

Nari Gunjan Express Teaching Fellowship

January - March 2017

Teaching fellows: Tyga Helme (UK) and Anni Kumari (India)

Participants: 20 girls (Musahar Community) at the Prerana home, Nari Gunjan, Patna

Reflections TYGA HELME

The Artreach programme with Nari Gunjan was a truly memorable experience. My main take aways were how dedicated and enthusiastic the girls were with their work. It was like nothing I have ever really seen before in my teaching and it really enabled us to achieve a lot in six weeks. We saw amazing leaps in confidence in making work and talking about it. They were a complete pleasure to teach, from start to finish. Patna was not the easiest place to live, but I felt very proud to be part of the world Sudha is creating around her. Listening to Sudha's stories everyday and seeing the scale of her projects was truly inspiring

Initial Plan

Anni and I began planning sessions in Delhi, setting out a loose structure to introduce the girls to new materials, new ways of working and looking and lots of time for group work. We wanted to give them a solid foundation and show them lots of artists work to think about.

Change in Plan

The main things that changed from our initial plan was adjusting our approach a bit as the group was much younger than expected. I think they had volunteered for the programme so were all keen and we were happy to keep the group as it was. Our sessions also became half day sessions as the girls wanted to just keep going and going. Anni and I were both very happy to keep going with them! Frustratingly we had no internet until the end so we didn't manage to introduce them to as many

artists as we were hoping too, but Anni had a few images on her computer already so we could show them some things, and we also showed them our own sketchbooks.

Pedagogical Methodologies

- Anni and mine approach seemed similar, in that we had plans which were very flexible in direction. As the weeks went on we altered things a bit. Their imagination drawings mostly came back to a cartoon style, so the whole programme became more about looking.
- Drawing from observation was something they had never done, and it worked really well to have this idea well developed so that they could do great sketchbook work when we went to the museum and the zoo.
- We encouraged them to use their sketchbooks as visual diaries, finding their own personal things to draw from in their own time. As weeks went on, their grounding in observational work was merged with memory and imagination and their work really flourished, becoming more personal.
- I talked more about drawing in terms of personal mark making and feeling, Anni's focus was more on perspective and representation. In hindsight having the 'this isn't right' approach was probably good for the girls to have in relation to my reactions. It was something to work against and it meant we found different things positive in their work.
- We did a number of collaborative pieces which were really successful. The girls had to work in response to each other, be respectful, but also take risks and change things. It helped them become less precious and it was great to see what could be achieved as a group.

What didn't go well

It was a shame not to do a mural as the walls were about to be redone, but the large roll drawings and the textile painting felt like a coming together of ideas and interests to make a finished whole, so the feeling of making impressive sustained pieces as a group was not missing.

Challenge

At first Anni had to translate most things I was saying, but after a few sessions without Anni, I found it much better to communicate using demonstrations, acting, and drawing. It helped us connect as a group and was actually fun for us all to work out what we were saying and I think it really helped with their English. From then on I took this improvisation approach to my explaining.

What I learnt

The programme taught me so much about simplicity, keeping the idea and task fairly simple, allowing each girl to grasp it and if possible take it away and fly with it. It also reminded me that repeating the same idea over a number of sessions helps different kids get the idea through different tasks.

Suggestions

In living in Patna, I would have enjoyed being a bit more independent, but I also understood that Sudha was worried for our safety. In the future I could imagine it would be great for artists to go in for one/two weeks with a more narrow focus - design/fashion/textiles etc. Our group would fly into a project if one was coming up soon

As an artist and art educator, I was curious about the girls, their community, the working of the NGO etc, but more so also because I was born in Patna. For me, this was a way to connect back with a place where somehow my roots belong but I had no memories of it.

Initial Plan

Tyga and I had only discussed briefly about the basic structure of the programme and thinking of it as an intensive foundation course, we had agreed to focus on drawing primarily.

