opened up through her art learning. As we consider the environment in the art room we want students to be more aware, to be more perceptive and to help them to relate personally to the world in which she moves. The first aim of the Art, Craft and Design at Junior Cycle is:

'To promote in the student an informed, inquiring and discriminating attitude to his or her environment and to help the student relate to the world in visual, tactile and spatial terms.'⁹

⁸ The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. *'Junior Certificate – Art, Craft and Design – Guidelines for Teachers'*.

⁹ Ibid.

Art is a powerful means of educating students to issues concerning the natural and built environment. In this environment-oriented approach, art instruction in the schools will explore many diverse areas, among them the man-nature relationship, the challenges of ecology, our history and culture.

Man-Made Relationship

Environmental education is a means of understanding, appreciating and conserving the environment. It is of great concern to us all today. Since the quality of the environment could deteriorate at a rapid pace we must assume some responsibility for educating students to take an active critical role in their environment. This is not about taking on the world's pollution but it is about their immediate surroundings e.g. putting litter in the school's waste bins. A project to design posters for the school's corridors to make fellow students aware of the function of waste bins, could promote a litter-free area.

Students could take a closer look at their community, e.g. buildings, streets, doorways, chimneys, street furniture, parks etc. This could help them to develop a concern about the conditions and to learn what they can contribute to improve their aesthetic quality, or simply appreciate them for what they are.

The Challenges Of Ecology

Ecology and art are partners. Students can become aware of the many dimensions of ecology through creative art teaching. Nature is as necessary as the air we breathe and it is important to promote a healthy respect for it. In 'Art and Environment' Arnel W. Pattemore writes about the love relationship between a child and nature through experience:

*'I recall the story of an inner-city child who visited a home in the country. She recoiled at the notion of going barefoot or tumbling on the soft grass, though her playmates did so with gusto. She shrank from the frogs and fish in the fishpond and seemed utterly uninterested in the birds and flowers and trees. The natural world was totally alien, and frightening to her. Little by little, through her inquisitiveness and the example of others came to the fore. After several hours, the shoes and socks came off and she ventured forth, wiggling her toes in the cool grass, touching and smelling everything. She tried to catch a frog, she climbed a tree and she discovered that the lovely fragrant roses have thorns to be respected. She didn't go so far as to explore the woods beyond the yard, but in the yard itself, at least, for the first time in her eight years she was close to nature.'*¹⁰

Depending upon the location of the school, students could explore nature by class excursions to nearby parks, botanical gardens, woods, etc.

Students could be taken on a scenic walk and focus on the natural elements such as trees, bushes, sky etc. They could be asked to perceive and identify

¹⁰ Pattemore, Arnel W. 'Art and Environment', p.106.

these things which surround them and are too often missed. A discussion of colour, shapes and textures that they have seen can be followed up by drawing, painting etc. Each student can express her own personal ideas and experiences. Or students may be asked questions, which provoke discussion; what makes the place interesting? What is it that is appealing about the landscape? What has contributed to its aesthetic appearance?

Our History And Culture

The 'language of the arts' is important in connection with our history and culture. It is both the product and context of culture and history. Messages are conveyed to us not only through words, but also through the visual language of signs and symbols, by the particular form and arrangements of buildings and objects, which communicate a wide range of meanings and encourage certain responses from us. History and culture is not mentioned or associated with art education until the Leaving Certificate syllabus. Students develop an appreciation of the History of Art over the two-year period. Within this curriculum, the history of Irish architecture follows a chronological sequence of periods and styles. It starts as early as 2500 B.C. with passage graves, to castles, ecclesiastical buildings and ends with 18th Century Georgian Dublin.

However, the Leaving Certificate Art History curriculum concentrates on these particular great buildings ignoring the surroundings of ordinary, anonymous buildings of vernacular architecture, such as cottages, outbuildings, forges and mills that are in danger of becoming extinct. If students were offered the

opportunity to include local studies of surrounding buildings in their own town or area, within the third section of the History of Art paper '*Art and Appreciation*', it may give them an added incentive and interest to notice their environment, and also learning about the local history, traditions and skills of the previous generation, which are a vital part of our heritage.

The Relationship Between Artists And Their Environment

Artists have been interested in the natural world for centuries. Painting, drawing and other media have been used to make a personal, visual response to what they see. Some artists have recorded their environment very realistically, attending to great detail and accuracy. Others have chosen to give their impressions of they see, often attending to shapes, patterns and colour, less for the photographic realism and more for the visual qualities that give them certain impressions. Some artists are more expressive in their response and may use line movement and colour, for example, to express the feelings they get from their environment.

