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ART AND IDENTITY: THE HIGH SCHOOL ARTIST

by

Rebekah Ann Albertson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Arts
degree in Art in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

December 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Rachel Marie-Crane Williams

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Rebekah Ann Albertson

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Art
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Nancy Langguth

For Lynne Saad, a loving and passionate art teacher.

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CHAPTER 1

THE PROCESS

Why Artistic Identity?

As I prepare to go back into the high school art room, this time as a teacher, I constantly reflect on my own experiences there. I was naïve and unfocused in regard to my education, more worried about the friend I caught smoking behind the library than about which colleges I should apply to. The only thing I was sure about was art. No other profession or focus of study interested me as much as art did. Where exactly art would take me was unclear, but I knew whatever I ended up doing would be connected to it.

As I considered the options for my master's thesis, I repeatedly returned to my own experience in high school, how my artistic identity developed and took shape, and what an artistic identity meant to me. Inseparable from my time in high school and my growing identity in art was my art teacher, who not only maintained a space for creating art, but also an environment that supported and encouraged creation.

My desire through this research was to better understand the artistic identities of my future students (both male and female) as well as my own artistic identity. Through the interviews of five female students who graduated from high school in the last five years, I hoped to gain a better understanding of how an artistic identity develops and how art teachers might encourage the artistic identities of their students.

The questions that directed my research were:

1. Why do some students choose to cultivate an artistic identity?

2. What are ways that art teachers foster artistic identity in and outside of the classroom?
3. How do high school students strengthen and build this identity through artwork and relationships?

Additionally, I sought to make the connection between students' artistic identities and the relationships they have with their art teacher, as the relationship with my art teacher, Ms. Gerring, was so central to the development of my own artistic identity.

Literature Review

In researching my topic of artistic identity in high school students, I had difficulty in finding literature that reflected my specific focus. Therefore my literature review concentrates on aspects of my research, including the significance of art and identity development, artistic identity, the importance of defined art space to artistic identity, and the teacher-student relationship. While no individual piece of literature fully encompasses my research, each adds to the discussion of what it means for a high school student to identify himself or herself with the arts, to see how this identity develops, and to uncover if and how the student's art teacher fosters this identity.

Art and Identity Development

Studies have shown how the arts can have a positive effect on adolescent identity development (Amerino, 2009; Halverson, 2010). In Halverson's study on positive youth development and youth-based organizations (YBOs), she was interested in the relationship between art-making processes and development. She focused her study on various YBOs who used drama, filmmaking, and other forms of the narrative and performance process to engage youth. Halverson came to the conclusion that the

dramaturgical process (the telling, adapting, and performing of narratives of personal experience) had the potential to encourage youth in the construction of positive identities. By encouraging students to delve into possible selves ("individual's ideas about becoming, both desired and feared" [p. 8]), detypification (redefining a social category without basing it on stereotypical assumptions), and identity (both individual and community) through the making of art, YBOs create a positive, challenging, and creative environment that in many cases succeeds to foster strong identity development (Halverson, 2010).

In terms of positive youth development, Larson (2000) focuses on initiative, which he sees as a key component. Initiative is broken down into two components: intrinsic motivation and commitment. Larson's research shows that what he terms "structured voluntary activities," such as art, sports, and hobbies, are where elements of initiative come together (2000, p. 174). While school-based art classes don't fall under Larson's definition of "structured voluntary activities," art clubs, private art classes, and, possibly, student-initiated independent studies do (2000, p. 174).

Amerino (2009) sought to reawaken lost artistic expression in a group of teens, most of whom had no preparation or interest in the arts. To engage students in artistic expression she used the Artistic Impetus Model, which begins with sensory stimulation, moves to emotional response, follows an expressive impulse, and arrives at a kinesthetic action (Amerino, 2009). Through the artwork they produced, Amerino found that participants were able to integrate home, school, and social life in such a way that they could begin to understand and make meaning of their individual situations and develop

contextual thought processes, "qualities which strengthen one's abilities to contribute to personal and communal change" (2009, p. 229).

Artistic Identity

I was unable to find any significant amount of literature on high school students claiming an artistic identity, especially when compared to athletic or musical identities. An early look at the development of artistic and creative identities was done by Rostan (1998), who interviewed children aged eight through eleven in the instructive environment of an after-school art enrichment program. Participants' definition of "artist" was clearly tied to what they deemed important in their projects. The eight-year-olds' ideas about artists focused on "enjoys making art," "draws and paints," and "draws and paints well" (Rostan, 1998, p. 284). 11-year-olds' answers were that an artist "enjoys making art" and "makes art because it's fun or feels good" (Rostan, 1998, p. 284). While Rostan focused on a small group of children who have been involved in a minimum of two and half years of art classes and show a maturity to their answers, the link between conception of artist and the work the children are currently making is important to consider when understanding an older adolescent's definition (1998).

Additionally, Rostan (1998) noted the "blossoming" of flow, Csikszentmihalyi's definition of the mental state in which a person is fully engaged in an activity, a state that is often found in older adolescents focused on the arts and artists (p. 296). These young artists took on an active responsibility for the growth of their artistic development. Perhaps this early commitment is an example of Kimstra, Hale, Raaijmakers, Branje, and Meeus's (2008) findings that identity formation can occur in early to middle adolescence.

Laurel E. Scott's research compared the personalities, values, and backgrounds of artistically talented, academically talented, and average 11th and 12th graders (1988). Prior to the study, she found that research on artistically talented youth had only been done retrospectively; that is, "they have been carried out only after the artist has become worthy of biographical attention" (Scott, 1988, p. 293). Studies of the artistic individual done at that time, in the late 1980's, focused more on post-secondary students than students in secondary school. Her assertion is similar to my experience doing research.

Scott (1988) looked at a sample of students from rural school districts in Wisconsin. The 102 artistically talented students were either identified by art teachers as having the potential for outstanding achievement in the arts, or the students identified themselves as having an interest or desire to continue in an art field. She focused on students who have never experienced special educational programs to develop their talents or who have yet to be labeled art majors by a post-secondary institution or artists by society. By comparing the data from the artistically talented students to the academically talented and average students' data, Scott found that her conclusions were consistent with the other researchers' studies done retrospectively (1988).

In terms of personality, Scott found that artistically talented students are more likely to be more reserved, detached, critical, and impersonal, as well as more liberal, likely to experiment, freethinking, and innovative (1988). They hold higher aesthetic values and significantly lower economic and social values. Their backgrounds are considerably different than the two other groups. The parents of artistically talented students are more likely to have a high school education and work in "Semi-Skilled or Labor" or "Clerical or Skilled" occupations versus the academically talented students,

whose parents hold college degrees and work in professional occupations. Artistically talented students were also more likely to come from homes that have one or more works of art by recognized artists.

Perhaps the most intriguing piece of data in Scott's (1988) study was that artistically talent students are more likely to receive encouragement in their career-planning efforts than either the academically talented or average students. Named in this role are teachers, mothers, and "other adults" (Scott, 1988, p.298) Of these, students listed teachers as providing the greatest amount of assistance. To support this, Scott cites Winder, whose study of 30 artists found that praise and encouragement from teachers was named as more important than classroom instruction. Art teachers are able to provide a distinctive form of support as they "are aware of the unique personal characteristics that serve to define and motivate artistically talented students" (Scott, 1988, p. 299).

A study by Adams and Kowalski (1980) looked into the factors affecting the college art student's self-identity. Though conducted in the 1970s, its basic principles are still relevant. Participants ranging from freshmen to seniors identified themselves as art students, professional artists, or somewhere in-between. Adams and Kowalski found that the participants' self-identification was primarily based on artistic experiences (such as displaying of work, winning an award, having an art show, or holding a job utilizing artistic abilities) and the number of credit hours in art. In general, this premise could transfer to the high school setting, with students referring to themselves as art students or artists based on those two variables (credit hours becoming simply amount of time spent invested in the arts).

While Adams and Kowalski's (1980) survey of art students at the university level found that the presence or lack of parental encouragement was not significant to the students' self-identification, it played an important role in the development of my artistic identity. My parents provided me with opportunities and funding to take art classes. Perhaps even more importantly, they did not pressure me to focus on careers viewed as more stable and profitable.

On the other hand, the survey found that faculty encouragement has a strong association with self-identity (Adams and Kowalski, 1980). Students who identified themselves as art students reported no encouragement from faculty, while about two thirds of the marginal students reported encouragement, and professionals were split in half. The relationship between an art student's self-identity and faculty encouragement is shown to be important, but not crucial, as evidenced by the data from the professional group. The positive attention from a faculty member or teacher, who is herself an artist, can increase students' confidence in their ability, which can lead to confidence in the title they give to themselves.

Space

The art room itself acts as an important space for the creation of art as well as the development of artistic identities. Alison Bain (2004) explains in her study on place and female artists that physical space is connected to and an important aspect of identity. She argues that physical space, specifically a working studio, has a crucial role to play in reinforcing artistic identity in women. This connection between space and identity plays out in the high school environment; students gain or are given an identity based on the room or area they are most associated with (an example being "theater geeks" and the

drama room or stage area). Bain states that there must be an emotional attachment to a physical space to create a sense of belonging and purpose.

Bain (2004) illustrates the connection between identity and space through the women she talked to, the majority of whom viewed their studios as "the primary place that defines and structures their daily lives and substantially contributes to their self-conception as artists" (p. 6). The art room, for the high school student who attaches herself to art and creativity, can fulfill the same function. It is not simply the room she is associated with, where she might spend her time socializing. The art classroom can be the room where she feels welcome to express ideas and emotions freely, where she is accepted and valued, and where she finds refuge. The connection and attachment to the physical space of the art room is an inner and outward expression of artistic identity.

