

IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS: INTERSUBJECTIVITY, REPETITION, AND DECISION MAKING IN PRESCHOOL PAINTING

Outfitted in a navy blue nylon running jacket and silver striped tennis shoes, a small boy makes a beeline for a paint easel. He is four years old beginning a three morning per week preschool program. His mother pokes her head around the doorframe telling me Otto has promised her a painting. I can tell Otto plans to be in and out of the art room as quickly as possible. He refuses to wear a paint smock.

I have designed this art studio as a place where preschoolers can decide “what they will do and how they will go about doing it” (Colbert, 1995, p.36). The art room is well- equipped and spacious enough for a dozen young children to work comfortably. There are assorted materials for woodworking, drawing and painting all accessible to children. The room is rich with space and has a clearly defined organization to encourage children’s independence and peer interaction. For example, in the painting area two easels are placed side by side, another two face each other. A wider double easel, also nearby, allows for either collaborative painting between two children or for one child to really spread out. Each easel has an attached tray holding eight to ten small jars of paint with a brush protruding from each jar. Mounted on a counter behind the easels is a large roll of white paper, and next to the easels are three wooden drying racks. Two small sinks and a pegboard holding eight smocks are mounted at child height. There are large windows in this space filling the paint area with natural light.

Among the children, easel painting is serious business. Children grip single brushes with fists, fingertips and two handed. At times a child selects a bundle of brushes, dips each horsehair tip in paint, and holding all half dozen together, arches wide rainbows

across the paper. At the easels the paints might turn muddy, jars tip, painted stories become far -fetched, raw or strung together, but for the child there is always import in the activity. In the busy milieu, where ideas pass with ease, there is a perpetual hum. For the uninformed observer, the sharing can appear chaotic.

As the art teacher I appreciate how children learn through experience. As a visual artist I am intrigued that the studio is a place where children share meaning (Zuermeuhlen, 1974). I am the art teacher and the researcher in this study. For the past ten years I have observed children use paint, cardboard, wood, packing materials, wire, paper and cloth to render their ideas. I see images rise to the surface, move back and forth among the children, and finally revealed days later in another context. I know art is a responsive activity (Shahn, 1957). I hear conversations between the child and the art materials, between the child and the model, and among their peers about the art project. After years observing children in this context, interacting and producing artwork, I want to know how ideas travel among children.

I notice ideas are appropriated at all stages of development, span media and are appropriated from once corner of the room to another. I see the borrowing of hesitant first marks and the copying of completed projects. Intriguing ideas are spotted by glancing over a shoulder, the peek around an easel or from far across the room. I experience ideas in woodworking being translated into painting.

This research study uses portraiture methodology, documenting the voices and observations of children in the art studio and creating an interpretation of these perspectives and experiences, in other words, crafting a narration of what has been happening. A close relationship exists between the subject and the portraitist who is more

concerned with differences and comparisons than outcomes (Lawrence-Lightfoot, Hoffman–Davis, 1997). Portraiture methodology considers the researcher to be generous and critical, questioning and open to possibility, qualities of good art practice. Artists and portraitists use aesthetic elements, like line, texture, rhythm, color to portray the essence of the subject. The portraitist’s narrative analysis is also full of visual elements, like rhythm, texture and color; to create what Clifford Geertz calls “thick description” (1973, p.6). As juncture between narrative and analysis, the portraiture composition, like a painting, uses allegory and knowledge of materials to create a clear vision.

The portraiture methodologist knows there are multiple realities and from these various perspectives researchers discover truths (Frankfurt, 2006). The portraitist, like the visual artist, realizes there is no innocent eye, nor should there be, and furthermore, finds no urgency to mask one’s biases in the telling. Both the artist and the portraitist know as well, the reader/viewer will reinterpret the narrative/ artwork based on their own experiences. Ben Shahn calls this “an audience of individuals” (1957, p.39). Julia Hoffman- Davis and Sara Lawrence- Lightfoot (1997) call finding idiosyncratic meaning in the analysis “co- construction of symbolic meaning” (1997, p. 30) or what happens gazing on another’s work.