Generations of artists have celebrated the environment but today, artists see it in problematic terms. The artist can help us to digest or grasp the welter of confusing and diverse problems that our natural or built environment throws at us or we throw at it. Exhibition after exhibition of Irish contemporary artists

are contained in the work of Sean McSweeney, who has devoted himself to a sustained exploration of a familiar archetypically western landscape of Co. Sligo. He is concerned with his immediate environment, the bogland, a heavy, waterlogged place where sky, sea and the land seem often to almost merge in. Colin Murray scans the ever-changing surface of West Cork. He talks of what his landscape meant to him in the 1987 catalogue of the 'Living Landscape' exhibition:

*'Man's struggle to survive in an inhospitable environment is glorious to witness. The land's struggle to survive against the natural forces is dramatic. There are changes that are taking place in the land so fast and all pervasive that the environment as we know it may not exist for too much longer.'*¹¹

Contained in the works of Gwen O'Dowd and Barrie Cooke is the interest in environmental issues. In 1988, both artists exhibited in the exhibition 'Clean Irish Seas', jointly organised by Greenpeace and the Visual Arts Foundation. At first glance, Barrie Cooke's images appear beguilingly attractive and lush but, on closer examination they reveal increasingly the often irreparable damage that man's influence has caused. In 'Sphaerotilus and Alga', the image is directly concerned with the dangers of the proliferation of sewage fungus and algae (when algae takes over they leave water effectively dead).

In 1993, Patricia McKenna set up an exhibition 'The Grey House', which grew out of a series of work based in County Cavan. This work was concerned with

¹¹ Murray, Colin. 'Living Landscape Catalogue', 1987, p.15.

the changes that have taken place in rural Ireland – emigration, migration, displacement and leaving behind deserted houses. The artist took a small abandoned house one and a half miles from the town of Belturbet. Patricia McKenna believes that such houses are reminders of the painful wound caused by the displacement of their people. The house was chosen as typical of the empty houses all over Ireland which are witnesses – visually reflective remains – of the reality of migration and displacement. A derelict house is devoid of function and becomes a vessel with only the innate memory of the materials left. It exists as it stands in its pure form, memory locked in its materials. It is the reality of the existence of these houses in their present state of emptiness and the sense of absence that such places evoke and not their previous social history, which concerned the artist.