In his discussion of identity development and the role of schools, Michael Nakkula places the weight of ongoing identity development primarily on the everyday experiences of family, friends, and school (2008). Adolescence is an important period of identity development, and the high school environment plays a key role; students spend roughly 3,780 hours there. The art room, as part of that environment, is a significant place of exploration, learning, and mentoring for students who associate themselves with the arts. According to Nakkula, this active association (choosing to take art classes, participating in art clubs, and spending downtime in the art room) is more influential to the student's identity development than simply the amount of time spent there (2008, p. 13). This is due to the student's investment in activities and relationships, through which they "experience the deepest gratification and most meaningful reinforcement" (Nakkula, 2008, p. 13).

Teacher and Student Relationship

"Good teachers teach their subject matter well; great teachers engage students in the learning tasks of the moment and instill in them the desire to keep learning long after graduation" (Nakkula, 2008, p. 19). It is not simply the space or activity that is key to the adolescent's identity; rather, it is the people who inhabit that space or participate in that activity. It seems clear that the teachers we remember most are the ones with whom we had a reciprocal relationship. Nakkula calls the process through which both parties are transformed "reciprocal transformation" (2008, p. 19). Teachers who engage their students, relate to them, and allow themselves to be visibly influenced by the relationship demonstrate that the student truly matters. Students are more likely to place a high priority on learning and work in a classroom where they feel important and wanted. Nakkula states that this act of engagement is key to the adolescent's identity development. "Whatever the school-related context, adolescent identity will be profoundly influenced by those relationships in which it is clear to the student that she matters to the adult as much as the adult matters to her" (Nakkula, 2008, p. 20).

In general, most students can name at least one teacher they like, have a connection to, or feel safe with. For students associated with the arts, that teacher is usually the art teacher. In a study of teacher-student relationships conducted over a semester at a high school with a population of 1,800 students, Bernstein-Yamashiro (2004) asked focus groups of students to define that relationship. Students struggled to find the appropriate words. Some related it to a friend or family member (an uncle or even a father figure). Bernstein-Yamashiro's explanation for their struggles is that the teacher-student relationship is unique. The teacher occupies the role of the experienced,

wise adult and a friend. In terms of identity development, she states that the positive relationships students have with teachers "provide personal validation and necessary reflection" (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004, p. 62).

Nakkula (2008) goes further and states that relationship development is "very much an anchor of identity" (p. 18). In discussion of the relationships formed between peers and leaders in a rowing club for middle and high school students in Boston's public schools, he believes that is not simply how a student sees herself in the relationship, but how she sees herself through the "profound influences of meaningful relationships" (Nakkula, 2008, p. 18). Both authors found positive relationships, especially those between adolescents and teacher figures, to be crucial in identity development, as they encourage reflection, support, and guidance.

In relation to the arts and talented students, Sabol (2009) states that art teachers, as mentors, can help talented students understand their artistic gifts, deal with issues that arise from being talented (social and personal), and encourage students to focus on their talent when difficulties arise. Art teachers, as artists themselves, can be key motivators to the development of their students' talents and identity in that they are personal examples of the artistic identity (Sabol, 2009).

Methodology

The method of research I used is grounded theory. Grounded theory allows researchers to start with a topic of interest (such as artistic identity in high school females), collect data, and discover themes and ideas as they develop. The data is collected through observation, interaction, and materials gathered about the topic or

setting (Charmaz, 2006). The result of grounded theory research is an "abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 4).

To begin to investigate the artistic identity of high school students, I decided to interview four to six females who had graduated from high school in the last five years and claimed a strong interest in the arts as a high school student. I decided to focus on females because it allowed me to narrow down potential participants and create a commonality of experiences, while the number of participants would allow for a variety of experiences. I chose not to interview females currently in high school because I desired that they would have the time and space to reflect on what had occurred and who they were in high school. Of the participants I interviewed, four graduated three or more years ago, and they seemed to have the most understanding of their self and experiences in high school.

The interviews took place over a two-month period and ranged from one to two-and-a-half hours. I met with two participants at local coffee shops, and with the other three in the Art Education offices at the University of Iowa. A few interviews ran long, so a second interview was scheduled to complete the list of questions. The list of questions asked each participant to tell the story of art in their life, describe who they were and what activities they participated in during high school, and to discuss their high school art room, art teacher, and the artwork they created. Each question was open ended to allow the participant the chance to answer thoughtfully and express herself fully. Participants were asked to be as open in their answers as they felt comfortable with. They had the option of passing on any questions they did not wish to answer.

With each participant's permission, I recorded the entire interview with a digital voice recorder. This allowed me to interact with and really listen to each participant. I took the digital recordings and listened to each interview at least twice as I transcribed the interview word-for-word. Additionally, I emailed the transcription of each interview to the participant for her to review. The interviews form the foundation for my research.

As I read through the interviews multiple times, I noticed stories and experiences that paralleled each other. In my notebook and in the margins of the 95 or so pages of interviews, I began to keep track of these themes. Using descriptive and analytical coding, I simplified the passage to a word or phrase: parental encouragement, independence, innate ability, and others. I then looked for the overarching themes, breaking them down by time period or focus. Examples of such themes include childhood recognition, pain and trauma, and a teacher-student relationship. With a system of highlighters, each color representing a theme, I scanned and marked each interview. After identifying the themes, I assembled the multiple quotes, stories, and experiences representing each one. At that point, I was able to closely compare and contrast each participant's data, ensuring it belonged in that theme and creating new themes when data called for it.

Participants

For potential participants, I looked for students in the art education and studio art programs. An email was sent to female undergraduates in the art education department at the University of Iowa and to an art education professor at the University of Northern Iowa. I also approached a few people in person as a follow-up to the email or as the initial request. One of the participants was a student I taught during my semester student

teaching at a local high school. I asked the art teacher to contact her and see if she would be interested in participating in my research.

All but one participant, who was recommended, were previously known to me through classes in the School of Art and Art History and in the Art Education Department or through my time student teaching. They were chosen not for their relationship to me, but because they fit the interviewee requirements and brought a unique experience and/or personality to my research.

All five participants are white, middle- to lower-middle -class females who attended high school in either Iowa or suburban Chicago. The high schools they attended vary in size from 120-150 in a grade level to a school with a student population of 4,000. One interviewee was raised in a single-parent household, three were raised by one or both divorced and remarried parents, and one was raised in a two-parent home. All were exposed to creating art at home (through crayons, markers, etc.) and during elementary school. All five participants mentioned having one or both parents who made art or crafts as a hobby in the home.

Currently, all participants are attending a public university or community college and working towards a degree that is in or related to the arts. One is in the process of studying to become an art therapist. Three are working towards a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Ceramics. One is in a Studio Art B.A. program, with an emphasis in sculpture and a Spanish minor. Two, in addition to their studio work, are also in the art education program.

Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the participants and all teachers mentioned.

CHAPTER 2

MY STORY

A Moment of Realization

In the spring of 2000 I was a junior in high school, taking as many art classes as allowed and beginning to consider what university I would attend after graduating. Frye Art Museum, a small Seattle museum free to the public, advertised a teen drawing class to be held in their studios. The opportunity to study art in the museum setting had a classical air, and would give me the chance to improve my portfolio. The class was held Sunday mornings for eight weeks. As I had only been driving for a year and was still unsure about driving in downtown Seattle, I left early, map in hand, only to discover that the streets of Seattle were quiet and nearly empty. Though the rain had ended hours before, gray clouds still covered the sky and the streets and sidewalks were wet. With a brand new newsprint pad wrapped in plastic and a case filled with pencils and charcoal, I found my way through the empty museum to the studio. I was nervous to be new, though everyone else was new too. I also was a bit uneasy about what we would be drawing, nudes. As I was underage, my parents had to sign a form agreeing to my participation for the figure drawing class. They warned me not to mention this experience to my grandparents, who likely would have disapproved due to my age and the subject matter.

The class was my first experience working in an actual studio setting. The space, which was up a level from the main museum, had high ceilings and windows that looked out to the parking lot and trees. We worked from drawing horses that were set up in a semi-circle surrounding a stage pushed against the back wall. The floor was dirty with charcoal dust and paint. Against the wall were shelves where adults and teens from other

classes stored their canvases. The model walked in wearing a robe that was thrown to the side as he found his first pose. Before I knew it we were filling our newsprint with quick, 15-second gesture drawings. I was nervous about my drawing skill as compared to my classmates, and I was unsure if I could look "there." I had never seen a man naked in person before and I felt a bit weird about it, not enough to giggle but enough to wonder if I could draw him without looking too much at his penis.

This uneasiness about drawing the human figure quickly disappeared as I went from 15-second sketches to two-minute and five-minute drawings. As my charcoal whipped across the page in an attempt to catch the pose of the model in the moment before the instructor shouted, "Switch!" I found myself transported. Time sped by and sheets of newsprint were suddenly filled with sketches. I had never experienced this sort of feeling, which I can only liken to euphoria or possibly being under the influence of some high-inducing drug. No longer was there a naked man standing in front of me, but instead shapes and lines and gestures that I tried to capture.

Looking back, it is this moment, a figure drawing class, which solidified my focus on art. It was no longer just about classroom projects, working from still lifes or a photograph. Art suddenly became something emotional and crucial to who I was. The little pieces of me that had always been drawn to creativity and art suddenly formed into an identity.

My Story of Artistic Identity

The story of how art came to be so important to my identity begins early and touches nearly every year and milestone of my life. My dad once told me that he and my mother realized I had a serious interest in art when I was very young. I count myself

lucky that my parents provided my sisters and me with art materials and encouraged us to be creative in all aspects of life. I don't recall doing much painting outside of school, but crayons and markers were always available and could be found throughout the house and family vehicles.