An example of “co-construction of symbolic meaning” in the visual arts could be found in Joan Brown’s painting *Woman with Gauguin Painting, 1972* (Tsujimoto and Baas, 1998, p.106) which is a visual response to Paul Gauguin’s *Spirit of the Dead Watching, 1892*. Gauguin’s work symbolizes death in the form of a mysterious and symbolic presence, a nude Tahitian girl lies face down on a patterned bed while the spirit of death looms in the background. Brown re-interprets Gauguin’s work, co- constructing

a universal theme of death by adopting his idea, meaning and composition. Brown recreates the nude Tahitian girl, the hovering spirit of death, and even includes the original polka dot pillowcase. Yet Brown's work departs from Gauguin's with the inclusion of her self- portrait positioned parallel, and also nude, in front of the reclining dark Tahitian. In mimicking the work of Gauguin, Brown co-constructs the symbolic meaning of Death (Tsujimoto & Baas, 1998).

Portraiture, like most qualitative research methods, is authentic, holistic, and empathetic. Arthur Vidich and Stanford Lyman (1994) refer to James Peacock's (1986) early definition of ethnography writing, " a social scientific description of a people and the cultural basis for their peoplehood" (p. 25) in the first edition of *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994). Yet by the third edition, the Joe Kincheloe and Peter McLaren definition of ethnography, as postmodern writing, to be more than " simply the reanimation of local experience" (2005, p. 326) and calls "into question the social and cultural conditioning of human activity and the prevailing sociopolitical structures" (p. 326).

Yet portraiture methodology maintains an active search for connections, unlike ethnography, which besides being interested in the cultural, is passive and receptive (Lightfoot-Lawrence, Hoffman Davis, 1997). Case studies, which are not a methodology, but a strategy or " a choice of what is to be studied... by pursuing scholarly research questions" (Stake, 2005, p. 443), that are determined before arriving to the research site. The case study may use quantitative or qualitative methodologies or some measure of both. Portraiture is less predetermined, letting site events suggest the question.

Other qualitative methodologies like participant –observation locate the researcher an active player in the scene, for me this means, refilling paint containers, tidying work areas, listening to explanations, encouraging risks and harping about overlooked routines. It is difficult to see participant –observation as a distinct methodology, because “ we cannot study the social world without being part of it” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p.249). The various strategies of inquiry, portraiture, performance ethnography, participatory action research, case study, critical ethnography, all have the option to use participant- observation.

Portraiture largely differs from other qualitative methodologies in how meaning is realized. Similar to art making, portraiture uses imagination to see possibility in the most chance events. As a means to understand phenomena, imagination becomes a basic component of explanation found in the heart of portraiture’s rich analysis. The imagination acts as a selector for memory much like the artists’ use of imaginative reflection to create likeness or essence of the model and to breathe “life into an experience” (Greene, 1995, p. 22).

The preschool art room works as an in-between place linking the classrooms on opposite walls. Observing children entering this in-between space or “the liminal” (Peacock, 1986, p. 41), I notice the art room is a place without a place, existing by itself, closed in on itself. A liminal space can vary in size and space; like adolescence with a foot in two worlds or the brief instance between dreaming and awakening. A train station, waiting room, movie theatre, drivers’ license bureau are all liminal spaces.

The intersubjective, where one child's meaning links to another's, "in so far as individuals directly or indirectly call upon one another for assistance and rejoicing when the appeal is successful" (Coles, 1978, p. 72), can also be described as a liminal place or the inbetween. I see the intimate linking at the easel when one child admires another's color and asks to "try it out." I see a child dotting their open palm with paint, then splaying the daubed fingers onto a blank paper, stamping the handprint pattern onto their easel paper; a child nearby is intrigued and gives it a try, first using her hand then, varying the method with small sponges, foam donuts and wooden cubes. The moment where one identifies with another is the liminal. The liminal, where intersubjectivity occurs, is not the presence of two existences but of an emergence of something new from them (Buber, 1992). I see innovation arising from the liminal.

Otto faces an easel, picks up a brush jutting from the orange paint, and makes a dot in the center of the paper by pressing the brush flat. The bristles fan out against the white sheet. Otto puts the brush back into the jar and announces he is done painting. He turns to leave. I call after Otto, suggesting he title his painting and was that a pumpkin he made? He shrugs, not looking back. A small voice asks, "When is my mom coming?" I give my standard response, "After snack."