Illustration A



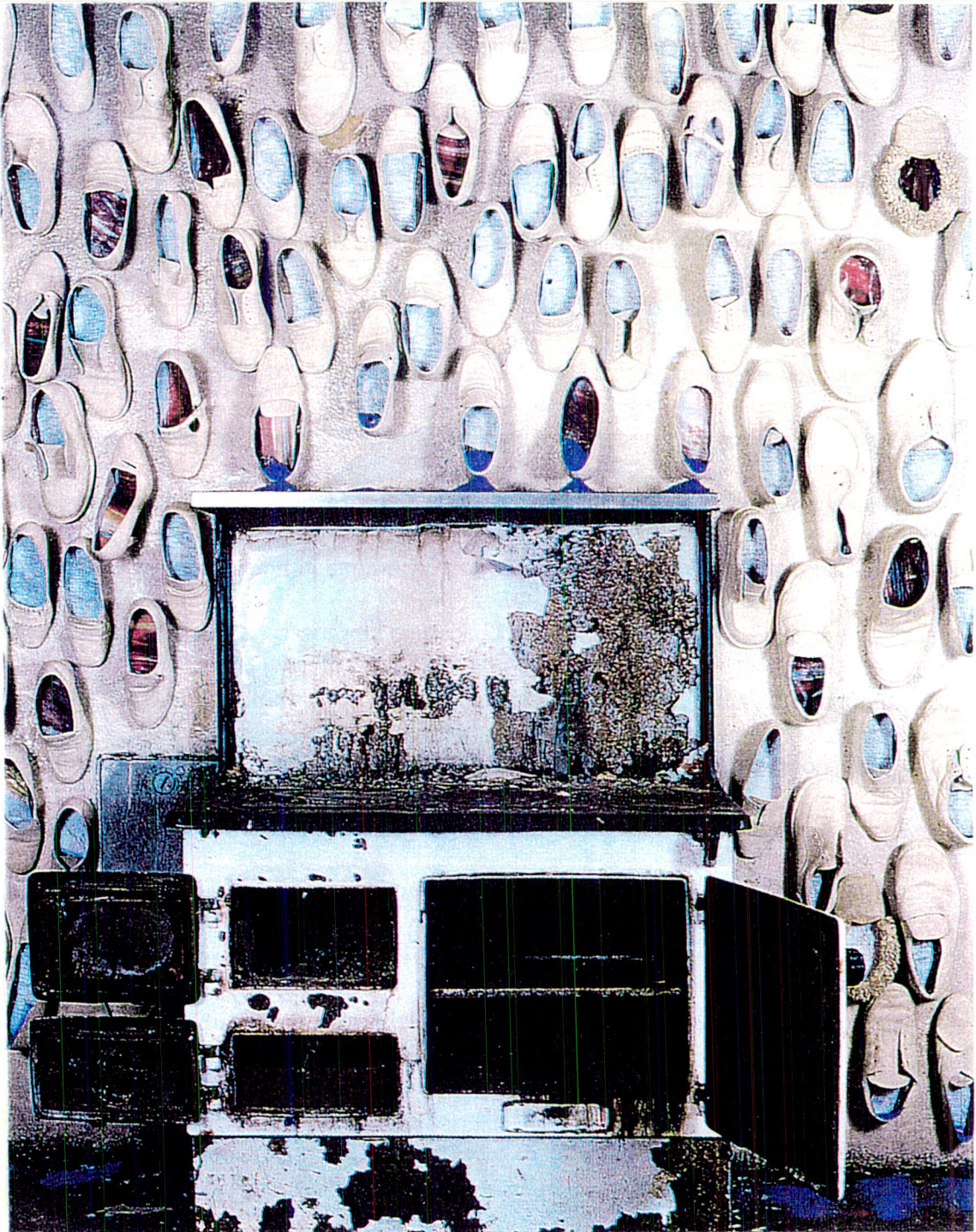


Illustration B



Chapter Three

Using The Natural Environment As A Resource In The Classroom – Methodology

Background To Methodology

I am currently completing my teaching practice at Mercy College in Coolock. Mercy College has approximately 600 students and is an all girls' school. The school clearly recognises the importance of art education resulting in great interest and appreciation from both students and staff alike. I chose my First Year class of 20 students to work with me in achieving my objectives within my dissertation. They are a class of good ability and receptive to new ideas.

The scheme that has been used for the practical application of this dissertation was concerned in encouraging the students to move out of the isolation of the art room and look to their surroundings in the making of art. This involved a class excursion to St. Ann's Park, which is located near Mercy College. It focused on a sensory and observational response from students to this natural environment, compared to their familiar environment of the city. The aim of this scheme was to promote visual awareness, resulting in provoking the student's personal emotional response to her surroundings. Students worked within three groups resulting in a triptych depicting St. Ann's Park, which utilised paint and involved tactile textures. Parallel to this first-hand environmental experience, students became aware of the role of art in our society. Today, art is related to many concerns of our world, one of them being our natural environment and so, the theme of nature and its importance was discussed throughout this five-week scheme.

Practical Application

Class excursion to St. Ann's Park:

The main aim of the visit to St. Ann's Park was for students to '*Stop, Look and Listen*' and then to '*record*'. Time was allocated for this vital exercise when the group first arrived at the park. Students were asked to find a place where they could sit in silence and answer questions on a given handout, such as '*What do you hear? What do you smell? And ending with the question 'How does it make you feel being here?'*' This exercise introduced the park to the students in a new way. It allowed them to experience it in a slower tempo, encouraging them to look at, take notice and to respond by describing what they were witnessing. Students wrote about seeing the pond, the tower, they heard the birds, the trees moving and they smelt the flowers and the 'fresh air'. Among their responses to the question '*How does it make you feel being here?'*' Aoife wrote '*It makes me feel relaxed and happy.*' Karen replied, '*There are a lot of things I feel – peaceful, relaxed, happy. I'm glad I found this place.*'

The students were using their senses to collect information which played an important role throughout the following weeks, not only in the making of art, but also for their views and suggestions within the classroom. The remainder of the visit was spent exploring their surroundings through observational drawing. This encouraged students to look objectively at their immediate environment and was important in promoting and increasing the students' visual awareness. A variety of textures were collected by taking rubbings from

different surfaces e.g. a wall, bark of a tree, etc. These helped the students when deciding on and applying tactile textures to their artwork. As a home activity, students were asked to write about their day's adventure to St. Ann's Park.