My strongest memory of making art as a young child was in first or second grade. I attended a small, Christian private school those two years. I had begun kindergarten in a public school but fell behind in reading, prompting my parents to seek out small class sizes and more personal attention. The class couldn't get much smaller. My first-grade class was six students. My second-grade class, a mixture of second through six grades, had a total of eight students. I can't recall the day-to-day schedules of those years, but what does stand out was the art we made. As a small school, we had the luxury of being able to visit a local studio and work with clay. Perhaps once or twice a month we made the 15-minute drive to the second floor of a brick building in downtown Redmond. I have a faint memory of tall ceilings and white walls, clay dust, and racks of drying tiles and shelves of glazes. The painted tiles and bowls I made would decorate my mother's desk at her office and could be found around our home.

Encouraging my interest in art, my parents often took our family to museums. As a child, perhaps my most meaningful visit to a museum was to the Seattle Art Museum sometime in 1991 or 1992, after the museum had recently opened a new building downtown. To a nine-year-old, the large paintings and elaborate frames were incredible. The work I remember most clearly is an oil painting of a harbor and a sunset. I was mesmerized by it. It seemed the ships actually bobbed up and down in the water. The

setting sun was brilliant as it dipped behind the horizon. I went home with a poster of the painting, and it hung over my bed for years.

It wasn't the image of the ships or the specific artist that drew me to that painting. What appealed to the nine-year-old me was how the artist made the scene become alive through his brush stroke and color choice. That moment when I stood in front of the painting for the first time, awe struck, reminds me of the first chapter in C.S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, when the children are looking at a painting of a ship and marveling at how they can feel the wind coming from the canvas and how the waves look so real and wet.

Fast-forward through years of school art projects to 8th grade: I was an awkward, overweight student navigating the stresses of friendships, school, and family at a public junior high school. There is a lot about that year I'd rather forget, but the art room is a treasured memory. Mrs. Michal was short and had big, curly brown hair. She was loud. You could hear her from anywhere in the classroom. The classroom itself was busy. The wall behind her desk was a huge collage of images, photographs, and items. The one that stood out the most was the life-sized cardboard cut-out of Kramer from *Seinfeld*. Mrs. Michal was funny and sarcastic. She wasn't afraid to joke around with us. If we were acting out or being immature, as all junior high students do, she'd call us brats and tell us to get back to work. That might seem harsh to someone who didn't know her or her style; if she called students brats without the love and dedication she showed, I could easily see her being called out for it. But she cared for her students. Mrs. Michal was the first art teacher who I truly adored and looked up to.

The art I made during the year I was in Mrs. Michal's classroom was fun and had a lot of personal elements. We focused on the principles of art, playing with blind contour and other drawing methods, and attempting to layer our emotions, personality, and dreams into our work. Many pieces of my artwork were hung around my bedroom, demonstrating that I must have felt successful and confident about the work I made.

Spring break of that year, I signed up for the trip to Washington, D.C. that the eighth-grade class took every year. We spent that week visiting Williamsburg, the National Gallery of Art, and the Holocaust Museum, among other places. Mrs. Michal was a chaperone, along with three or four other teachers. I adored her and spent as much time as I could sitting near her on the bus or being in her group. The National Gallery of Art was my first visit to a large, established museum. On display was an exhibition of Pablo Picasso's early work, and his drawings were what fascinated me most. At the gallery shop I purchased postcards of Picasso's work and a 12-inch-tall wooden mannequin. These purchases were representative of my love of art, and perhaps an early desire to be viewed as a serious art student. As I shopped, I noticed Mrs. Michal struggling to carry an armful of books to the register; her luggage home was well over the 50-pound limit.

The Holocaust Museum was a powerful experience for all of us. I will never forget the mounds of hair and eyeglasses or the framed photographs stolen from the luggage of Jewish prisoners covering the walls of one room. In the gift shop I purchased a book entitled *Until We Meet Again*. Mrs. Michal saw me buy it and asked to borrow it once I finished reading it. It felt good that I had chosen a book she also wanted to read. When we returned home, she took the time to discuss the book with me. I adored Mrs.

Michal initially because she was funny, artistic, and loud, but the connection made from a borrowed book deepened my admiration for her.

Junior high as a whole was not a happy time for me. The same year as the Washington, D.C. trip, I found myself forced out of my group of friends. It happened one morning in the cafeteria, with the long tables pushed aside and groups of people talking throughout the open space. Walking up to my friends, some I had known since third grade, I found myself suddenly being told to leave. They no longer wanted me there. I wasn't sure why then, nor do I really understand now. I was fairly naïve and was more of a follower than a leader, and possibly that had something to do with it. At the end of my eighth-grade year, I found myself with no friends and changing schools with about half my class to attend a new junior high that had been built to the east.

My freshman year provided a much-needed change in the form of a new environment and a new group of friends, but it did nothing in terms of art. Sadly, I have little to no memory of art from that year. The only thing I remember with any clarity is the room itself, white with tall ceilings and a glass, garage-like door that faced the inner courtyard of the school. Being the first year of the art program at a new school could explain why it lacked anything memorable. Even the teacher herself was forgettable, someone whom I don't recall disliking or liking.

Perhaps it was this year, not having any meaningful art making or personal connection with an art teacher, that made art during my high school years so important and memorable. By the end of high school, thanks to a loving teacher, my initial interest in art, which had been growing since I was a child, turned into my passion.

I had always been a very shy person, preferring to blend in rather than be in the spotlight in any way, and this continued throughout high school. I played the role of a follower in my groups of friends and preferred the classrooms where the teachers were less likely to call on me. It was a deep fear of failing and being disliked that kept me in the background. The only classroom in which I desired to stand out was the art room.

I always leaned towards realism and tried to make my artwork look true to form, though not necessarily photographic. I understood that art could be abstract, but I was drawn to the challenge of capturing a portrait or laying out the textures and complexity of a scene. My work didn't often stray from the assigned projects, as I found them interesting and loved the challenges my teacher presented. During my senior year I arranged to have a "free period," which I spent in the art room working on my own projects as I worked to develop my portfolio. Most of my self-initiated projects were drawings from life or still lifes in pencil, ink, or charcoal.

I would often explore the closets of the art room, finding materials and tools that I wasn't accustomed to using. Printmaking wasn't offered as a project in that class, so I tried it on my own, with unpleasant results. I found the supplies, linoleum and a Speedball cutter, in the closet. I loved the idea of being able to create in multiples. With little understanding of the process, I borrowed the materials and attempted to cut the linoleum at home. Perhaps I had been told to be wary of where I placed my hand, but I wasn't careful and succeeded in slicing open my left thumb. That is the only time I've ever felt faint due to the sight of blood. I never did finish that linocut and only discovered my love of printmaking in college.

I spent the majority of my art classes up on the third floor in a lone art room that was attached to the sign language classroom. I would occasionally wander down to the art classrooms on the southwest side of campus. I loved the idea of photography; the capturing of an image and how it appeared during the developing process seemed magical. But for some reason I only ever took one course. I took jewelry classes twice and enjoyed them, but I didn't feel as successful with or as passionate about jewelry as I was with drawing.

I don't remember my first class with Ms. Gerring, the drawing and painting teacher at my high school, but I will never forget Ms. Gerring herself. She was of average height and had short, blond hair. Whenever I imagine her, she is wearing a denim dress that goes to the floor, a linen jacket, and maybe a scarf, as well as a pencil or pen, or both, behind her ear. Ms. Gerring always had a comfortable, artistic look, complete with paint splotches and the like.

When I think of art teachers, I imagine them to be artistic, confident, and eccentric. Ms. Gerring had those wonderful, fun qualities. She was dramatic, funny, and seemingly a bit crazy about art. She was best known for the infamous chicken. It was an average, large rubber chicken that made noise when squeezed. But Ms. Gerring had embellished it. The chicken had feathers and an outfit, a hat, and sparkles. It was the Fairy God Chicken. If you had a wish, you would squeeze the chicken and think of your wish. If you needed a date to prom, Ms. Gerring would dance around you making the chicken squeak madly. Looking back, it was an object she used to connect to her teenage students, and the Fairy God Chicken was highly effective. Even now, the chicken is discussed. Someone set up a Facebook group dedicated to Ms. Gerring titled,

"Everything I need to know, I learned from Ms. Gerring." The chicken is in one of the latest photographs posted on the group's page and is regularly mentioned by former students.

Ms. Gerring's classroom seemed ordinary on the surface. There were rows of large tables that held a number of students each. At the front was her desk, where she could be found drawing in her sketchbook or taking attendance. To the right was her office; to the left were flat files, shelves of books, and a CD player. Nelly Furtado had just come out with an album my senior year, and Ms. Gerring would sing and dance along to *Turn off the Light*. When we needed to be calm and focused, she played Enya and Al Green. And of course, there were Pink Floyd Fridays.

Behind her desk was a small hallway that led to a back room, a storage space that Ms. Gerring had converted into a space for students working on individual projects. I would sit back there working from a still life I set up. Other students would do work directly on the walls and ceiling tiles. The whole back room was a splash of color and writing, built up from years of students. Her half of the office that she shared with another teacher was covered in papers and books. I spent a whole week the fall of my senior year sitting in front of her desk, drawing every sheet of paper that was pinned to the wall, the senior photos from classes in the 1990's taped to the side of her file cabinet, and books piled around her boxy Apple computer. My pencil drawing captured the organized chaos of the room, as well as the randomness and fun that characterized Ms. Gerring as an art teacher.

Beyond the fun, Ms. Gerring was kind and loving. Her demeanor and voice were soft and had a sing-song quality, yet carried across a room filled with 30 teenagers. I truly

believed she cared for and loved her students. Students who had a hard time in school were able to find refuge in her classes. As someone who suffered from shyness, I found myself taken under her wing. She worked hard to build my confidence through conversations and her obvious interest in who I was and what I created. I loved her attention. Even more, Ms. Gerring understood, being an artist herself, that each piece we created was precious to us and held a piece of our heart. Her respect for her students as artists and the work we created was evident in all her interactions with us.