Every day for the next two weeks Otto makes a dot painting. His morning routine, a direct stride to the easel, brisk dots of orange, and an exit, is sober and focused. The only variation is the number of dots. Daily, Otto adds an extra dot to his painting. By week four, keeping to the same easel, Otto paints twelve orange dots and is working on his twelfth piece of paper. Otto never says a word while painting. I try to reassure and

develop a rapport with Otto asking, “What are you painting? A design? Pumpkins?” On this twelfth day Otto announces, “The dots are pumpkins.” Whether Otto speaks from my suggestion or not, by naming the orange dot, Otto connects a painted mark to a form in the world. I tell myself Otto is on his way to realizing the whole world can be represented through paint and brush.

I am curious about this quiet focused boy. The room keeps a quick tempo like trades on the floor of the stock exchange; a roomful of small heads bobbing up and down telling a story or gazing upon another’s work. From across this sea of chattering artists, I watch Otto in silence paint dot after dot. He stands out like parenthesis, separated from the main topic, yet in this difference represents another way of being four. In school Otto seldom interacts with other children standing off to the side observing. Otto’s routine is as predictable as his uniform of silver running shoes, royal blue and black athletic jacket, navy-blue sweatpants.

On the thirteenth day with thirteen orange dots, I suggest a ghost might be among the pumpkins and Otto begins adding a ghost per day. I notice Otto’s struggle to add new forms. He sighs as if he has been holding his breath. With this compulsive adding of images, I wonder how Otto will solve the problem of space. The paper is already full of pumpkins. With the potential for a dozen specters and lunar orbs, how will it all fit?

I find Otto’s repetition curious. Is he scaffolding, building onto what he learns from the mark before? But I see little difference from one pumpkin to another. Rhoda Kellogg (1969) in her book *Analyzing Children’s Art* observed drawings of hundreds of young artists. Over and over the children draw mandellas and suns filling the sphere’s centers with marks. The repeated shapes mimic earlier models. Children seemed

predisposed to making multiple copies. Over time the orbs with inner marks drop their insides leaving empty centers. Kellogg believes the mind is “predisposed to remember- that is, to like- certain variations and to discard others, finding the rejected forms too complicated to take in at once or too complex to become fixed in the mind” (p. 77).

Otto’s early marks have minimal variation. Despite the range of colors available in his easel tray, his marks are always orange, what changes is the size. Ben Shahn (1957) sees the artist engaged in a dialogue between what the material can do and what it can’t. Perhaps Otto is intrigued with the paint as object, and as consequence, the repetition is a step -by -step investigation of the properties. Does the attraction lie in the scale of the paper, the building on, and the coming back to something? Could re-experiencing pleasure be a motivation for Otto’s repetition? Otto, in his repetition of the orange dot, seems to be finding a niche and setting out to master it. The orange dot, dot, dot painting appears to be a solution to a problem what to paint, how to paint, and, perhaps, how to please his mother.

After thirteen days of pumpkins, Otto adds a ghost to the pumpkin patch. On day fourteen Otto dots seventeen pumpkins, shapes the white paint into two ghosts and then uses the yellow to design a moon. Through this repetitive mark making, I realize Otto is creating a system from his painted marks that creates a broader vocabulary.

Repetition in composition or as working method occurs with adult artists. Working in a series is common. Beitel’s (1973) conception of an “ artistic serial” is a “dialogue” among the artists, their lives, and artworks (1973, p. 19). Beitel sees the serial as “ strategies by which the artist guides their art making” (pp. 18-21). Artist Kiki Smith investigates questions of reproduction in her work saying “ Prints mimic what we are as

humans. We are the same yet different. I also think there's a spiritual power in repetition, a devotional quality like saying the rosaries" (Moma, nd).

On the fifteenth day Otto begins to paint Batman, Batman Beyond, and both in city settings. I see Otto developing "a repertoire from which to improvise" (Bateson, 1994, p. 10). He concentrates and works from memory. He begins with a solitary gray Batman Beyond and soon his paintings include walls for Batman to climb and then variations on capes. Otto spends an increased time at the easel. He seems more comfortable facing a blank piece of paper. I watch Otto move beyond his single color of orange to grays and blacks, the colors of Batman, to a wider palate. At the easel Otto reflects, stepping back and forth, adding to earlier marks. He describes his painting, filling me in on who's who in Gotham City.