Illustration C





Illustration D

The next class began with students reading out to their fellow classmates, what they wrote about the class excursion to St. Ann's Park. Notes were taken to what they saw and heard, and written on the blackboard. This enabled the class to recap on the activities of the previous week. The task of this class was for each student to compose a painting of their impression of the park. The sketches they made in the park and photographs were used to aid them with their artwork. Composition and perspective were introduced to the students and support studies included the work of Henri Rousseau.

The third class introduced the students to group work. The class was divided into three groups – '*The Gardens*', '*The Tower*' and '*The Shell House*' – areas of St. Ann's Park that had been discovered by the students. Students were carefully selected for each group based on their personal interest of the park, their art ability, but more importantly to allow interaction between the students as it had been noted that certain groups of students did not know their fellow classmates which is understandable in any First Year class. Time was spent talking about each group working as a team – the importance of each individual's idea, opinion and art skills were needed for their group's effort to succeed.

Within the groups, students began by drawing their personal impression of depicting their area of St. Ann's Park. Then each group came together to decide on the final composition which was drawn on an A1 board. Once again composition and perspective were discussed. Support studies for this class was looking at and talking about the works of Claude Monet '*Giverny Gardens*'.

The next two classes were concerned in introducing students to the variety of textures that were seen and felt in St. Ann's Park. A visual aid supported this introduction with a second visual aid on 'tactile textures'. These were discussed and then each group had to decide on appropriate materials to suit their artwork. Over these classes, students gathered a range of materials such as tinfoil, pasta, clay, pebbles, twigs, and tissue paper to apply to their A1 boards. At the end of each class, time was spent evaluating students' work but also introducing them to Irish contemporary artists whose works are based on the theme of nature. Students looked at the work of Sean McSweeney, '*Shoreline Fields*'. They learned about this artist who devotes his time to exploring his surrounding landscape of Co. Sligo and the appreciation and fascination he has for nature. The following quote from the artist was read to the class:

*'I want to make a statement about this area. You are always seeing something new. And it goes so quickly. If you were to leave it for a month that pool will change.'*¹²

A discussion began by asking the question '*How does this artist get across what he feels in his paintings?*' Their response was that the paint was applied very thickly. The students could understand this as they made the connection from their task of applying textures using paint and flour in their artwork.

¹² McSweeney, Sean. '*the Irish Times*', 25th September 1996, p.14.



Illustration E



One student's comment was *'You could almost feel the wet, muddy soil of the field'*. Even though the students were not familiar with this more expressive, contemporary work, the class very much understood and appreciated to what Sean McSweeney was bringing across in his painting. The discussion arose about learning to appreciate nature, as it is as necessary as the air we breathe and should not be taken for granted. Students talked about the importance of St. Ann's Park to their community. Also one of the students made the connection to what Sean McSweeney had said about nature and its changing forces *'If we were to go back to St. Ann's Park, it would look different with the arrival of spring'*.

Also the work of Gwen O'Dowd was introduced to the class. When students were presented to *'Under the Waves'* they were asked *'What is this a painting of?'* Some of the students said it was like clouds as they could see movement within it. They were told about this piece and also learned of the artist's interest in environmental issues. This painting *'Under the Waves'* was exhibited in an exhibition *'Clean Irish Seas'* in 1988 organised by Greenpeace to create environmental awareness. It reveals the artist's concerns about pollution and the irreparable damage that man's influence has caused to our environment. After looking at this art piece and evaluating it, the students became aware of the role of art today and its interaction to many of the problems and concerns in our society. This was discussed by asking questions such as *'What other issues could artists and their work deal with?'* Vital connections were beginning to be made by the students as they could see what Gwen O'Dowd was saying in her painting; they were practising in their art

