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Art as Radical Act: Teenagers Revisit Diversity and Social Justice through JR's Giant Baby

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Abstract

In this article I share ways that I have used the artworks of contemporary artists to encourage middle school students to reflect on the concepts of diversity and social justice. This paper describes my use of an artwork called "Kikito (Tecate, Mexico-USA, 2017)," a work in the Giant series by a French artist JR. When I shared images of this artwork with students, the participating teenagers discussed this public art piece verbally as well as through texting via social media. They then created artworks based on their reflections. Although the quality of student outcomes varied in both the text-based discussions and drawing activity, they clearly showed that the Giant Baby project and JR's stories deeply engaged the students in a critical examination of the U.S./Mexico relationship and sparked their interest in the role of the visual arts as a source of social justice and systematical change.

Key words: social justice; diversity; art education; secondary education; storytelling

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Art as Radical Act: Teenagers Revisit Identity, Diversity, and Social Justice Through Contemporary Art

While browsing on the first floor of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in December 2019, I found an interesting panel displayed in the classroom area (see Figures 1 and 2). Presented in celebration of the 80th anniversary of the MoMA's Education Department, the panel was titled *Art Education as a Radical Act*. It asks the following question to viewers and museum visitors: "What should we fight for?" as presented in Figure 2. In addition, the museum's Education staff restructured their mission statement that year (see Figure 3). The five core values listed in the Education Department's mission are empowerment, empathy, radicality, creativity, and joy. Among them, *empowerment* is interpreted as honoring various people's experiences to change the established power structure, while *radicality* means challenging the existing norms and systems to question critically and to think innovatively. This art museum's example demonstrates a possible direction for art education practices within today's society.

In this article, I share ways in which I have used the artworks of contemporary artists to encourage middle school students to reflect on the concepts of identity, diversity, and social justice. Specifically, I focus on the *Comfort Hair* series by Yuni Kim Lang, a Michigan-based Korean American artist, and a piece from the *Giant* series, "Kikito (Tecate, Mexico-USA, 2017)," by French street artist JR. When I shared images of the artworks with the students, the participating teenagers discussed the pieces verbally as well as textually via social media. They then created artworks based on their reflections. In this process, I used storytelling as a main tool to engage the students in thinking critically and exploring multiple interpretations and personalized perceptions based on what they observed (Heise, 2010).

Figure 1

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Museum of Modern Art Atrium in December 2019. Used with permission.



Figure 2

A Panel Displayed around the Museum's Education Department's Classrooms. Used with permission.

Art Education As a Radical Act

What should we fight for?

Share your thoughts on why art education is worth fighting for today.

#ArtEducationAsARadicalAct

This year marks the eightieth anniversary of MoMA's Education Department. Since its founding in 1939, the department has continually experimented with new methods for connecting the public with art, from convening discussions about the value of art in people's lives to designing spaces that facilitate deep engagement with art and art-making processes. Through these methods, MoMA has championed not only the creativity of the artists whose work is on view here, but the creativity of people of all ages and abilities, both inside and outside of the Museum's walls.

This year also marks the introduction of an expanded MoMA Education program, with new features including The Paula and James Crown Creativity Lab on the Museum's second floor; the reimagined Samuel and Ronnie Heyman Family Art Lab; extended Community and Access programs throughout all of New York City's boroughs; and the online course *What Is Contemporary Art?* offered on Coursera, a digital learning platform.

To celebrate our expanded programming, we invite you to help us write a new Art Education Manifesto by responding to the question: What should we fight for? Submit your ideas on social media using the hashtag #ArtEducationAsARadicalAct. Responses will be shared on moma.org and projected here through January 2020.

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Access and Community Programs are supported by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF).

Figure 3

MoMA Education Core Values. Used with permission.

MoMA Education Core Values

EMPOWERMENT
Honor people's experiences. Share power.

EMPATHY
Build relationships. Foster understanding.

RADICALITY
Challenge norms. Embrace questioning. Think anew.

CREATIVITY
Take risks. Value imagination and experimentation.

JOY
Work with presence, passion and authenticity.