In terms of my art, she was a constant encouragement to keep creating. Her assignments were similar to any art room, but she would allow anyone to change the project if they had a specific focus in mind. If students were creating and making some sort of progress, she had no issue with them working outside of the assignment. I enjoyed the projects she gave us and would sometimes spend my lunch hour in the art room to work on them. Though it has been 10 years, specific days and projects still stand out in my mind. One day, either my junior or senior year, we were drawing the human figure, many of us taking turns to be the model. Ms. Gerring asked her teaching assistant, a senior, to jump up on a cluster of desks and sit on a plastic blow-up chair so a group of us could draw him. I had recently found an old attendance ledger in the scrap bin, ripped out a few pages, and taped them together. On this base I worked, using black and primary colors to paint the TA, sleeping in the pink chair. The final product isn't especially fine or special, but I found the whole process fun and exciting.

Somehow she always found the time to talk with each of us about our work, while still being able to teach, set up for the next class, and draw a bit in her own sketchbook.

Additionally, she always encouraged us to bring in art we made outside of class and would take the time to look at it and discuss it with us.

While generally easygoing and fun, Ms. Gerring expected much out of us, especially those of us who demonstrated artistic skill and passion. I recall one report card, from a trimester when I was technically her T.A. but actually used the period to focus on my portfolio for college, on which she chastised me for my lack of focus. It was during third period, and one of my best friends was a T.A. next door, providing me a constant distraction. Ms. Gerring's comment could have come out of annoyance, as third period was her prep time. Instead, I understood that she was asking me to be more productive, and to challenge myself. At that point, Ms. Gerring knew me better than I knew myself. As a teenager I was focused on friends and Friday nights instead of the future and what I could be, but she knew I was an artist and encouraged and pushed me to be one.

At 17 I wasn't sure exactly what my life would be like in 10 or 20 years, but I knew the only thing I wanted to do, that I could do well, was art. Unsure of what I needed to create a successful portfolio, I asked for Ms. Gerring's advice. She encouraged me to take classes outside of school, so I started taking a Monday night course at a local art studio. When the time came to apply to colleges, she sat down with me and helped me sort through a stack of artwork to select the pieces that showed my strength and diversity. With my work photographed and a glowing recommendation from Ms. Gerring typed up on school letterhead, I sent off my application and waited. Weeks later, as I sat in sign language class, my translucent aqua beeper silently buzzed. My mom sent word that my application had been accepted; I was bound for Western Washington

University. To make sure I received the message, my mother also called Ms. Gerring. At a school assembly that afternoon, Ms. Gerring stood up and yelled across the crowd that I was in. I gave her a big smile and yelled thanks. It was the best I could do at the moment to thank her for her help. She believed in me as a person, student, and artist. Her encouragement had paid off.

After graduation I didn't see Ms. Gerring until the following summer, when she invited a number of her former students to her house for a tea party. Ten of us sat around her lace-covered table, drank tea and caught up. It wasn't until four or five years after that, as I began to struggle with the decision of what to do next in my life, that I contacted her again. After some searching I was able to find her email through another former student. Ms. Gerring was excited to hear from me, and more so when I told her I was considering going back to school to become an art teacher.

The next weekend I found myself at her house, a different one than I had previously visited. This one had a beautiful large living room with tall windows that looked out towards Seattle. We made tea, then sat back in her deep couch and discussed my next steps. As time went by we moved to the kitchen and sat around her counter. Then, as she said she was feeling tired, we lay on her bed and played with her kitten.

Though she had mentioned it previously in an email, it was in that moment that I understood the reality of her condition. She was battling breast cancer. Ms. Gerring had a collection of wigs on her dresser, having lost all of her hair to chemotherapy. She wore out quickly and looked smaller than she used to. Even with all she was dealing with, Ms. Gerring still had her loving, warm personality and was more interested in talking about me than herself. Upon regaining her strength, she brought me downstairs to show me her

studio and her current projects; she was actively creating art and showing at a Seattle gallery. I walked around the room glancing at piles of plates she collected and planned to use for her next show. The basement room was lovingly filled with her art, supplies, and pieces of inspiration collected from garage sales and second-hand stores.

As I was getting ready to leave, we talked about her current dining room table centerpiece, a collection of white ceramic Japanese characters that included a sumo wrestler, a geisha, and a Buddha. They were glasses used for drinks at Benihana and similar restaurants. I told her about my trip to Japan, and she told me about her many excursions to Goodwill to find these pieces. She found a box, placed each figure inside, and wouldn't let me leave without her entire collection.

After our reconnection, I made sure to go to her openings at Catherine Person Gallery. The last opening I attended was in February 2008. Ms. Gerring was in the second year of stage-four cancer at that point, but her work was all about the celebration of life. The gallery, with its tall, white walls and warm wooden floor, was filled with friends, fellow artists, and art enthusiasts. Ms. Gerring wore a silly hat, likely one that she made, and was being filmed for a local art television show. Her work, painted paper sewn together and paintings framed to look like lockets, covered the walls. Towards the back, I saw the plates that had been stacked in her studio, hung as a group creating an oval shape. Shortly after I arrived she saw me, enveloped me in one of her deep hugs, and gave me a moment of her time that was much desired by reporters and friends. Later, I walked to the back wall and looked at the plates. They were entitled *Served*; each plate had a figure or object painted on it with black and white acrylic, each image representing someone or something significant to her life and her battle with cancer. They were

beautiful. And to my surprise, I could actually afford one of the smaller plates. I had always wanted a piece of Ms. Gerring's artwork; she had a painterly, romantic style that inspired me when I was a student in her classroom. I'm not sure if Ms. Gerring knew I purchased one of her pieces, since I never got the chance to talk to her before I left the gallery. While I never found out the meaning of the painting, because she painted it and knowing it must have been significant to her, I treasured it.

Ms. Gerring's final show a year later displayed her strength, gratitude, and grace as she was looking head-on at end-of-life issues. I wasn't able to attend, as I was living in Iowa and taking classes, but my mother went for me and said it was a beautiful show. Ms. Gerring died in March 2009.

Ms. Gerring is the person who most influenced my artistic identity, and subsequently my teacher identity. She was present during those important years when I was trying to figure out what to do after high school, and again years later when I struggled with what to do after receiving my undergraduate degree in art. Even in her absence, I find myself thinking about who she was as a teacher and an artist and using that reflection to inform my life.

CHAPTER 3

THEIR STORIES

Jenny

I had every intention of being early for my meeting with Jenny in order to have enough time to set up the office for my first interview. As I unlocked the offices, I glanced down the hall and saw someone sitting on the sofa near the bookbinding studio. Having never met Jenny before, I was unsure if it was her or someone just waiting for a class. I quickly entered the office and borrowed two chairs from the randomly distributed desks that fill the rooms. I placed the cushioned orange chair on the left side of the table and, to the right, a nice wooden chair for myself.

This was the first time through the questions I wrote. I was nervous, hoping not to overstep any personal boundaries, while also wanting to get at the issue bringing us together. Did she have an artistic identity in high school, and what did that mean for her? I placed the digital voice recorder on the table as she entered the room.

Jenny was recommended by my advisor, and was the only participant I did not know prior to starting my research. She graduated from high school in 2008 and is currently working on her B.A. in Studio Art while taking education courses towards her teaching certification. Openly intrigued by my thesis, she emailed her desire to participate within an hour of the email request.

Jenny grew up in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois, in a middle-class family. Until their divorce when she was seven years old, Jenny's parents owned an advertising agency, where she says her dad was the "artistic one" while her mom was more "artistic verbally, with her words." As a child she was encouraged to draw and provided with any

materials she wanted. Her parents recognized her talent early on and praised her for it, informing her that kids her age could not do what she did. Though Jenny's talent and interest in art was supported in numerous ways, her mother was blunt in telling her that she would not make any money as an artist. "'You don't want to do that kind of stuff.' I was like, okay, that makes sense," Jenny recalls thinking.

With this warning in the back of her mind, Jenny continued taking art classes in middle school while also playing in concert and jazz bands at her magnet school for the arts. In high school she played volleyball and ran in track and cross-country. These interests defined who she was early on in high school and led her to consider studying sports medicine for a time. It was a teacher she met the summer before her freshman year who would convince Jenny that her talent and passion showed that she belonged in art.

While taking an introductory art class over the summer after her eighth grade year, Jenny was introduced to Ms. Murphy. However, it wasn't until her sophomore year that she began taking an honors drawing class with her. "After I saw her continuously put my work into shows, I noticed her talking to me more, questioning me, supplying me with books to read, something to gain inspiration from. I think she was trying to get me to do my own research, help me figure out where my thoughts were going. So it was more of a studious, educational relationship first."

Jenny would not be in Ms. Murphy's class again until her senior year, when she took Advanced Placement Studio Art, something she had been encouraged to do as a freshman. "I always had a strong relationship with [Ms. Murphy], in far as communicating and she would give me critiques and feedback." But the relationship went beyond that of the favored student and likeable teacher. She knew both of Jenny's

parents from the school's art shows, and was familiar with the family's situation. Jenny found that she was welcome to come to the art room before school, to draw and talk about what was going on. "[Ms. Murphy] saw both sides of it, which no one else could have with having a bias."

Ms. Murphy was also blunt with her opinions, telling her, "Jenny, forget sports medicine, forget doing all this. You need to understand where your passions are, what you like doing." Though Jenny spent the majority of her high school time focused on sports, she now feels that art has taken over her memories. For her, Ms. Murphy is the only teacher who has maintained any importance since she graduated.

The artwork that Jenny made her senior year heavily reflected her emotional state. Coming out of the long, messy divorce of her parents and having a negative and deteriorating relationship with her stepfather, Jenny's imagery, juxtaposed with her concentration of surrealism and inspiration from Pink Floyd's album *Dark Side of the Moon*, were "daunting" images that "made a lot of people feel very uncomfortable." Upon reflection, as well as a forced visit to a psychiatrist by her worried mother, Jenny admits that she was overwhelmed and confused in high school. Suddenly, something she liked to do became an expression of herself and her situation, and a method to vent her frustrations.