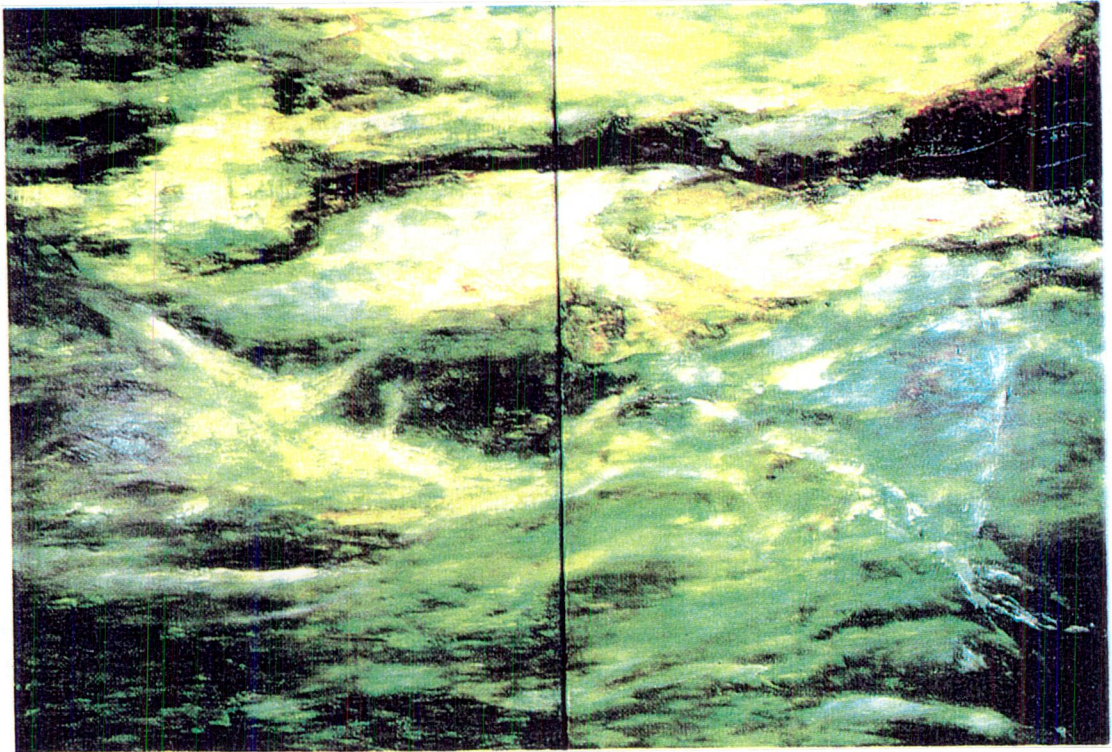
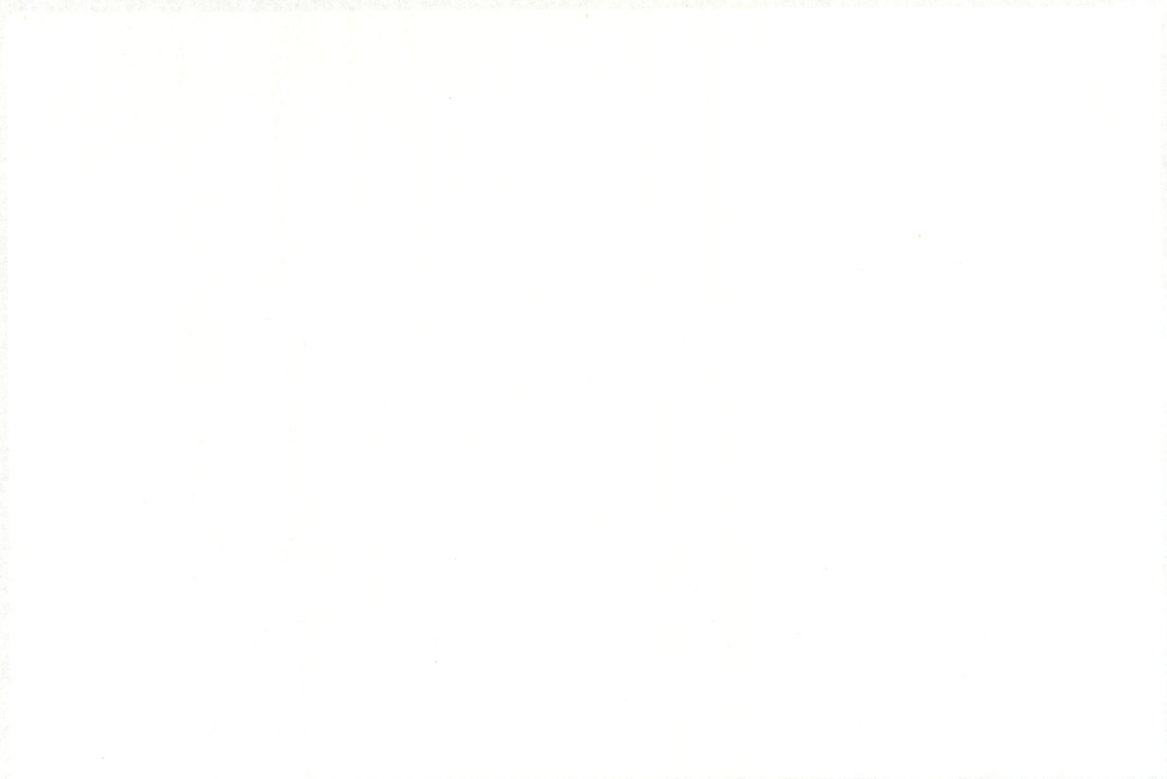