Engaging Youth in Critical Approach to Social and Cultural Contexts

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Art educators believe that the visual arts can become a potent vehicle for social change, empowering people, including young students who are newer members of our society, and questioning social systems (Bae, 2020; Fendler et al., 2020; Kraehe & Crabbe, 2020; Kraehe & Herman, 2020; Rollings, 2020). A number of studies have explored instructional methods that engage youth through critical inquiry to ask questions about their societal and cultural environments by participating in art-based discussions and art making. Utilizing the *Conflict Kitchen* project created by artists Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski as a focal point for instruction, Bae (2020) encouraged students to explore the food cultures and customs of other countries and to question the political relationships between those countries and the U.S.

Fendler et al. (2020) approached social activism as “a highly visible form of cultural production and resistance that many young people are exposed to across different media channels” (p. 10). The authors organized a summer program based on “a think/make/act curriculum model for turning art education into a site that builds on the contemporary activist work of teens” (p. 11). This curriculum exemplifies the fact that interactions with the visual arts can inspire teens to participate in civic engagement and social justice as critical thinkers. As a conceptual framework, Fendler et al. examined several examples of hashtag activism conducted by youth in digital worlds in the context of participatory politics (Jenkins et al. as cited in Fendler et al., 2020, p. 11) and restorying, referring to “productions that resist, offer alternate representations appropriate, or remix cultural forms” (Thomas & Stornaiuolo as cited in Fendler et al., 2020, p. 12). These theories view youth activism as “intentional and critical cultural production” and call for educators to adopt “a circular, opening manner instead of a linear one” in exploring art-based youth activism to support social change (Fendler et al., 2020, p. 11).

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Heise (2010) sought to empower students in urban settings and encourage them to engage in critical thinking through the exploration of folk art. According to Heise, folk art can be easily incorporated into culturally relevant curriculum because it offers access to stories, artifacts, and other aspects of the cultural heritage shared by the students, their families, and their communities. As participants in a critical and creative process, students can “uncover relevant contextual information” through research and conversations (Heise, 2010, p. 66). Within these interactions, providing students with opportunities to build relationships (Kraehe & Crabbe, 2020) is considered as important as supporting their participation in civic engagement and activism for social justice.

Utilizing Contemporary Art for Inquiry-Based Discussions

Contemporary art can be greatly effective in engaging students in inquiry-based and issue-based discussions (masked, 2012; 2017). As a pedagogical method to help students reflect on the power of the visual arts as a tool for rethinking social justice and diversity, Nordlund et al. (2010) suggests fifteen principles for teaching through contemporary artworks. This issue-based process for unpacking complicated pieces of contemporary art includes the following steps: start with students, create community, find ideas, look for metaphors, extend the community, encourage dialogue, establish a safe place, make room for multiple voices, make comparisons, explore contexts, encourage inquiry, guide practice, be flexible, reflect, and find support (Nordlund et al., 2010). Fey et al. (2010) suggest that works by modern photographers offer “a powerful medium with which to explore social issues and concerns through the intersection of artistic form and concept” (p. 51). These authors utilized photography to push students’ conceptual boundaries and to help them deconstruct their prejudices based on racism. Based on these insightful reflections on social justice in visual classrooms, the following sections examine

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an art project for teenagers, which highlighted the themes of diversity and social justice through art making and art discussions.

The Setting: The Reflection and Change Project

In a small community-based studio art program offering weekly two-hour art classes, I organized a project called “Reflection and Change,” which examined how visual art could empower teenagers by weaving together art appreciation, storytelling, and art making. Seven Korean American middle school students—six females and one male—participated in this project. All participating students were born in the U.S. and had Korean immigrant parents. Exploring themes of identity, self-discovery, the power of personal voices, and visual art as sources for social change, the students assessed the works of contemporary artists, participated in honest discussions, related the artwork to their own lives, wrote reflective essays about their personal history; and created artworks of their own. In this paper, I share how they explored the works of Yuni Kim Lang and JR.

Using the flipped classroom strategy (Boevé et al., 2017), I asked students to conduct “mini-research” about the artists and their works in advance. The students then shared their findings via a chatting app called KakaoTalk, which most of them were using. In class, we had verbal conversations, discussing the artists’ practices, and I tried to incorporate storytelling into these discussions. Some students shared their ideas openly, while others were too shy to speak up. Thus, in one face-to-face class session, I experimented with promoting storytelling through the use of social media. Every student participated in this chat-based discussion, openly sharing responses and reflections.