Otto's easel narratives are brief like his portraits, one or two sentence stories. "They fight bad guys." Within days as the Batman paintings fill out, so do Otto's stories. "That looks like a face and that looks like another face and the red guy looks like he is going like this. The orange guy is reaching overhead, to the sky. There are two houses behind. One house is far away and one is closer. That's grass all around." In our easel conversations Otto seldom gestures while he narrates standing stock still with a deadpan expression. He speaks with little inflection, matter-of- fact, even in the most lively of tales. Batman is the series but Otto's stories extend beyond the adventures of a superhero. His easel stories divulge tales about his brothers, his grandfather, and heaven. "Sometimes I go to heaven and I visit my grandparent that died in a war and they played with superheroes."

One morning I am bent over interviewing a small child about her tabletop cardboard house. A swelling fills the art room, a rising and falling of cheers from the adjoining classroom. I look up to spy a half -dozen children re-enacting an X-men battle in the play loft. A fair-featured child, like Otto, Marlys, wearing an enormous navy velvet sombrero adorned with gold braid, is waving underneath the loft staircase. Otto is on the stairs flapping his arms. A child on the ground yells, “ I really have aqua vision. In my hot tub it is 18 feet and I open my eyes. You can look under without any goggles and without any glasses. My goggles are kid size so they don’t hurt.”

A week or two passes. Otto has not been in to paint. I am preoccupied with a table full of monoprint artists who need help both washing their plexiglass sheets and hanging wet prints on the drying rack. I make a note to search for an alternative to spring clip clothespins. From the doorway of the art room I see Otto and Marlys in a drama featuring Darth Vader and Hans Solo. Otto stands, arms outstretched, in a mock battle. As days pass I catch Marlys and Otto role-playing innumerable adventures of Batman, Peter Pan, Captain Hook, and a crocodile. Running in and out of the art room, the two children construct light sabers from cardboard gift-wrap tubes, return for more tubes and masking tape and then markers to label buttons for light saber control panels. This is a harmonious relationship built around Marlys and Otto inventing tight jams for heroic escapes.

Once Otto and Marlys’s relationship is set in motion, it becomes all-consuming. Upon arriving to preschool between 8:45 and 9:00, the first child to arrive scans the room for the other, despondent at the missing partner and showing cursory interest in a welcome from the teachers or overtures from classmates. When the other child arrives, they embrace and then the pair hits the ground running. They are side-by-side at lunch

and circle time, playing together inside and out, not excluding others but not seeking others either. Their play is fluid, introducing favorite characters that demonstrate a particular talent like flying, shooting adhesive from its wrist, or battling crocodiles and dragons. The characters emerge from each child's consciousness and are accepted by the other. Storylines overlap, the other's experiences are accepted, and the dramatic play fuses together two lives. Meanings are adjusted; I picture a rope woven from many strands. The children are inseparable.

I watch a connectedness develop between Otto and Marlys that embodies joy. In the art room Otto stands fixated as Marlys stirs her jar of tempera with a long handled paintbrush. Extending her arm upwards, Marlys is almost on point to reach to the top edge of her paper. The very tip of her pencil thin brush holds little paint, so Marlys dips her brush over and over to have enough color to make an $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick blue line across the top edge of her paper. Similar to any television chef, Marlys describes her procedures succinctly. When the how-to stops, perhaps to consider what's next, she paints a blue border around the perimeter of her paper. Otto hurries to his own easel to create a centered seven-inch gray Batman. In Marlys' performance and Otto's that follows, I see a celebration in the mutual, perhaps, in the discovering of another "similar in type to my own" (Mensch, 1988, p. 32) as the children share time and space.

I note logistics and physical similarities between the two children. For both preschool is a first plunge into institutional routine; both are the youngest of three children in a two parent household; both within miles of each other in a Midwest university town; both are fair with platinum hair, similar in height with slender bodies;

both were balloon- faced babies three years before. In outward appearance, the two seem as one. Could their initial attraction be sparked by these common connections?

One morning at adjacent easels Marlys and Otto are looking back and forth at one another's portraits enjoying companionship and the sharing of ideas. Otto is painting his Batman series and Marlys is creating an assorted grouping of Robin Hood, Peter Pan, and Green Goblin. Marlys never repeats an image. I wonder what they share through painting so I interview the two children.