Her senior year proved to be a turning point for Jenny, a point in her life at which she was able to truly find herself and discover who she wanted to become. Though art became a primary focus when her future in athletics and sports medicine did not pan out, she says art was an awakening rather than something to fall back on. "This is truly my passion," she says. "This is what I want to do."

Hannah

Hannah is late. It is our second meeting, so I knew that perhaps she would be, as she showed up 30 minutes late for our first one. I have nothing scheduled after our meeting, so I sit patiently in the art education offices with the windows open; spring has finally come. Hannah is 23 years old and is earning a Ceramics B.F.A. We met in a figure sculpting class last spring, but didn't connect until a few months later. She ran into me and was very excited because she had seen my linoleum block print of a grizzly bear. I had hung it on the wall along with the work of my classmates in a printmaking class. Unbeknownst to me, she had also been working on bears. We walked back to her studio, where she took the plastic off of a large chunk of clay that sat on rollers a couple inches off the ground. The chunk was actually the carved, life-size head of a roaring grizzly bear in a suit and tie. It was lifelike, animated, beautiful, and it had yet to be fired or glazed. We agreed there to exchange work, swapping one of my prints for one of her hand-built bear sculptures.

Hannah has the eccentric look of an artist: thick, unkempt hair wrapped up in a messy bun on her head, clothes covered in clay or paint, with a lingering cigarette smell. She is boisterous and loud, but also friendly and thoughtful. It was because of all these things that I asked her to participate in my research. She stood apart from the other participants, and I wondered about her story.

Growing up in a small community outside of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Hannah was seven when she decided to "excel at art." Her earliest and most vivid memories are of her mother, aunt, and grandmother all being able to draw. It was when a cousin visited, as they sat in the kitchen molding different shapes and creatures with play dough, that she

committed to working at drawing and being able to "execute what they did, how well they did."

Throughout her childhood, Hannah made art in and out of school and was always encouraged by her mother, who she believes was not encouraged as a child herself. Hannah's mother would often help with her projects, suggesting they cut off bits of their poodle's hair and attach it like ponytails to figurines in an Indian reservation diorama. Hannah says, "My mom was very inventive. That might have something to do with the prospering of my inventiveness with my sculptures, how I don't let a piece die."

Going into high school, Hannah was a self-described tomboy; she was more into sports, being outside, and being physical than anything else. I still can see this side of her when I watch her work with clay, hand building and carving into the piece, as well the ways that she makes her screen prints. She builds them up with clay block outs rather than creating individual stencils. She admits starting to smoke pot at age 15. "I had serious identity problems. I was trying to figure out who I was. I was trying to figure out how I wanted to carry myself, how I wanted to dress, how I wanted to be, and if that even coincided with who I was," she remembers. "I didn't even know I was an artist up until a couple years ago."

The search for who she was overlapped with her discovery of throwing on the wheel. Hannah wanted to learn how to throw pots after seeing a former boyfriend and her older sister take Mr. Thomas's ceramic class. "Then I started throwing pots and it came to me, it was really… it saved my life at that time." The physical process of throwing along with the safe and supporting ear of Mr. Thomas, her high school art teacher, entered Hannah's life just as she began to realize she was gay. "I don't know

when we started talking about things, but it was after school and with me throwing. I remember admitting to him the first time I thought I was gay. He was the first person I ever admitted that to. He let me be what I was and say what I needed to say to get me through."

"Why him, and not any other teacher or adult?" I asked.

"Because I could tell he really cared about his students. He talked about that with me too. I would talk about how I felt and he would talk about how he felt about his students, how important it was for him to connect with them." Their discussions went back and forth from Hannah's current pots she was throwing and her academic future to the emotional turmoil she dealt with in terms of not only her sexuality but also her parents' divorce. He filled the void left by adults in her life with his kindness and support.

From the time she was a sophomore, Hannah took only ceramics courses; she felt she had achieved the goals set in other art courses in her school. Mr. Thomas built up the ceramics program so that students did not just work with clay, but also came to understand the science behind clay. His classroom had enough wheels for every student, pug mills, and glazes that he had made himself. He encouraged students to come and use the facilities outside of class time, even opening up the room on Saturdays for students to come in and throw.

Hannah's passion for clay is evident. I was inspired as I listened to her discuss how clay has memory, and how certain elements of life surround a person when using clay. In high school, though she claims she lacked the confidence to fully understand her talent and skill, her peers looked up to her because of her talent, and Mr. Thomas relied

on her. "I became one of the ones who knew what I was doing and could do it well. I would throw bigger pots and it would be an encouragement for me and for [my peers] to have me around," says Hannah. She welcomed the chance to mentor and help the students with less experience, often demonstrating wheel-throwing techniques in front of the entire class.

Her artwork, primarily pottery at that point, represented the state of her identity and emotions: "A lot of dark blues and blacks with a touch of white. Dripping motions. I would use the wheel and spin it, dripping," she says. "As I reflect back on that, there was so much symbolism in the process. The spinning, the way that it… it was so loosely together, like me. My work has always been a reflection of myself… Every mark and breath I make says me." Throwing was something she enjoyed, and it provided a physical outlet for everything going on in her life, a form of meditation, while also making a surface that she could paint on. "Ultimately there is an incorporation of painting into everything I do."

Five years after high school, Hannah has come to understand why she felt so inadequate at school and why she never considered pursuing art beyond high school. After discussing how Mr. Thomas was thoroughly impressed by her natural ability to glaze, Hannah tells a story about her brother. "My little brother is the car whisperer. He can listen to an engine and know what's wrong. He listened to the school bus and told the driver what he thought was wrong. The next time he saw him, the driver told him he had been exactly right, just from listening to it run. These are amazing talents, but they are not to society's standards of intelligence, especially when you're in high school and furthering into higher education. So we felt inadequate and we never knew why, we

never knew how we excelled more than others in certain areas. They weren't the standard."

Cassie

Cassie, standing at no more than five foot, four inches, is a commanding woman. And, in the final semester of her Ceramics B.F.A., she is as busy as ever, finishing work for her B.F.A. show, directing school events, and attempting to find an apartment in a new town where she'll be working towards her M.F.A. this fall. I never heard back from her about participating in my research and had chalked her up as too busy until we ran into each other in our warehouse-like art building. We talked as we walked past each other. Yes, she'd love to help me out, but the trouble was finding time for the interview. I said I would email her and arrange our meeting based on her schedule. She thanked me as we kept walking in opposite directions.

The week after her B.F.A. show and graduation, Cassie met me in the art education offices on campus. We sat across from each other in an office full of mismatched furniture, the windows opened to encourage a breeze on that warm May day. Just as I started each previous interview, I asked her to start with the story of art in her life.

Cassie is 23 years old and grew up in a small Iowa town hours from any city of a decent size. She describes both of her parents as artistic, but she doesn't recall them ever creating artwork in front of her. Rather than being allowed to watch television, she and her sisters were told to play outside. If they were inside, they would be coloring, putting on a magic show, or making something out of the scrap wood in the basement. "That's the earliest part I remember, just having art materials all over," she says.

Art classes in both elementary and middle school were positive experiences, with teachers whom Cassie looks back upon fondly. She had an elementary teacher who "always did fun stuff," the highlight for her being a second grade papier-mâché project in which they made Egyptian masks, "… which I don't even know if that can possibly be done in schools anymore. I mean, we were breathing out of a straw." In middle school, Cassie's positive relationship with her art teacher allowed her to become involved in the school's Extended Learning Program, or ELP. Generally restricted to students who qualify for the program, Cassie was allowed to participate in their problem solving activities, through which her peers recognized her artistic talents. She was regularly called upon to design scenery for their theatrical plays, the method through which they would solve the provided problems.

Self-described as a "pretty decent student" in high school, Cassie's primary focus and identity throughout the four years were sports. Year round, athletics consumed the majority of her time outside of school, normally arriving home around 7:00 or 8:00 PM on non-game nights. She enjoyed being a part of a team and the competitive feeling that came with playing against other schools.

Perhaps due to the small size of her school or the fact that she maintained a romantic relationship throughout high school, Cassie claims that her identity had no dramatic transformations. She "floated" through her four years there, developing close friendships with a few and being constantly active in sports. It wasn't until her junior year, with the idea of college looming ahead of her, that art suddenly became something important to her. She claims she only found her artistic identity in the art classroom. Her

life outside of school was still consumed by athletics. It was only in the art room that she made art, spending two to three hours a day there her senior year.

As she talked about herself in high school, I had to stop and ask her to clarify her choice of art. I felt something missing in her reasoning behind her choice to suddenly focus on art. "You keep saying that you were leaning towards art, going into art because you 'excelled' at it," I asked her. "Was there any deeper passion or desire towards it? Or did you just see yourself as being good at it, so you'd keep going towards it?"

In order to explain her choice, Cassie told me a story about flow: "Flow as in the sense that you are completely engulfed in something…I was completely engulfed when I was working… Nothing else was on my mind, it was very clear that I was in there just to paint." This answered my question.

I understood her response because I also experience that feeling of timelessness, a feeling of separation from the world and my life when working on my art. I forget about everything and only think about and feel what is in front of me. The only thing of importance is the movement my hand makes as I bring charcoal across the paper's surface. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) proposed the concept of flow. In his book *Creativity,* he uses a quote by poet Mark Strand to describe the effect flow has on self, time, and the surroundings. "The idea is to be so… so saturated with it that there's no future or past, it's just an extended present in which you're, uh, making meaning… When you're working on something and you're working well, you have the feeling that there's no other way of saying what you're saying" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 121).

But Cassie went further in her explanation: "Maybe this [was] more rebelling as a kid?" Cassie told me about a father who jumped from job to job because he lacked a

college degree and a mother who couldn't follow her passion to be a scientist, and taught instead. Reflecting on what she saw in her family, Cassie says, "So why maybe I chose art is because I saw my dad doing what he did not want to be doing, he didn't really enjoy it. I saw my mom teaching, but she didn't really want to do that. She wanted to be a scientist. I saw them going through life not enjoying their jobs every day. It pushed me to say, 'Screw you. I'm going to do art and if I'm poor, I'm poor.'"