Illustration F





Illustration G



work – the importance of nature. Students concluded that the piece of work was done to draw the viewer's attention to a critical problem. Their comments revealed a shift in their perception of art from primarily decorative and expressive to a purpose activity in society.

In the fifth and final class of the scheme, each group applied the finishing touches to their artwork. It was decided by the students that the final piece – triptych depicting St. Ann's Park would be displayed in the school corridor for other students to see. Within this class, time was allocated for evaluating the work done over the previous five classes. One student spoke on behalf of each group to present their art piece of St. Ann's Park to the class. They talked of their area of the park, the materials chosen for the application of tactile textures and the problems and decisions that arose during the process.

A questionnaire was given to each student to fill in. This questionnaire contained three questions based on previous class discussions and to what students learned and thought during the scheme. The first *question* 'How do you feel about the park, now that the project is finished?' was asked to find out if students became more aware and appreciative in having such a beautiful natural area within their community. A very positive response was written by all the students. Joanne wrote:

'When I arrived at the park, I did not know about the place until we explored it. If you want to notice all of your surroundings all you do is just be silent. Now that the project is finished we can see the overall effect that the park had on us.'

Pauline responded:

'To me I feel the park should be valued because there is not much wildlife in cities anymore. We should admire and respect St. Ann's Park.'

The second question that the students were asked was *'Do you think 'nature' is important in our cities? Why?'* This question was asked as this group of students are living in a city where noise, traffic, crowds are part of their everyday lives. From their responses, they all made the reference to living in a city and the words *'quiet'* and *'peaceful'* were used to describe their emotions.

Amy wrote:

'If people have to get away from all the noise, they can go to the park. It is very relaxing and you can go and think. You can sit and enjoy all the lovely sights. It would make you feel nice and refreshed.'

Recel wrote:

"It would be boring if we just had cars going non-stop. Plus the fact that we can go and have picnics. The park is quiet and can be used for recreation."

Some students wrote about nature being a necessity for survival. When answering this question, also the simple importance of having natural colour within the built environment of a city was a response from some of the class.

Laura's response to this question was:

'Nature is important in our cities because without plants we would not be alive and oxygen comes from the trees.'

Bernadette wrote:

'If you don't have nature, the city would be plain without colour and beautiful sights.'

The third question was asking students *'did they enjoy the project and why?'*

Overall the class enjoyed the scheme as this was due to their class excursion to St. Ann's Park. Also, they enjoyed working and making decisions together within their groups. As Joanne puts it:

'I enjoy this project because we worked in putting all our ideas together in making an overall picture of nature. Also, I learnt more about nature.'