Yuni Kim Lang’s Comfort Hair Series

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The students searched and explored images of artwork, watched video clips, and investigated other resources about the artists' work. Born in Seoul, Korea, and currently living in Michigan, Yuni Kim Lang received an MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Art and a BFA from Parsons School of Design. Her primary mediums are sculpture, photography, and wearable art, through which she examines the themes of weight, mass, accumulation, hair, and cultural identity (Lang, n.d.). Experimenting with concepts such as materiality and bodily transformation, she creates sculptures using rope and synthetic materials (see Figure 4 – 6). In her art practices, Lang is interested in investigating what people give power and meaning to and the mechanisms through which they become attached to adornment (Lang, n.d.). While examining her work, my students focused on her *Comfort Hair* series.

Figure 4

Hair Landscape II. Yuni Kim Lang (2013). Used with permission.



Figure 5

Hair Landscape I. Yuni Kim Lang (2013). Used with permission.



Figure 6

Woven Identity I. Yuni Kim Lang (2013). Used with permission.



In exploring *Comfort Hair*, the Korean American students instantly showed interest in Lang's choice of materials. One student stated, "I think it's very cool how Yuni Kim Lang creates artworks differently than painting or drawing" (personal communication, February 11, 2020). Even though the students were not initially made aware of how this artist combines sculpture, photography, and wearable art, they felt that her artworks are powerful and successful in delivering certain messages to the viewers. They also tried to find aspects of the artwork to which they could relate personally. Another student reported, "I really like the artwork 'Mother and Child'...[They] look so relaxed and calm covered in the blooming, plant-like thing. I think

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it's very creative how she thought of that and created that" (personal communication, February 11, 2020).

As a teacher, I was careful not to push the students toward one direction in terms of finding any conceptual component of Korean American identity in Lang's work. Rather than giving them my explanation, I had the students engage in mini research into the artist and her work, and I encouraged them to interpret her work in their own ways. After this independent practice, they were asked the question, "Does this artist remind you of anything about your own identity?" Of the seven participating students, three students said yes, and four said no. Some students said the work had a possible link to Korean culture, as they found components of Korean culture in her work, and as teenagers living in Korean American families, they related to these cultural aspects. There were the students who took very personal approaches, focusing on the concepts of expression, authenticity, and uniqueness. One student responded no to the identity question, but she explained that she thought this artist created interesting things, describing them as somewhat "weird," and the student claimed to make many weird things herself. Another student emphasized artistic expression by stating, "The only thing that I find relatable is the fact that she uses art to express herself. Only I don't use art to express myself as much" (personal communication, February 11, 2020).

I also asked the students why they thought I chose the *Comfort Hair* series for our project theme of "reflection and change." The students' answers varied; some offered simple responses like "because she doesn't only do drawing and paintings but does art with physical materials that you could feel" or "because in the *Comfort Hair*, it shows how the hair is still the same even though the generations are different" (personal communication, February 11, 2020) (see Figure 6). However, some students took a deeper approach and attempted to think critically. One student

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shared, “I think you chose this topic because her work isn’t clear. You wanted us to really think deep. We have to really reflect on our identities to understand what she’s trying to tell us” (personal communication, February 11, 2020). Another student described how Lang’s work inspires the viewers to think differently: “Yuni Kim Lang shows her mindset through different colors and textures and although you cannot touch them you could see the texture it has. It can make different people think in unique ways” (personal communication, February 11, 2020). Even though I did not explicitly highlight the theme of Korean cultural identity, the students spontaneously made a connection between the series and their own cultures and identities, presenting genuine curiosity about what the artist had attempted artistically and creatively. They also appreciated how Lang’s work is visually interesting and eye-catching and that these elements allow viewers to become open-minded so they can find meanings in her work based on their own interests and personalities.

JR’s Giant Baby: Students’ Discussions and Creative Responses

The students viewed JR’s artworks and watched an interview clip about his *Giant* series, particularly *Giant Baby* project (Salesforce and Dreamforce, 2018). It appears that listening to the artist’s actual stories about his project inspired the students. JR, a French artist who is interested in changing the general public’s perspectives on people and their environments, pastes large-scale photographs of people on public walls across the globe (Narang, 2017). In 2017, he worked on a project set on the border between the U.S. and Mexico, part of his *Giant* series, which is titled “Kikito (Tecate, Mexico-USA, 2017)” (see Figure 7). Based on an image he saw in a dream, JR built a 65-foot-tall structure that displays a photo of a baby who is looking over the wall in Tecate, California (Narang, 2017). He searched for a model for the baby’s image and

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found a one-year-old boy named Kikito in a Mexican town located right next to the installation site.

