

# Assignment: Make Art, Make Friends

Stacey McKenna



The artist, Amy Roberts, mimics her model's thoughtful pose for this photograph with her papier-mâché sculpture, entitled, *Homage to Ryan Underwood*.

How many times have teachers lamented at the failure of teenage students to reach outside their circle of friends, and get to know other students? How many misunderstandings, conflicts, lonely moments, and violent acts could be avoided by simply making an effort to learn about others in our community? As a high school art teacher in a prosperous suburb, I know that even the brightest, most talented, and financially comfortable teenagers feel uncomfortable most of the time—and so I endeavor to create a relaxed, safe classroom environment in the belief that a more relaxed student will be more likely to take creative risks.

To that end, I facilitate frequent group discussions and class critiques, encourage students to move freely around the studio, talk informally to individual students on a daily basis, and sponsor after school art activities. In spite of these efforts, it came to my attention recently that some students in my Advanced Art class did not know other members of the class.

My goal became to create an artistic problem that would challenge students creatively, while at the same time provoke more interpersonal

interaction. We had just completed a large self-portrait painting lesson and I thought further study of the human form in three dimensions would strengthen their perceptual skills, so I built my lesson around this concept.

## Part I: Interpersonal Interaction

The lesson began by gathering everyone together, as we often do when looking at art or discussing ideas. I invited students to ask me any question they wished—personal or professional. As an incentive, I brought in candy, and rated each question as worthy of one, two, or three candy treats—the most thought-provoking earning the most candy. After the first half-dozen questions, students forgot about the candy; they simply asked questions—such as When did you first start making art? When you go somewhere new, are you most interested in the food, the people, the landscape, or the culture? Do you want to have children? I answered each question honestly, and that led to more questions and open discussion.

After a thirty-minute question-and-answer session, I introduced the assignment, which began with each student being paired with another whom they did not know. These

pairs, or “artist-partners,” would then interview each other and document the interview with sketches and notes. Several students asked what we were going to make after the interviews, but I refrained from revealing the planned “Homage Sculpture” lesson. I wanted them to focus on the encounters with one another, and not on what would follow.

## Part II: Artistic Response

The next day we gathered together to view and discuss realistic and expressive figurative sculptures by nineteenth- and twentieth-century master artists. We identified the materials the artists had used. We defined the word *homage*: to pay respect to by external action. I instructed students to create a three-dimensional tribute to their new friend, using the sculpture material of their choice. Any forms they chose to include in the sculpture must be based on observation. They were to think of their work as a gift to that person.

Students set to work in their sketchbooks, brainstorming ideas for their sculptures. As it was the first time for many students to work in clay or papier-mâché, I showed figures I had sculpted and demonstrated basic construction techniques for both materials. Students selected their material, refined their ideas for the planned homage, and then worked for seven class periods on their sculptures. I suggested no seat-



This clay sculpture's huge smile captures Heidi's excitement at preparing to eat a favorite food—Maryland crabs. *Homage to Heidi Kavanaugh*, by Sang Park, clay.



"I wanted to represent her loudness and never-ending talking," said artist Ryan Underwood of his clay sculpture of Amy Roberts.

ing arrangement; students oriented themselves in the room in a way that made sense to them as individual artists. Some artist-partners elected to sit together while working. Others sat farther apart and took turns posing. I assisted students when they encountered technical challenges, and occasionally evaluated progress. I observed artist-partners frequently asking one another for feedback. Additionally, students asked other students at their table—both old friends and new acquaintances—for critiques of the work in progress.

#### Sense of Self & Sense of Others

When the sculptures were complete, I passed out a reflection sheet with specific questions intended to assess each student's perceptions of the process. I assured them that the responses would be confidential and asked them to be as honest as possible.

According to their responses, ninety-five percent of students did not know their assigned artist-partner at all before this art problem. During their interviews, seventy-five percent of students felt they had learned a lot more about their artist-partner. Sixty-five percent enjoyed being interviewed, one young man added, "I liked it because I could have a reason to tell [my partner] things that I wouldn't just come out and tell people." A female student said of her artist-partner, "We had a

lot in common. I didn't think we would have. We didn't look like we would have."

Everyone, without exception, used positive adjectives to describe the atmosphere of the classroom while the sculptures were in progress. "The atmosphere," said a female student, "was really pumped. Everyone was interacting with one another. No one was left out or alone. The room was just vibrating because of the talking and getting along. It was a great vibe!"

Several students sensed a noticeable shift in the classroom dynamics, "During the interviews, the atmosphere was really quiet because no one really wanted to talk to the person they were assigned to. When we started working, the atmosphere changed immensely because even the different tables started to talk to each other, which previously had never happened."