Me: What is difficult about painting?

Marlys: To paint a bunny is hard. It's hard. Very hard.

Me: What's hard about a bunny?

Marlys: You know his big ears- his feet- he hops- it's hard to paint those.

Otto: It's hard to do new paintings.

Me: Is it hard to paint Green Goblin?

Marlys: Since he's green, he's easy. Just paint a person green.

Otto: Painting Batman is easy. You just have to paint a body and a head.

Marlys: I love to paint. I'll show you how to paint Green Goblin. (Marlys begins painting a green character with hands on its hips. She poses with her hands on her hips and looks down so she can understand what that looks like.)

Me: Have you ever seen Green Goblin?

Marlys: No, I only like to watch Peter Pan.

This interview does not tell me why the children share meanings, but discloses particulars: that both find painting is difficult at times, Otto finds beginnings difficult and solves this with repetition, Marlys finds painting bunnies troublesome but solves her

problem through assimilation. These reflections, verbalized in the interview, are part of the larger ongoing exchange between the two. In the interview the two listen to each other's responses, answering me but also following the other's reflective remarks. This seems comfortable for them.

A month of reciprocal play passes and I find Otto and Marlys' relationship less hurried, less desperate. I see this ease in their bodies. The once furtive checking on the other disappears, replaced by a knowing. The children appear more assured with one another, seldom surprised. At adjacent easels Marlys describes her themes of Peter Pan, dragons and Robin Hood. Otto has scenes of Batman, Batman Beyond and Batmobiles. I observe curiosity in the other's story and the tales become longer, more detailed. Through this back and forth of easel painting, Otto and Marlys begin borrowing each other's characters. Green Goblin gets his own portrait; the Batmobile heads off to Neverland. The children see their actions influencing the other. I see the borrowing of symbols, the mutual narrative. And even broader, Otto and Marlys share a common existence.

It is the middle of the week. I am surprised to find Otto painting alone. Otto is working on his Batman and Robin series adding a variation. Otto tells me.

Batman and Robin ride in a Batmobile. They go to Neverland where pirates are. Someday maybe when I am an astronaut I will go to Neverland. Neverland looks like a wide blue sea. The Batmobile floats on the water to get away from the pirates.

I am wiping down the counters. Around the perimeter of a small sink are six small plastic horses. I gather the toys and stop to look at Otto's newest painting. Marlys' themes are embedded into Otto's composition. It is clear her concerns are added to Otto's

consciousness. Unlike a month earlier, Otto doesn't need Marlys standing next to him for the borrowing to occur. Otto must be carrying a lot of Marlys around with him. I am reminded of Mary Catherine Bateson who writes, "The willingness to assimilate what has been seen or heard draws other life into increasingly inclusive definitions of the self" (Bateson, 1994, p.10).

In the block corner Otto and Marlys build body sized platforms to curl up on. Marlys pulls her knees to her chest and pretends she is sleeping. Otto lies next to her on his own bed, knees bent, his head facing upwards. He seems to be daydreaming. Both children share truths in a particular subject matter. Yet their friendship stems from a curiosity of the separate facts each knows about those truths. As the children react to each other's beliefs, their limited experience expands to create new meanings. This personal inquiry has terrific potential, for all imagination of one is open to the Other.

I peel the wet Batman Neverland painting off the easel and attach it with wooden clothespins to the drying rack. It is clear Otto's work has a style change. I attribute it to his re-interpretation of Marlys' themes through "intuitively given data" (Mensch, 1988, p.31). James Mensch (1988) describes how early relationships begin with a bodily pairing. We realize we cannot know the other's ego, but an initial physical identification lays the groundwork for imagining a like-mindedness. Husserl (1963) believes the parallel appearance, in action and manner, must persist for a pair to progress to a shared "commonness of the world"(Mensch, p. 33). After all, what one knows of oneself is transferred to the Other, the relationship thickens and both are immersed in a collaborative life, each picking up on the other's passions and peculiarities. There is a

history of good choices in the borrowing and both negotiate to an ever- widening shared experience.