Illustration H





Illustration I



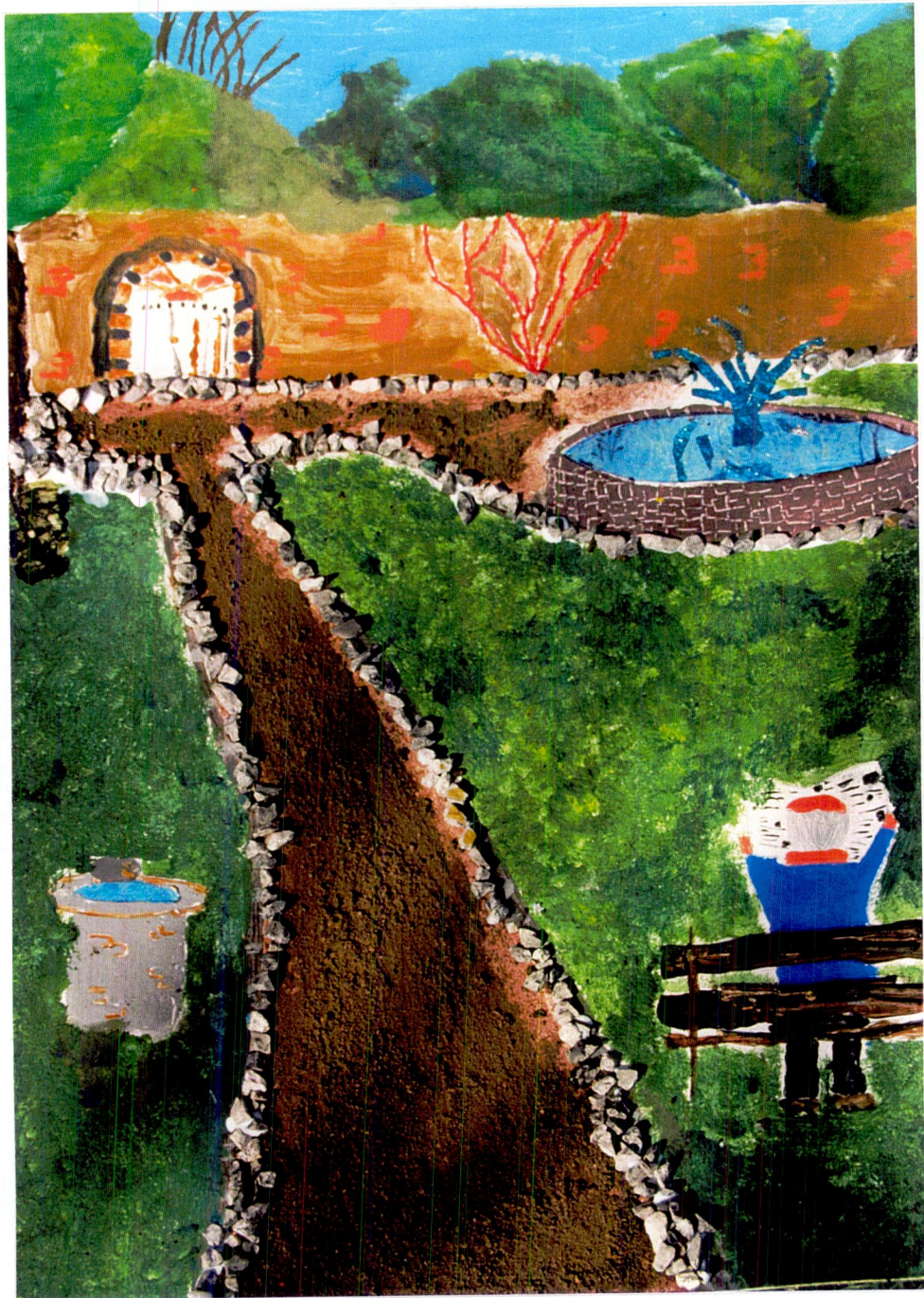


Illustration J





Illustration K





Illustration L





Illustration M



Conclusion

Art, learning and life are intertwined and inseparable. In the school curriculum, art is the one subject in which all other subjects meet, for in the art room the student exercises her total understanding, awareness and imagination creatively. It is not simply the development of skill in drawing, painting, design, craft, it is more. In teaching art, the aim should be to lead each student to realise that art is the vital link between her and her world. Each student's own artwork will mirror the world as she sees it with her 'inner' eye. Art teaching should encourage such expression. At the same time, it should take every possible opportunity to expand the student's awareness and increase her sensitivity.

It is vital for the student to be in a stimulated and motivated frame of mind. The purpose of this dissertation was to show the importance of taking the student out of the isolation of the art room and opening up her whole surroundings for the basis of image making. The natural/built environment contains many inexhaustible primary resources such as parks, buildings, streets, and nature, all waiting to be explored. Ideas, inspirations, observational drawings etc. as a result of these experiences could be the starting point to making art in the classroom. Parallel to the teaching of line, colour, form, texture, this first-hand environmental experience encourages the student to see – to 'really' see what she is looking at and allows time for the student to become sensitive to, to understand and to care about her surrounding environment.

With awareness comes understanding. Art is a powerful means of educating the student to issues concerning our society, such as physical and cultural issues. This is a result of the role of art today, which has become interactive to these concerns. Art cannot be separated from other aspects of life, it is an integral part of life. If our concern is for the future, we cannot help but develop a socially responsible environmental art curriculum in which values and aesthetics are combined in an instrumental manner for the benefit of all.

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