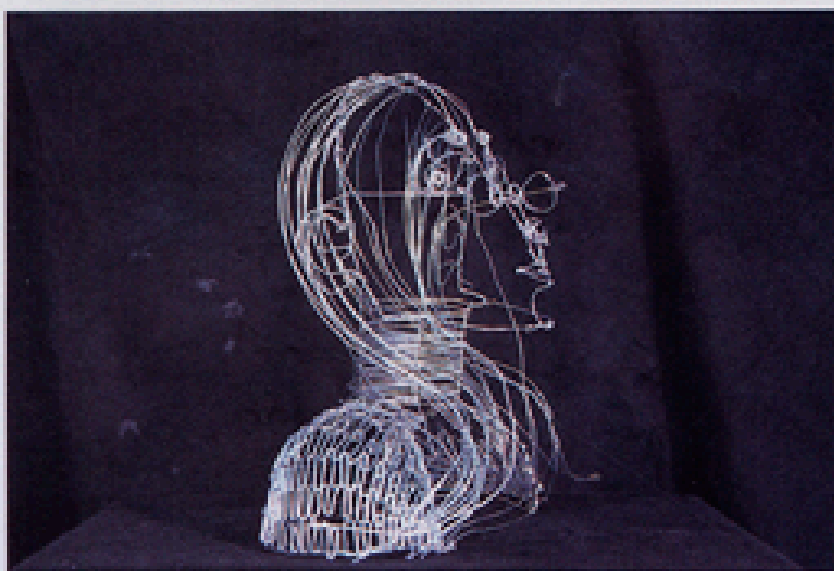
#### Aesthetic Merits

In addition to assessing the interpersonal interaction on the reflection sheet, students assessed the artistic merits of their work. The aesthetic concerns most frequently mentioned by students included: selecting a personal style, improving perceptual skills, and learning new sculptural techniques.

One young woman commented, "I like [my sculpture of Ryan] pretty well. The face and posture are how I wanted. They look Ryan-ish."

One student had a great idea for doing her sculpture in a different material. She said, "At first I wanted to do a papier-mâché relief of [my partner] and use pencil marks to make it seem like the sculpture was a drawing come to life. Then I remembered seeing wire used to make sculpture and I thought I could make it seem like the bits of wire were pencil strokes. I am very

*(Continued on page 75.)*



Homage to Sasha Minsky-Ellis and Her Wire-Rimmed Glasses, by Emily Jacques, wire.


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(Continued from page 49.)

pleased with the outcome and can't wait to do another."

### Mind, Body, and Spirit

The range of styles and approaches in the finished work suggests that each was an authentic response, the product of a personal vision. I believe that this art problem's success lay in the two key components to the lesson: offering an interpersonal experience that challenged students' social assumptions, and providing time and space in which to create an artistic response to that experience. In fact, as the results of this problem suggest, when students are emotionally stimulated, their desire for technical success and aesthetic refinement is greater because each student then has something that they consider important to talk about.

Perhaps it is not unusual for us as art teachers to become focused on technical and aesthetic issues to such an extent that we neglect to nurture interpersonal human ones. However, in a world that so often ignores the daily emotional needs of the individual, we have an opportunity to serve our students better by not only teaching aesthetic concerns and providing experiences for the making of art, but by cultivating the development of the students' emotional life as well. 

### NATIONAL STANDARD

*Students conceive and create works of visual art that demonstrate an understanding of how the communication of their ideas relate to the media, techniques, and processes they use.*

### WEB LINKS

[www.sculpture.org](http://www.sculpture.org)

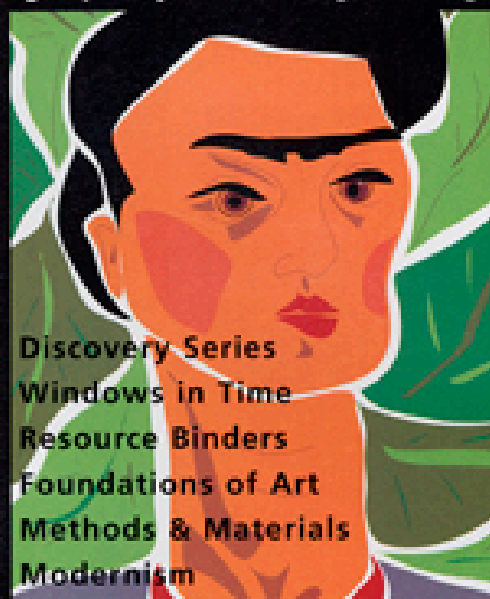
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