With adjustment comes revision. In their art making Marlys sets aside her sword and makes a cardboard light saber to battle the crocodile. Otto's Batmobile heads for Neverland instead of Gotham City. Both are widening their perimeters of make believe, practicing flexibility and trusting another's decision. For Otto and Marlys to be guided by the other, both must be open, not absorbed in their own feelings. This negotiation also requires a kind of intelligence for Otto to analyze Marlys' intent, imagine what he could do, put together a response, all while reinterpreting personal meaning.

Edmund Husserl (1963), the father of phenomenology, writes that we all search for an identical other, a process he calls a "pairing" or "appresentation" (p. 139). This pairing begins with an initial attraction based on physical and behavioral likenesses. This superficial attraction may or may not develop into finding a convincing other: the first meeting has the potential for leading to a significant bond or a cooling. To find this identical other "the way my body would look if I were there" (Husserl, 1963, p. 147) requires imagination, or thinking in metaphor. Pairing is not as straight forward as predicting what the back of a chair looks like after seeing the front. Otto must rely on his imagination; his intuition must predict a deeper semblance located in the Other's psyche. Otto and Marlys do check their hunches, but people with their invisible psyches make the knowing less direct and more iffy than craning around a piece of furniture.

Martin Buber describes intersubjectivity as "imagining the real" (Buber, 1992, p. 75). Intuiting, according to Buber (1992), is an intimate dwelling place where one's spirit flutters within the life of another (Buber 1992). As new acquaintances chosen for

common looks and themes, Otto and Marlys imagine the likelihood of a friendship. Weeks of mutual narratives pass. I observe this deepening relationship surpass the cataloguing of another's quirks and enthusiasms. It becomes a seasoned relationship with Otto and Marlys bound in knowing each other's uniqueness. Can a child know another's psyche as well as he knows his own (Buber 1992)?

In time, each child develops further relationships. I find Marlys being shadowed by a younger four year old, who is enamored with Marlys, and stuck like glue. I watch a patient Marlys give this new child how-to tutorials. Without Marlys, Otto pretends to be Batman Beyond alone, then turns to woodworking. He pounds roofing nails into scrap pieces of 2"x4"s. This becomes his new passion: beating nails into wood, inventing nail head patterns and wrapping rubber bands around the nail shanks. Others around the woodworking table have fallen in with this project. Otto's mother tells me he played with his newest nail board all weekend, took it to his brother's soccer tournament, and left it on his brother's chair at dinner. He appears preoccupied and excited about the material.

What I never saw before, now I see everywhere. Perhaps, I have learned to recognize what is significant. Now I find signs everywhere. The construction of meaning from another's idea is the rhythm of the art room. Interaction is thick, occurring with fluidity and discontinuity. Through artmaking, there is an ongoing "trying out" of another. For instance, Ruby and Marlys sit at the round drawing table. From a nearby shelf Marlys chooses a black sheet of paper and a red pen. Ruby does too. Marlys begins drawing a W murmuring, "No one I know has a W in their name. I am just drawing it."

She changes the red pen for a red oil pastel. Ruby traces her hand with her own red pen. Marlys follows suit using the pastel.

Ruby bent over her paper, her nose inches from her tracing, “ Look at my handprint. I need an oil pastel.” Marlys’ reaches for the scissors, “ I need to cut this out with the scissors. Can you help me?” I shrug, wondering if she could begin on her own.

Ruby is one step behind and displays a choppy hand silhouette in no time. “Look my own hand! I’m going to be a scientist when I grow up and play the violin at the same time.”

Marlys compliments Ruby on her cutting. I wonder aloud if the hands have rings or fingernails? Both girls begin drawing rings. Marlys remembers her mommy has a ring and Ruby knows her mommy has a diamond ring. Finished, Ruby begins a second drawing, “ I’m decorating Flicka’s house. This is Flicka’s house.”

“ Flicka the bunny?” puzzles Marlys.

“ No Flicka the horse. This is his food.” Marlys, still struggling with the scissors, asks Ruby to help cut between the traced fingers.

“ Sure. Don’t you remember the China kids who were stuck together?”

Marlys accepts her paper hand back, “ We are Chinese twins. We are stuck together.”

Ruby not looking up, “ We are friends and we can never let go of each other.”