The choice to make art in many ways is a rebellion against the middle-class and working class value system that maintains the importance of a steady and reliable job with an income that is stable. It is a well-held belief that children are expected to do better in life than their parents, or at the very least, do as well. My father, son of a Navy sailor and the fourth of seven boys, was expected to complete high school and go into the military or go on to college. I was expected to go to college, and then it was my choice to go on to pursue a master's degree. Though Cassie's parents both supported her desire to study art, her choice was questioned and viewed negatively by her extended family.

While Cassie's experience with her art teacher, Mr. Orsino, was far from negative, it was less personal than relationship the other participants had with their teachers. Aware of Cassie's talent and desire to create, he challenged her and allowed her to study ceramics independently. It was apparent to Cassie that she had a different kind of relationship with him than he did with other students. He granted her permission to use any of the materials available in the art room. He also would critique her work more than other students. "His opinion mattered to me, more so than anyone else's," she shared.

Kim

Kim and I chose a table outside, as the weather was perfect. With the voice recorder and our drinks between us, we talked as people and vehicles passed the coffee shop on a busy road in town, our discussion friendly and easygoing. Kim is a sweet and quirky junior who immediately agreed to help me out with my research. She hoped her participation and reflection on her own experience would be beneficial to herself, a future art teacher.

Kim grew up in a suburb of Chicago, attending a large public school she describes as being divided along socioeconomic lines. She lived on the poor side of town with her single mother and older brother. Her family life while she was growing up could be described as eventful, perhaps even chaotic: a mother raising two children while going back to school to get her master's degree, and a mostly absent father who suffers from mental illness. As a child she was enrolled in a variety of classes (including art) available in her community and at the local college. Kim states her mother believed that being busy would help her cope with the family's current situation and, she adds, she partly wanted Kim to take them because the classes got her out of the house.

When I ask about the story of art in her life, Kim begins by introducing her father's health issues and how she doesn't keep clear recollections of her early childhood because of his illness. She recalls making art, but nothing is clear until elementary. And while she knows that she liked art, Kim asserts, "Most of my art learning has been outside of the regular classroom." This is due to her less-than-positive experiences with art in classrooms from elementary through high school, and was also caused by her mother's constant drive to keep her and her brother actively engaged in a variety of

educational and creative experiences. The inadequate art classroom environments included an elementary teacher who taught cookie cutter art projects, and who Kim claims everyone was afraid of. She had a middle school teacher she thought was cool and describes as a hippie who called everyone "Moonchild," but who failed to teach the necessary art fundamentals, such as the basics of painting and drawing. Finally, there was a high school art teacher whose responsibilities spread her too thin, forcing her to be distant with her students.

While Kim liked art and was encouraged by her mother (who herself creates quilts and other crafts) to be creative, in high school the drama and events of family and school life overshadowed it. Kim's family background is important to mention because of how it affected her in high school. With her freshman year of high school approaching, Kim found herself weighted down by recent events involving her dad, as well as the fact that her older brother, who was very much a father figure, was leaving for college. Unconsciously, Kim set out to protect herself by becoming someone who looked, in her words, "scary." She became a "little goth kid" and dated the "biggest, scariest dude" she could find. "I'm making myself look scary, I'm dating someone who is scary, and now I'm safe." It took her more than a year to realize that goth wasn't who she was. Her involvement with the tech crew and technical theater at her school turned her focus to a new identity, the "tech geek." By her senior year, she had added art to that label. And while she would say she was more "tech" than "art" in high school, she always knew she'd go into art.

Due to budget constraints, Kim's high school had one art teacher: one art teacher who still had to oversee a number of classes, some of which occurred during the same

period. Kim explains, "So there would be a photo class, the painting class, and then on the other side of the school there would be the graphic design class… She would be running back and forth." Students who needed help would carry their project and join a line that followed her from classroom to classroom.

With an art teacher who had no time for her students and who would often "hide" in her office, Kim found more support and direction from the librarian. Ms. Fiskum was a certified librarian who also had a B.F.A. and would help out the graphic design classes that were held in the computer lab. During lunches, Ms. Fiskum would tell Kim about studying art in college and "being on the L train with oil paintings still wet from class." She sparked Kim's interest in art school and would become her inspiration for being an art teacher. "I think Ms. Fiskum helped me find myself a lot. My sophomore year, I started working with her, and from there I stopped being a little goth kid and started being myself… I feel like she helped me formulate my identity in high school and make me comfortable with who I was," she shares.

Outside of school, Kim found more focused art instruction at a local community art school. Thanks to unused scholarships for teens, Kim was able to take drawing, painting, mixed media, and other classes there for free. Twice a week in the evening, Kim found individual instruction in small classes of mostly older students. Even more, a watercolor teacher took Kim under her wing and looked after her. Though Kim doesn't recall her name, she felt a strong connection to this teacher, who often walked Kim to her car after class, and assisted Kim in choosing classes to take and discussed college with her. This teacher even allowed her to take a class "off the books" once the scholarship fund had dried up.

A defining moment for Kim was at portfolio day at The School of the Art Institute in Chicago. Excited at the opportunity to be in the company of art students and to be seen as a potential art student herself, Kim chose her attire carefully. She desired to be seen like what she envisioned a "cool artist" was. With her portfolio in hand, she went first to the SAIC table. As soon as her portfolio was open, the SAIC representative said, "We can't even begin to think about looking at your portfolio." "Because it was so bad," Kim adds. "It wasn't that it was so bad, it was that it didn't have a unifying theme. I didn't have the space where I could paint and paint. I didn't have anyone giving me solid critiques."

Crushed, she left the table, but not before hearing the SAIC person become giddy at the next student's portfolio. "Her work was dark, black with guns," Kim remembers. "It was just like that, she was the melodramatic artist, being so dark. The stuff I painted was flowers. That was the break of what they [SAIC] defined the artist as."

Broken as she was, her mother and brother encouraged her to visit other tables and talk to other schools. Every other school offered her automatic admission. But the dismissal by SAIC still weighs on her. "Now I think of myself as an artist, but comparing what I do to what the people at the SAIC do is still a big schism for me." Kim disapproves of the high and mighty attitude she experienced then, an attitude she still faces, as her pottery is viewed by some as a craft rather than art.

Melissa

I first met Melissa while student teaching in a small school district near my university. In her final year of high school, she stood out from the other 180 students I taught because of her self-confidence and artistic focus. In her own way, Melissa owned

the art room. With her personality loud and commanding, she was one of the few truly focused and talented students. Compared to other students, I saw the difference in the relationship Melissa had with the art teacher, Ms. Callaghan. There was trust and openness going both ways.

Melissa is 19 and comes from a large middle-class family. The second-youngest of 10, she had a mother who was supportive but understandably stretched in terms of time and focus. A hobby watercolorist herself, Melissa's mother always provided crayons and markers to her children and saved everything that they made. Melissa's earliest memory regarding art occurred in kindergarten, when her artwork was recognized through a local art show put on yearly by a bank. Her painting of a clown with chicken pox was chosen by her teacher to enter into the competition and won an award in her age group.

In junior high, due to a busy class schedule and relatively few art courses offered, Melissa stopped creating art and focused solely on academics. She skipped over this part of her life during the interview, beginning again with her transfer to a smaller high school during her sophomore year. At this new school she joined the dance team and the student environmental club, becoming more involved and active in extracurricular activities. But it wasn't until the following spring, when pushed by a close friend to take an art class together, that Melissa began to create art again. Though she likely signed up simply out of the desire to be with her friend, the encouragement to take the painting and drawing class introduced Melissa to Ms. Callaghan. Her friend forced her to sign up for just one art class, but Ms. Callaghan constantly pushed her to continue her art education through classes, clubs, and art shows.

Though she balks at the idea of trying to label her high school self, Melissa relents and identifies herself as "artistic and really into dance." After that initial painting and drawing class, she regularly took a minimum of two art classes each semester. In addition to that, she painted at home, in an old makeshift playhouse, and made art at a local youth center. Melissa states that her identity has always been tied to creativity, but it was her personality that evolved and opened up in high school. Melissa considered herself really quiet before and immediately after transferring schools. It was only after developing strong connections with art and dance, as well as having friends who shared those passions, that Melissa came out of her shell and became the one "screaming across the art room" and "probably throwing things." Involvement in the arts gave her the self-confidence to be herself, someone who naturally stands out and doesn't follow the norm in personality or appearance.

Melissa states that during her first class with Ms. Callaghan, she recognized the developing relationship between them. Melissa found in Ms. Callaghan support and attention, even concern about her life and education. By her senior year, Melissa identified Ms. Callaghan as her "school mom." It is also evident that Ms. Callaghan recognized Melissa's talent and focus that first semester; she selected her for one of a few awards presented to deserving students at the end of the school year. Ms. Callaghan, in Melissa's words, forcefully encouraged her to add art club to her extracurricular activities, as she somehow understood that Melissa would need the extra push to do it.

In terms of space, Ms. Callaghan's art room was literally a place of refuge for Melissa. During the winter of her junior year, Melissa found herself hospitalized for a month and a half, during which time her estranged father passed away. Upon returning to

school, the number of people suddenly around her caused her to have panic attacks. She didn't know what to say when asked about her absence. Finding safety in the art room and Ms. Callaghan's presence, Melissa hid there rather than attending her classes. It took a two-week period for her anxiety to ease as she slowly saw more people and began to attend her other classes. "That became a sacred space for me, somewhere I really valued. It was a safe space."