Change in Plan

While both Tyga and I, were constantly hand-holding the girls, demonstrating and drawing with them, especially as they struggled with perspective, light and shade, textures and scale; we were also training them to make independent decisions. So we changed the paper size for different exercises, challenging the girls to choose whether a vertical/ portrait or a horizontal/ landscape orientation suited best. Or how big their drawing should be to balance the positive and negative space? Or how could they best create a relation between different parts of a composition?

Pedagogical Methodologies

- Much like the previous teaching fellowship participants, the girls loved to 'copy' images from their books, newspapers and greeting cards; make crafty items like wall hangings, soft toys and flower vase. While these were dexterously made, we introduced them to the importance of 'looking' and drawing.

- More than anything else, it was this principle of 'looking and drawing' that both Tyga and I gave emphasis to throughout the workshops.
- While we started with story-telling as a tool to initiate a drawing process, the subsequent workshops on still-life, nature study, portraits, anatomy, outdoor drawings, drawings of museum display, life-drawing in the zoo; each emphasized the importance of 'observation'.
- With each successive workshop, we introduced them to the possibilities of chalks, charcoals, conte, watercolours, inks and markers, demonstrating the different ways in which each of these materials can be used for drawing from life.
- We also showed them our sketchbooks, images of artist's works and films on art to inspire them.
- We constantly motivated them to document their life in the hostel, through self-portraits, portraits of friends, drawings of trees and flowering plants growing in their campus, and objects that surrounded them. From the hostel rooftop they drew buildings, lampposts and electric wires, water tanks and animals (goats, horses, cows, buffaloes, hens and chickens) on the neighboring streets.
- In an exercise on color, the idea of colour mixing for different shades of greens and skin tones was quite perplexing for the girls in the beginning. So we figured out that we had to do some improvisations to make them understand colour tones, shades and saturation (transparency and opacity). We planned two field trips – one to the zoo and other to the museum. Since they had never been to either, their excitement knew no bounds.
- In the zoo, they learnt to make quick sketches of birds, animals and fish and observe colour and patterns, (despite being surrounded by curious onlookers). At the museum, they saw for the first time, a diverse range of sculptures, coins, maps, fossils, minerals, textile, paintings, jewelry, pottery etc. This not only broadened their understanding of art objects but also pushed them to make quick sketches deftly.
- Encouraged by the response, we also took them to the nearby nursery and cabbage farms. It helped them to make observations about natural forms,

colors and patterns. As they drew these on transparent sheets, they understood the importance of layers and overlapping. Through exercises on collage and large cut-outs, pattern making by using found materials, they engaged with color, design and geometry.

Challenge

One of the challenges in the beginning was that the girls belonged to a wide age group (between eight and fourteen). It was quite difficult for the really tiny ones to adapt to this new approach, for they loved to fill their sketchbook with cartoon characters and floral designs.

What I learnt

- For me, this informal display was quite an 'educating experience' not just for the participants, but also for the audience- the other hostel girls, staff members, the cooks, the driver and the frequent visitors. It is moments like this that help to reinforce the importance of art as a connecting thread between diverse people, locations, situations and histories.
- It was quite inspiring to see how efficiently the girls worked as a team, managing to sort out the display quickly. This was always a proud moment for them as their peers gazed at their works in much awe, making comments about whose drawings were the best, identifying objects , people and spaces drawn , laughing gaily at times.

Suggestion

I think my role as their mentor and observer, was quite satisfying looking at their zeal to learn and their commitment to practice what was taught, despite involvement in a host of other activities , along with their studies. In the span of six weeks, we produced four large paper and fabric scrolls, one book of nature studies, 21 small canvas paintings, several other drawings and many "cherished memories". But there

were also many other exercises we had planned that had to be kept aside as we need to finish the ongoing collective works. Having a collaborator for the programme made it more relevant for the possibility of discussion, planning and reflecting back and also to learn from alternative approaches.