

The Arts in STEM: Advancing Meaningful Integration

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Art Autobiography

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Was it Art?

Recall:

Music drifted through the wet air and tumbled into the third floor of the red brick row house on Arlington Ave. The festival was running on fumes as it kicked and sputtered to a stop. A little cat lay curled on her satin quilt, as blue as the night sky. Her greasepaint whiskers were slightly smudged as she fell asleep, thumbing at the outline of a golden lamé moon.

My childhood was blessed with splashes of every type of art from my earliest days. I grew up in an art district of Baltimore called Sowebo with my mother and her costume shop. Behind our lot was Chip Corradetti's glassblowing studio, where I would eagerly watch liquid color drip and expand in stone ovens. Nextdoor to the studio was BlackCherry Puppet theatre, where artists made felt speak. Every Spring, as the circus elephants made their exodus down our street, we would gather for food at Danny Van Allen's doll-adorned deck. Wind chimes of painted barbies and the like spun over his painted tire-planters. My neighbors were oil painters, sculptors, historical preservationists, and power tool musicians.

My mother taught me to press flowers, paint with berries, and read poetry, but my deepest training was within the costume shop. My mother reconstructed history with careful precision and attention to detail. The wrong shoe or collar in a stage production could remove the audience from the fantasy of the time period. This was the art of time travel, the art of illusion. Sometimes her skills were called upon to create creatures and characters outside of our own time; silk plant sculptures, furry monster heads that were 4 feet tall, fairy wings dripping with rhinestones, or collars for drag queens made of 100 peacock feathers. Sometimes I would wake up from a nap in a foam cake to meet an exciting new customer like Yo-Yo Ma.

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When we worked backstage at the Columbia festival I watched each performance from at least four different vantage points. I wondered what breakdancing looked like from the catwalk, or ballet from the wings. I would rush down a ladder to the sound box to see Marcel Marceau's silent motions as the audience laughed. The stage I called my summer home hosted kinetic sculpture, Celtic Dance, Shakespeare troupes, Mikhail Baryshnikov and more.

As a teenager in Baltimore I would make ten dollars an hour sitting in costume for students at the Schuler School of Fine Arts. Sitting in a meditative state for hours I listened to masters at their craft. Sometimes, as a teenager, I would babysit for my aunt while she trained her bellydance troupe for the upcoming fairy festival (my uncle was busy forging armor in the basement).

I remember that throughout my school experiences I was often told to focus more on substance than presentation. When I turned in a school report the margins would be adorned with custom pastel art, and the analysis would be weak. However, some teachers would allow me to make up points with lavish art projects, or costumed monologues. I had a passion, it just wasn't for the structure of an AP essay.

Reflect:

It was incredibly difficult to cherry pick only a few experiences from my childhood, as it is bursting at the seams with art. As I analyze my chosen few memories, I see a pattern of versatility. Art was never one thing. Art didn't have boundaries. Broken tiles glued around someone's door could be art. Custom cornices, brick laying, a beat kept on a power drill; all of it was art. Art was campy, crude, shocking, refined, outspoken, melodic, small, enormous, still, and moving. My mom's best friend made needle points of famous serial killers and cult leaders. There are oil paintings of me that are 8 feet tall in the style of renaissance masters. Both are incredibly valid forms of art. The world needs John Waters just as much as it needs Francis Ford Coppola.

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I believe I was successful in art for a time. My cosplay dried up when my teaching responsibilities took over. I don't have the time to experiment with leather working, or hand press silk flowers anymore. I stopped doing live theatre after high school, with the exception of two community theatre productions right before Covid. Every few months I try to take up a new medium. My tambor frame hides my unused bag of embroidery thread. Bass wood panels for modeling lay next to the gouache I haven't touched in a year. I would say most of my artistic power goes into crafting engaging lessons for my class. When I worked remotely last year I would spend hours every night making visually exciting pear decks.

Honestly, I have to say that I have been successful in art because I would be a hypocrite otherwise. Art is a mindset, and it never leaves you. When presented with a problem of any kind, I can think of an artistic solution. When asked to convey information to a crowd, I can't help but act. Whenever I create a piece of art, people ask me if I have ever thought of leaving teaching to do art full time. What they don't understand is that I get to do every form of art with my kids year round.

Connect:

Art is everything you think it is. Art is the interpretation of the viewer. Art may not look like art to everyone. When a kid asks me which drawing is better, I can't help but tell them it is impossible to compare. I believe the only measure of value for art is how much thought and heart was put into it by the artist.

Many people new to art may see a simplistic painting and undervalue the message and story that went into its creation. Ballet movement looks simple too, but the journey that led to that seemingly effortless pose took years. I have a 15 inch framed portrait of an alien in my living room that reminds me to stop myself before I make a judgment. (He has a French accent)



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