Figure 7

Giants, Kikito and the Border patrol, Tecate, Border Mexico-USA, 2017. Used with permission.



Art-Based Storytelling via Social Media

Some educators have examined the U.S. and Mexico relationship in an art education context (Hubbard, 2010; Katzew, 2010; Kraehe & Crabbe, 2020). In responding to the stories about the baby Kikito and JR's initiatives, the students shared their ideas about this topic via KakaoTalk. When asked to speculate about JR's goal for this project, many students focused on "people" who viewed the installation and participated in accompanying events, including Mexicans and Americans who joined together around the Giant Baby and border wall. One

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student remarked, “I think JR wanted to unite the people of Mexico and U.S. He chose the border because maybe he wanted to show what divides us also unites us” (personal communication, February 18, 2020). Another middle schooler stated that JR created this art project “[t]o show that even with all of the tension surrounding the border of America and Mexico people can be brought together through art” (personal communication, February 18, 2020). One student specifically connected the artist’s purpose to young generations: “I think he wanted to tell us to think about our youth and generation that will be leading us” (personal communication, February 18, 2020).

Most students found the use of a toddler’s image in this installation to be powerful. One participating student noted, “JR wanted to show everyone that people are united even though we are separate and how he used the little boy’s face because he was innocent and that he did not know what was yet to come” (personal communication, February 18, 2020). To these students, the focus was on the innocence and novelty of a one-year-old baby. Another student delineated this idea of innocence in her statement: “He used the image of the toddler because the toddler is innocent and doesn’t make mistakes as much as we do in life. He is using the image of a toddler due its innocence” (personal communication, February 18, 2020). This student contrasted the “innocence” of the baby with the “mistakes” of older people and included herself in that group.

Students’ Artistic Responses

The middle school students artistically responded to these discussions about JR’s Giant Baby through a drawing activity, using various materials that included oil pastels, colored chalk, pastels, markers, colored pencils, and charcoal. In her reflection, Student 1 described what she tried to depict in her colored-chalk drawing, which she created in complimentary colors (see Figure 8):

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JR tries to unite people. The yellow is the Americans and the blue is the Mexicans. They start out in different places, but soon unite. That's the part where the yellow/blue mixes. For the background, the top is when the border is there and people aren't united, but as the colors start mixing together, it gets...in directing unity and happiness. (personal communication, February 18, 2020)

Figure 8

Student 1's Artwork



Student 2 believed that JR's *Giant Baby* tied Mexicans and Americans together. Also emphasizing her color choices (see Figure 9), she stated that the colors in her drawing represent the colors of the counties' flags, and "the two sides of the face show the two counties uniting"

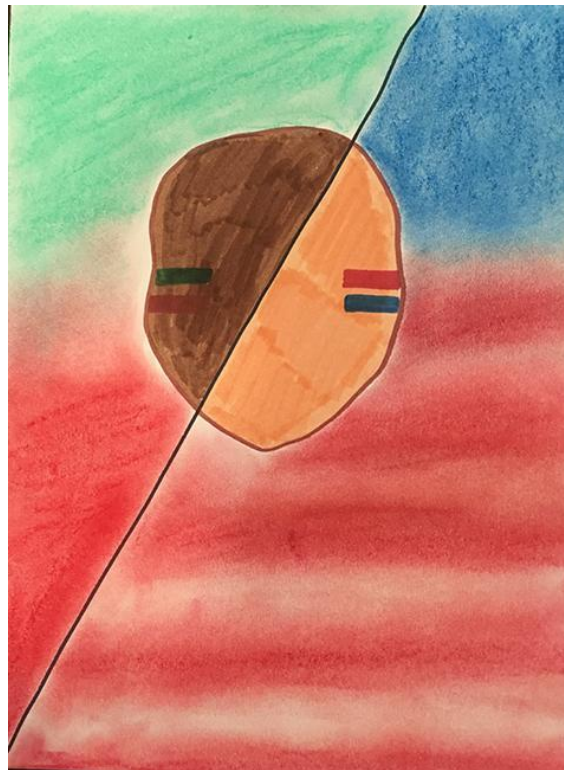
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(personal communication, February 18, 2020). Student 3 used images from popular visual culture, such as the peace symbol and yin/yang sign, to present the ideas of balance and harmony that JR pursued through his project. This student used the term “cultural diffusion” to explain what he created:

I’m trying to represent the peace symbol as innocence and unity among the Americans and Mexicans. There is also cultural diffusion (Ideas passed down from another culture) that happens among both by the American looking at the Mexican. The colors mix up together to make a yin-yang-like. They have different cultures, but like to learn each other in ways, so they unite. (personal communication, February 18, 2020)

Figure 9

Students 2’s Artwork



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Both Student 2 and Student 4 depicted people who possessed qualities expressing opposing sides. Student 2 drew a simplified image of a person that depicted a combination of two countries—the U.S. and Mexico. In contrast, Student 4 drew a more realistic rendition of person that contrasted the concepts of innocence and non-innocence, focusing on the idea of “changing process.”

Student 5 expanded her view beyond the U.S. and Mexico relationship and visualized various races that exist across the globe (see Figure 10). She described her creative process and her reasoning in composing the image:

I was trying to show the different races of the world. Showing the difference of everyone in the world. In the background there are puzzle pieces that connect to each other. This represents how diverse everybody is, but we are still united, connected. Even though we are different we are still together as ONE. (personal communication, February 18, 2020)

Apparently, this student reflected on all the different races and insisted that we are interconnected, despite differences in skin colors.

Figure 10

Student 5's Artwork



Discussion and Conclusion

The participating teenagers explored stories related to JR's *Giant Baby* project and enthusiastically responded to the messages they found through their drawings. The storytelling embedded in JR's artwork and more explicitly provided in the artist's interview video appeared to inspire the students to examine the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico from their own perspectives. By employing the flipped classroom and offering discussion questions, I encouraged them to critically think about this social issue and to respond to it conceptually and creatively.

The quality of student outcomes varied in both the text-based discussions and drawing activity. In their writings, some students tried to form their own position statements based on honest responses and thoughtful reflections. They explored concepts like division, union,

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mixture, diffusion, innocence, and change. Others did not write personal reflections about what they learned from *Giant Baby* and tended to repeat what JR said in his video in their responses. For example, two students connected art to dignity and humanity in their comments, and this is exactly what the artist said in his interview. In terms of drawings, some students creatively used artistic elements and principles to present their personal and critical thoughts on the topic of the U.S./Mexico conflict or the examination of diversity, race/ethnicity, and social justice (Shin, 2010). Others could not go beyond the use of stereotypical images to illustrate their ideas, or they tried to replicate what they saw in JR's interview video.