The girls’ drawing projects involve red yarn and cardboard boxes. Ruby imitates her version of a bunny’s voice to persuade Marlys to give up a marker. After twenty minutes, the girls collect their projects. Ruby hands me a piece of red yarn, asking to be tied to Marlys so they could be twins.

Standing beside the girls, I listen to the girls “imagining the real” (Buber, 1992, p.75). It seems art materials are tools for Marlys and Ruby, like they are for Otto and Marlys, to discover what each other knows, to create a mutual reality, and collective memories. Watching the small hands push and twist all the stuff of art making, intersubjectivity seems amorphous coming out of action. I lean back into the counter gazing at a room of children. Around me are swirls from paintbrushes, arms reaching for a pair of scissors, hands uncapping markers, the meanings of the other are found in a context of action.

Ruby and Marlys wait while I knot the sixteen -inch piece of yarn through their belt loops. The two girls shuffle from the art room hips colliding with every step. The red strip is literally a shared symbol, tying more than two small waistbands together; it binds the two children through the activity of shared meaning. In Marlys and Ruby I see a turning to another, a reaching out, to create something that is a between. I am so curious about this connecting with another. It seems to be part of how children make choices.

Audrey has been painting a light saber series. She tells the student teacher, “These are not paintings of popsicles. Lucy thinks that. It’s not true.” I can see Lucy’s point. Audrey’s paintings look like long stripes of color on a stick. Audrey, an authority on Star Wars, totes a new Star Wars backpack. She describes the light saber variations to me as she completes each painting. I have been intrigued with Audrey’s dozen quick and confident sketches of sabers. Audrey also paints in a series. She knows her stuff.

Audrey is an art room regular. Experienced in preschool life she enters the art room with aplomb, familiar with all routines and materials. She calls me by nickname, tagging a silly ending onto my given name, hangs on till snack to wash brushes and

paints both portraits and patterns. Audrey has tap danced on stage, plays team soccer on the weekends and has an older brother.

Otto has little physical interaction with Audrey, enrolled in separate preschool classrooms, only crossing paths on the playground and in the art room. But three mornings a week their wet paintings cover a similar subject dangling side by side on the drying rack. Both Otto and Audrey are busy cataloguing numerous identical light sabers. Their style is different; Otto hesitates to describe his work, slipping in and out of the art room, leaving behind two or three new light saber variations. Audrey, on the other hand, mimics full light saber battles between Obi-Wan Kenobi and Darth Vader. If Otto has not left the room by the time a parody begins, he watches Audrey's performance whispering commentary. Audrey seems to overwhelm Otto.

For two months Otto paints twenty-eight light sabers, each a particular color, handle and number of activating buttons. Otto stops often to reflect, then in a monotone explains the nuances of each specific sword. Like the earlier orange dot and the Batman Beyond series, the light sabers are painted methodically and in multiples. At times Otto repeats particular sabers or positions two swords parallel like railroad tracks. Otto is perfunctory, and once he makes his mind up, paints with confidence. I notice the light sabers command full use of the paper beginning where he left off the day before. I feel I am watching a train conductor clip tickets.

Their contrary painting styles reflect differing forms of repetition. Audrey, like Otto, paints in a series but she pours through topics. In a year she covers Harry Potter, light sabers, family members, Halloween, outer space, swamps, designs with grids, designs with curves, bells, hearts, favorite stuffed animal portraits. Otto's themes are

limited, scant portrayals of pumpkins, Batman Beyond, light sabers. As the light saber series concludes, Otto's catalogues at least twenty varieties of swords. Audrey completes thirty-two. Audrey is a prolific painter juggling other topics while the light saber theme abounds. I urge Otto to take risks and he expands his sabers to include a hand holding the saber. This begins a brief series of hand-reaching paintings. I notice particular handle details, once so fascinating, are now omitted with the inclusion of the painted grip. His final Otto saber painting is a hand reaching for the hilt.

Otto and Audrey's stack of saber paintings demand a close look. In the near obsessive repetitions, I observe joint inspiration, a similar method of working, yet the celebratory communion I observed between Otto and Marlys is absent. The focused dedicated activity of Otto and Audrey at first seems solipsistic. The two paint side-by-side to create faithful renditions of the light saber, but there is little curiosity about each other. Perhaps this intersubjectivity, is the shared intent, the comfort of a common goal,

In the Spring Otto and Audrey produce a preschool gallery show of fifty-two 36" by 24" light saber paintings. The work stretches down the hallway almost to the glass entrance. I see children up and down the hallway staring up at the work. I interview Otto's mom at the opening. She tells me that prior to preschool Otto was shy, not speaking to other people unless his older brother did. Every night in bed Otto prays for all the bad guys to become good guys. Otto tells his mother that she really doesn't know him and sometimes he goes to heaven where he plays with superheroes and visits his grandparents who died in the war.