Melissa is the only participant to acknowledge that she called herself an artist in high school. Her initial definition of artist as someone "who enjoys art and does it regularly" supports her acceptance of giving herself the title of artist. She claims that the making of art was done on a daily basis, both inside and outside of school. She also showed her paintings, mixed media, and photographs through art shows promoted through the high school. Furthermore, Melissa had a solo show through the youth center with which she was actively engaged. The solo show, more than anything else, cemented the title and her passion for the arts: "That was the first time I had been recognized by more than Ms. Callaghan and my mom," she says.

Melissa recognizes the importance of Ms. Callaghan and the art room space to the development of her artistic identity. Without the early encouragement and the ongoing relationship between herself and Ms. Callaghan, she says she might have never refocused on art and become interested in photography. Additionally, the year since Melissa graduated has allowed her time to reflect and understand how important it was for Ms. Callaghan to step back her senior year and allow Melissa to be more independent with her artwork, even though at the time she recalls how frustrating it was for her teacher not to push and teach.

In terms of the art Melissa made, she describes her early high school work as shallow. "It didn't have a lot of meaning behind it. It was more: I painted it and it is pretty." Her work became more abstract with each year until her senior year, when she says she began to focus on making a difference with the art she made. Melissa's past experience as a victim of child abuse began to surface, and it was something she could no longer ignore. "I did this one piece that was a dress I made, very simple in white. I put it on a mannequin. I wrote adjectives around the bodice that describes how you feel when you are abused, and splattered red paint on it. I think that really opened people's eyes."

The dress and other pieces of art with such dark themes could hardly go unnoticed by Ms. Callaghan. While Melissa says she initially did not want to talk with Ms. Callaghan about her past, it seems that the artwork she made was calling out for someone to ask the questions, listen, and encourage. "She was supportive like that. My own mom and I won't talk about it. Ms. Callaghan helped me through that." Having lived through the horror of being abused, Melissa desired to make a difference in other people's lives and made the choice in her senior year of high school to become an art therapist.

CHAPTER 4

THEMES

Early Recognition

The level of early recognition for artistic talent and focus varies between the participants. For this study I define early recognition as the attention and support (either verbal, action, or material) that participants received for their art making between the ages of one and 14 years old. All had access to some form of materials, from crayons, markers, and boxed art sets which included painting supplies, to household construction-type materials. Beyond materials, the major themes of early recognition were parental involvement in the arts, verbal acknowledgment of talent and/or desire, and participation in extracurricular art activities.

Parents and other family members' involvement in the arts seems to have directly or indirectly encouraged each participant's involvement as a child. Hannah was surrounded by family members and neighbors who all could draw well. Seeing her cousin shape play dough into a "perfect" guitar led her to make a commitment at age seven to excel at art. Additionally, Hannah's mother actively participated in creative activities and art projects with her. Hannah credits her mother with her own inventiveness and how she can never "let a piece die." Similarly, Kim's mother is a quilter and crafter who regularly engaged in crafting and other creative endeavors with her. Kim was always encouraged to create. Jenny's parents both worked in a creative field, advertising. With Jenny often tagging along, her father would provide her with their current project and allow her a chance to work out a solution. While not all parents actively engaged in art making in front of their children, it seems just the fact that the

children knew their parents were interested in art was an encouragement, and it increased the likelihood that a variety of art supplies were available in the home.

Jenny remembers compliments she received from her parents as a young child, they were adamant about how good her drawing was compared to her peers. All participants mentioned having peers recognize and acknowledge their work either at school or in the home. This early verbal recognition spurred all of them to make more art. Cassie was always called to draw and paint the sets for the ELP program's plays, and these assignments helped her to realize her talent. Hannah was forced to "compete" with two other peers in drawing competitions. Other classmates would select a topic and choose which they believed to be the best from the three drawings. While Hannah says she hated the competition, she did enjoy the attention she received because of it.

A few of the participants took art classes or had art experiences outside of the home and public school art room. Those who were enrolled in art classes also took part in other forms of extracurricular activities. Jenny took many writing classes at the local college. Encouraged by her mother and financed by her grandfather, Kim took classes every summer. Due to less than positive experiences at school, Kim states that most of her art learning occurred outside of the public school art room.

Artist Title and Identity

What is Artistic Identity?

There is no clear definition of artist or artistic identity from the participants. Instead, each person's definition is specific to the individual and their experiences. For this study I define artistic identity as the degree to which an individual identifies with the artist's role, based on Brewer's definition of the athletic identity (1993).

The artistic identity manifests itself primarily in action and product, but it can also be apparent in appearance. By action I am referring to an individual's choices relative to art and art making, such as deciding to take art classes, learning new techniques, or spending lunch in the art room. Product is what comes out of the actions, such as knowledge of a new medium, an actual work of art, or even the growth of a relationship based on art (such as between student and art teacher or with other creatively-minded peers).

All participants accept that they had some sort of artistic identity in high school, whether they confidently acknowledged it or not. Their artistic identities were public, private, or both. Cassie, Kim, and Jenny were more publicly known for their athletic or "tech geek" identities. Cassie states that her artistic identity was simply that her classmates and teachers knew she could draw and paint. When asked about her artistic identity in her day-to-day life, she states, "I think that when I walked into the classroom I did my art. When I walked out of the classroom it wasn't that big of a deal." She and Jenny only embraced their artistic identities as seniors in high school.

The belief in and strength of this identity depended less upon the individual's actual talent and more on the support and recognition from others, especially those outside of the family. Hannah connects the development of her artistic identity with her relationship with Mr. Thomas. She sees him as the first person besides her mother to fully believe in her as an artist. Melissa's confidence in her artistic identity greatly increased after she had a solo show at a local youth center: "That is the first time I had been recognized by more than Ms. Callaghan and my mom." For Jenny, winning her

school's art scholarship, a highly competitive showcase, was the "beginning of everything," a new direction for her life.

Kim ties in her appearance with her artistic identity. For her, experimentation with clothing and hairstyles or looking a certain way, such as the hipster look, encouraged others to identify her as "artist." However, Hannah and Jenny look negatively upon attempts to dress the part of the artist. They both mention the "posers" who dressed the part of an artist with little substance or action. Jenny's explanation of artistic identity as a high school student does include people who have "that edgy look and like to experiment," but this appearance is backed up by the creation of art and involvement in an artistic group of people.

Melissa also mentions associating with creatively-minded peers when explaining artistic identity. She strongly associated a sense of her identity with the friends and the groups who offered support in her life. She allied herself with "artsy people," and thus she had an artistic identity. Cassie focused less on the association and more on the input that friends and peers have. "The people around me have made my identity, if that makes sense. [They] help me choose what my identity is supposed to be."

Kim, Melissa, Hannah, and Jenny all mention having close friends or entire groups of friends who were also active creators (writers, musicians, dancers, and artists). Studies have shown the importance of peer influence on adolescent identity (Meeus and Dekovic, 1995; Hartnett, 2007). In Hartnett's study of peer influence on absenteeism, she states, "Since teenagers often look for love and acceptance through peer identity groups, particularly as family culture erodes, peer group identity becomes a central factor

in the process of development" (2007, p. 36). It is clear that all of the participants sought acceptance and support for their artistic identities in their peer groups.

Definition of Artist

Artist is defined by Merriam-Webster as a person skilled in one of the fine arts. When asked to consider how they would have defined artist as a high school student, the participants' answers were generally more rigid.

"An artist is someone who got paid to do his or her work. It sounds awful, but I think that's the successful artists that you saw. Someone who could afford to do what they wanted and get paid for it." (Cassie)

"Someone who has artistic inclinations… I felt like a poser, in a way, when I would say that I was an artist because I didn't practice my art, but I was good at it." (Hannah)

"Somebody who enjoys doing art and does it regularly…I think that in high school I associated [artist] with [someone who] does good work." (Melissa)

"I think an artist was always someone who could draw whatever they wanted; they didn't have to have a pictorial reference. Someone who was creatively and technically developed." (Jenny)

"Even though I am an artist and I know better, for a hunk of my life it was about drawing and drawing realistically. Painting realistically." (Kim)

Each participant's definition of artist affected how confident she was in her own artistic identity. As a high school student and currently as a B.F.A. student, Cassie is unable to confidently accept the title of artist, even though she says her definition has changed to somebody who enjoys the work they are doing whether they make money or

not. She also believes that to be a successful artist means that your peers recognize you and your work. Recognition in that you are being written about by critics and journalists in art magazines or showing in galleries outside of an academic context. Cassie has yet to achieve this kind of recognition, and perhaps that could be another factor in her hesitation to name herself as an artist. Likewise, though Hannah claims she was confident in her artistic identity as a high school student, she felt like a fraud because an artist was supposed to practice their work constantly. Jenny and Kim could not achieve their definitions of artists, because their art was not realistic enough. None of them felt like they could live up to the cultural definition of "artist" when they were in high school.

As I considered my own thoughts about the cultural definition of artist, I also searched online and came across a quote by former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani. In response to a controversial show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he said, "Anything that I can do isn't art. If I can do it, it's not art, because I'm not much of an artist" (Goodnough, 1999). While his statement is in reference to that show and a particular work of art, it reflects an attitude that is shared by many, including the participants' high school selves. If they could draw a picture or throw a pot, it must not be art because they made it. If it isn't art, then they are not artists.

To many, including my high school self, an artist is male (Picasso, DaVinci, Van Gogh), white, and idolized. "Good art" is something hallowed, and the person who makes it, revered. It is not surprising that the participants in my study had similar experiences. Kim, when pressed, could have mentioned Georgia O'Keeffe, but first went to Monet and Michelangelo. Jenny's list was similar to mine, except that her art teacher actively introduced her to Duchamp, Rauschenburg, and Judy Chicago. An article by

Jerry Saltz (2007) in *New York Magazine* asked the question, "Where are all the women?" In his observations at the Museum of Modern Art, he found that in 2007, out of the 400 works displayed, only 3.5% were made by women (Saltz, 2007, paragraph 6). Glancing at the library of art books I have collected over the years, I was surprised to find that I have only one book whose focus is on a woman, Kathe Kollwitz. As a female whose work is not represented by large, recognized institutions of art, in high school I clearly could not claim the title of artist and doubted I ever would.