Figure 11

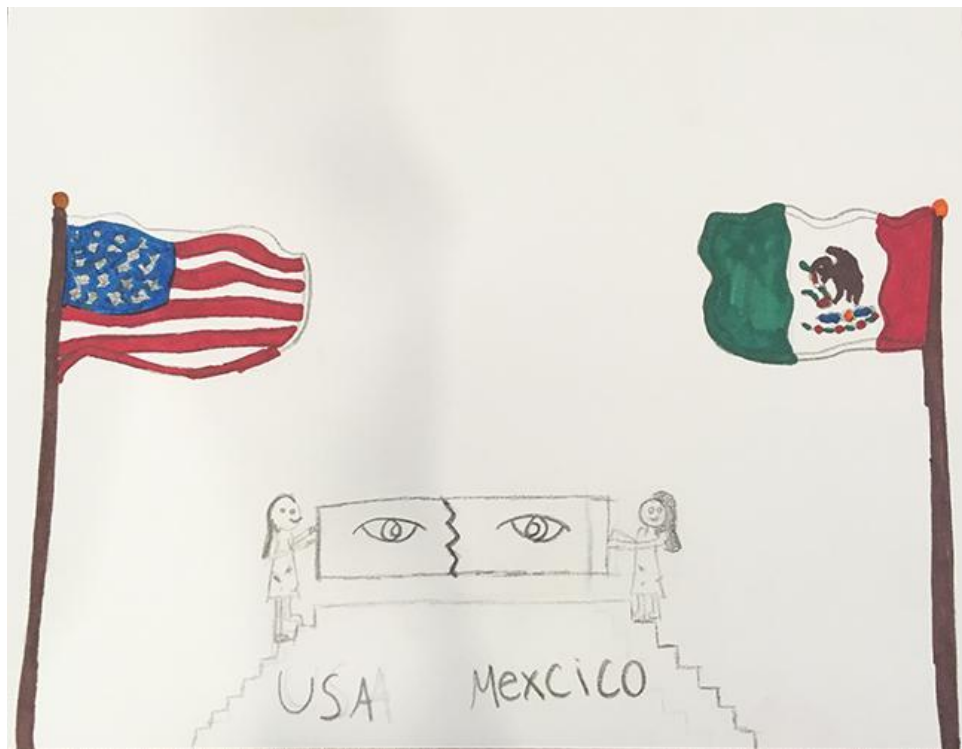
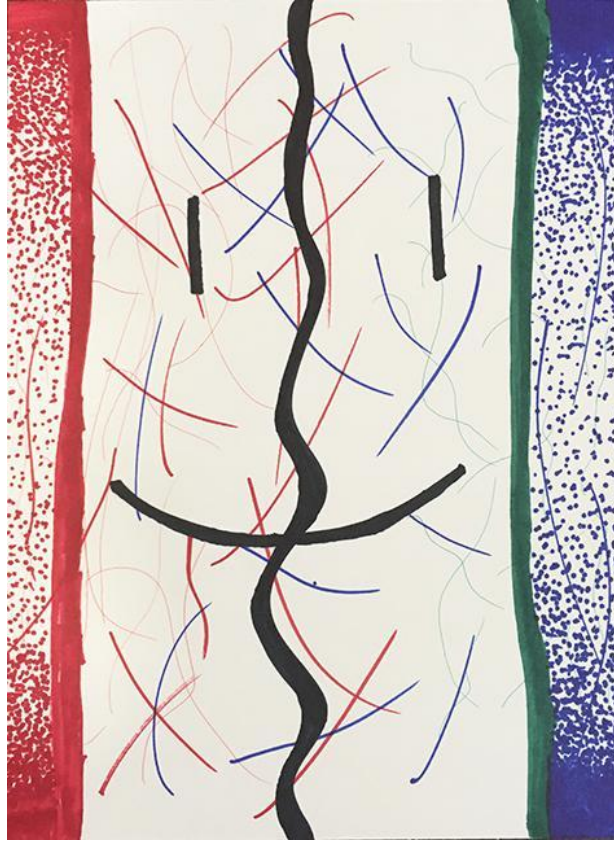
Student 6's Artwork

Figure 12

Students 7's Artwork

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Nonetheless, the written responses and artwork of the participants clearly showed that the *Giant Baby* project and JR's stories deeply engaged the students in a critical examination of the U.S./Mexico relationship and sparked their interest in the role of the visual arts as a source of social justice and systematical change. As Kraehe and Crabbe (2020) pointed out, people who do not live in the borderlands have difficulty in truly understanding the situation at the Mexico-United States border. JR's artwork guided these students to investigate what was happening in the borderlands and to learn how to interpret social issues from their own perspectives. Notably, the students focused on the "interactions" among people, using action verbs such as 'divide,' 'gather,' 'unite,' and 'change.' This finding resonates with JR's description of an intended outcome of the Giant Baby project: "I think that's the most interesting

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part, the fact that it connects people. I always love to think as an ethnologist” (Narang, 2017, para 21).

JR uses social media as the platform to promote his artworks and collaborative projects (Narang, 2017). In a similar fashion, the students actively participated in chat-based communications via KakaoTalk, sharing honest reflections and personal responses to the artwork. In their exchange of ideas, social media functioned as an effective tool that helped the teenagers share their stories and responses.

In this paper, I demonstrated how seven Korean American teenagers responded to the works of artists Yuni Kim Lang and JR through their writings and artworks. In this process, they spontaneously revisited the concepts of identity, diversity, and social justice. One of the takeaways from this project is that to connect with secondary students through socially-engaged art making and discussions, art educators need to motivate students to purposefully employ critical thinking in approaching the given topic and making a plan for their artwork. When critical inquiry functions as a framework, students can move beyond stereotyped images and typical conversations about culture and race. This is even more crucial for today’s teenagers who constantly engage with visual images and share various discourses about cultural interactions through social media in everyday lives. I encourage fellow art educators to search for their own ways based on their teacher identity and teaching philosophy to promote social justice and diversity in their own classrooms.

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