Repetition, intersubjectivity and making choices seem concurrent in preschool easel painting. I wonder about the connection. Do some children need more help making

choices than others do? Good quick decisions take a lot of practice. Is repetition a quick fix for choice making? Perhaps, repetition helps decision -making by providing a structure for problem solving. Beginning with a prior solution and repeating the experience, little risk is involved. Yet too little innovation leads to boredom. Otto's incremental variations of repeated orange dots, light sabers and Batman Beyond makes the decision making manageable and generates enough invention to keep Otto at the easel. Both Otto and Audrey appear to use repetition as a structure to organize what they know. All three children find repetition an activity to share meaning.

It seems intersubjectivity, the mutual act of constructing meaning, is useful in making choices. While awareness of another's views doesn't mean agreement, perhaps, intersubjectivity, joint, overlapping or a co-action also functions to negotiate in the diverse or unusual. For Otto to make successful choices, he must know himself. His self-knowing comes from how he is seen by Marlys as well as finding out how separate Marlys is from him. Otto needs to observe how Marlys "organizes her significant world" (Geertz, 1983, p. 154). Subjective consciousness is inherently intersubjective.

Otto and Audrey share a structure in the repetitious activity of cataloguing light sabers as well as in the common subject matter. Otto and Marlys exchange individual themes. Marlys is fearsome, Otto reticent. Day after day children in this studio intermingle and transform their lives through conformity and hybridity, selecting and rejecting. In early moments of pairing, imagination asks "What if?" As intersubjectivity deepens, it bridges the separate, it questions the different, in a hodge-podge, a this- and-that, changing life.

One morning I notice Marlys paints a witch flanked by a light saber. Otto has long since left the art room but Marlys continues adding to her portrait. The witch's light saber is identical to the damp one hanging on Otto's adjacent easel. I don't expect Marlys to paint multiple light sabers like Otto and Audrey, Marlys follows themes but never repeats an image. Her borrowing seems particular, sparked by an innovative idea. She would rather paint new characters than refine the familiar through repetition. Yet whether similar images result in multiples or are a one-time affair, looking at the artwork of another affects decision-making.

I wonder what I am missing. What I see in the art room are a child's ideas, interspersed with fragments of another's, the hurly burly of activity as pieces of lives rub up against another, scraps of billboard, a blur of color, a remnant of something buried, an odd sized corner-fragments may be shared from the media, adults, other children's histories, little narratives, cultures. Rubbing elbows with compatriots inspires collaboration and the emergence of new meanings. Repetition seems to make choices easier. Borrowing from another appears to simplify decision-making but requires recognizing what truth we already know, in order to put our own spin on it.

In having a friend we learn isolation and absence. We discover we are separate beings, discrete from all that is not ourselves. Ideas are the field where children play out their individual subjectivities, and whether expressing antagonism to one another's ideas and plans, suggesting an alternative, or overlapping facts, new meanings come from the collaboration. Maxine Greene (1995) writes "reality is multiple perspectives and that the construction of it is never complete, there is always more" (p. 131). This is how

childhood must be, a continual passage, a collaboration reflecting on partial truths, ready to be transformed by the new, a kind of intimacy.

Standing at the easel the children draw and redraw their own lived worlds. Across sociocultural differences, the children peek at the idiosyncracies of others, “to make connections in experience” (Greene, 1995,p. 55). Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in “Narrativizing Visual Culture (2004) ” stress that innovations and change in art are born “between and communities and cultures in the process of dialogic interaction”(p. 46). They describe a postmodern environment where multifarious groups see their own truths alongside those of another, and the recognition of social and cultural separateness. In this polycentric collaboration, where a plethora of ideas travel, there is a chance not only to “ see” other groups, but to see how (each) is itself seen” (p. 11). This tugs at what I have witnessed among the children.