Today, the participants' definitions of "artist" have transformed, grown broader in some aspects and narrower in others. No one mentions the requirement that an artist is an accomplished and realistic draftsperson, though Hannah mentions it still is important. Instead, they mention the purpose of making art, one's level of enjoyment, and the recognition received when defining who an artist is and what it means to make art. Artistic identity narrows when participants look at themselves. Hannah and Kim both clarify that they are artists now, but even more importantly, they are a sculptor and potter, respectively.

The Teacher and Art Room

In the story of my artistic identity development, my high school art teacher is a key player. While I enjoyed her lessons and feedback, I loved the friendly relationship that developed between us. Her art room was a space of comfort, challenge, encouragement, and the one place on the entire high school campus where I felt it was okay to be myself.

All five participants mention an important teacher who influenced their artistic identity and the unique space that the art room offered compared to the rest of the school building.

For Cassie, Mr. Orsino provided materials and advice that might not normally be found in a small, rural town. "He was the only person who could give me feedback as an artist. Not as my parents. Not as my peers. He was central [to my artistic identity development] in that he let me do a little more on my own, such as my independent study and working with precious materials."

Jenny and Kim also mention access to "precious materials" as representing a new level in the relationship they had with their art teachers. These materials were deemed precious either due to a limited art budget or because they weren't used by the average student. Cassie mentions how her art teacher had "all these wonderful materials" including oil paint, canvas, and other materials he would have to order because they weren't available to buy in town. But due to their costs, they weren't always used. However, Cassie had unlimited access to materials because she and Mr. Orsino "had a different level of relationship compared to other students in his class."

Kim's relationship with her school's art teacher was not as positive due to staffing issues that forced the teacher at times to teach multiple classes during the same period. Her focus was stretched too thin. There was no personal or mentoring relationship, though Kim eventually did become a "favorite." A "favorite" meant either that a student had a visible innate talent or was taking the teacher's Advance Placement studio course and had access to hidden materials. During her senior year, Kim was able to access the locked cabinets in the teacher's office that held Prisma color pencils, nice oil and acrylic

paints, and good brushes. Her teacher holds little importance to Kim's artistic identity development, beyond being a provider of space and materials.

On the other hand, Kim looks more fondly upon Ms. Fiskum, the librarian. She provided Kim with an adult and artist to relate to as well as a teacher who was open and willing to provide time and attention to projects and to Kim as a person.

Like Cassie, Hannah's relationship with her ceramics teacher, Mr. Thomas, was centered on the fact that he was the first adult to believe in her and her ability. Their relationship was likely the most reciprocal out of all the participants, in that there was trust and honesty going both ways. Cassie would open up to him about her life, and he would tell her how much he cared for his students and about finding ways to adapt his teaching to their learning styles. She says, "He wanted to take the time to help me prosper in whatever way that was. And being in tune enough to know what I needed. Everyone at home wasn't realizing what I needed. I needed some kind of emotional support and structure."

Ms. Murphy helped Jenny "explore her creative abilities." Through instruction in technique, introduction to a variety of mediums, access to art books, and constant encouragement to do her own research, Jenny found a teacher who was intent on her artistic growth. Jenny states that without Ms. Murphy, she would not be where she is today. No other art teacher could fill that role. "I had a couple [art teachers] throughout high school… But there was something about Ms. Murphy that was sincere and intelligent," she says.

Melissa states that Ms. Callaghan was like a mom, her "mother in school." She was a friend and mentor who saw her artistic ability before it was visible even to her. For

Melissa, their close relationship was evident when Ms. Callaghan gave her a piece of art she had made personally for her. Due to their relationship, the art room itself was seen as a place of refuge. Melissa found safety in there after medical and personal issues kept her out of school for an extended period of time. She says, "No one was going to tell you anything bad there. Only encouragement."

The connection between the student-teacher relationship and the level of comfort and freedom the participants felt in the classroom was repeated over and over again during the interviews. Jenny came to school early and would draw in the art room and talk with Ms. Murphy. Kim felt she was welcome not in her art teacher's classroom, but in the office of the librarian, with whom she would often eat lunch. Hannah felt open to discuss personal issues as she threw on the wheel. Even Cassie, who did not have a personal relationship with her art teacher, felt that her artistic identity existed in the art room.

A positive student-teacher relationship creates a welcoming, creative environment that is crucial to the development of a student's artistic identity. It is true that not all students desire personal relationships with their teachers. Ms. Callaghan, under whom I student taught, had a student who was extremely talented and took many of her classes, but who kept her distance at a personal level. Still, it is apparent that the open and creative atmosphere of Ms. Callaghan's art room was a product of her attitude and personality. The student benefited from it though she did not seek Ms. Callaghan's friendship or mentorship.

"Teachers who understand that students want to be validated as 'people' and not processed as 'students,' who create safe atmospheres for intellectual risk, and who

express their own personalities to students understand the complexities that determine many students' dispositions to learn." (Bernstein-Yamashrio, 2004, p. 63-64) And one might add, to grow.

Pain and Art

Nearly all of the participants I talked to experienced some form of pain or suffering in their childhood and high school years: divorce, mental illness, sexual identity confusion, and child abuse. This pain was often mentioned in connection to making art or as the reason a participant can't remember making art. While no participants used art as a form of therapy, it would seem from their experiences that art was therapeutic for them. Additionally, through their art making, they were able to connect with a sympathetic adult.

Jenny, Hannah, and Melissa all mention the importance of art making while they were going through periods of trauma. Often arriving early to school in tears, Jenny found her art teacher's door always open. Ms. Murphy would sit and listen as Jenny would draw and open up about her situation. Hannah discovered wheel throwing as she was also figuring out that she was gay. Physically demanding, throwing forced her to focus and allowed her to expel her negative energy, while glazing each piece became a mode of expression for the emotions she was feeling.

Near the end of high school, Melissa began to create art as a way to open her viewers' eyes to a topic important to her: child abuse. Melissa's work spoke of pain and darkness, but she never mentioned that she herself was a victim. Unable to verbally confront her past, she found she was able to face her abuse through her art. The work she was making drew Ms. Callaghan's attention. With concern, she approached Melissa

and encouraged her to talk about what was behind her art. Though unable to talk with her mother about the past, Melissa found support and kindness from her art teacher.

For Kim, due to her father's mental illness and its affect on her family, she has vague memories of her early childhood. There are artifacts of the art she made as a child, but no memory of making them. Through high school Kim never used her art as a vehicle of expression. Now, as she works towards her B.F.A. show, Kim is using her family's past in her pottery. Her main work is a full table setting for four, representing her family and made out of her own clay body. She's broken every piece: each wine goblet, each plate. Each will then be put back together, kept together with bits of colorful fabric. They will be scarred, but whole again. One place setting, representing her father, will be left white and stark. To her this implies his past, current, and future state of never being a "whole person."

These four participants used art as a means to deal with and express their pain. While the process of creation was a private act, the artwork itself was public and was used by Melissa and Kim to inform the viewer or start a discussion on the topic.

Artistic Realization

For me, the decision to focus on art occurred during an eight-session figure drawing class put on by a local museum. I felt alive when I was drawing. I felt as if something deep within me was awakened. It was spiritual. That experience proved to me that art was something I should, and could, do.

For some, it is a light bulb that turns on quickly and brightly. Other times it is a slow understanding that comes from numerous experiences and events. Why do firefighters become firefighters and doctors become doctors? They have an interest, a

passion, an understanding that that is what they should do, what they want to do. The decision to focus on art is a choice, no matter how talented a person might be. Some might feel more compelled to study art because it is the only thing they feel successful in or because they have been told by people throughout their life that it is what they should do.

For three participants, their choice to focus on art involved clay. Kim's access to clay was minimal as a child and adolescent. Her high school had a kiln, but no ceramics program. Kim claims she always knew she'd go into a creative field, be it theater lightning or set design. Early in college, as she was studying scenic design, she took a clay course. She found clay to be a medium she could easily manipulate to express an emotion or idea. She says, "That's definitely when I decided I was an artist, when I started doing ceramics [in college]." The confidence in art clicked for Kim when she began working with clay.

Hannah's introduction to clay occurred in high school, thanks to a teacher who was building up the ceramics program. She watched a boyfriend and her older sister throw and knew it was something she wanted to do. Though challenging and at times frustrating, Hannah found that the process of throwing on a wheel and glazing the finished product were things that came naturally to her. She intuitively knew how the glaze would act. Studying at a university now, Hannah's focus has turned from wheel throwing to hand building and sculpting. She's found sculpting to be her calling, now labeling herself an artist, but foremost a sculptor.

Though Cassie was known to be a good drawer and painter, she says she did not become really interested in art until her junior year of high school when she took painting

and clay classes. Her initial clay course prompted her to want more than the basics. With help and permission from the principal, she was allowed to do an independent study to further her investigation in ceramics. Cassie's choice to continue her studies in art was the product of the flow she felt when painting or working with clay, as well as the artwork itself. This decision was spurred by her choice to follow her passion and not to listen to naysayers.

Jenny shifted her focus to art during her senior year. With a future in sports seeming less likely, two things happened. First, a supportive and knowledgeable adult, her art teacher Ms. Murphy, told her that art was where she belonged. And second, she decided to compete in and then won her school's art showcase scholarship, a competitive scholarship given yearly to a student who puts together the best portfolio of work. Jenny calls that that moment "the beginning of everything."

Melissa is the one participant who did not have a clear moment or experience that led to her focus on art. Rather it seems that throughout her life, people, experiences, and encouragement drew her to the point where she made the choice to study art therapy. Her past experience as a victim of child abuse is perhaps the most important in her decision not to make art for herself, but to use art to help others.

These experiences and moments of understanding don't always lead straight to art studies or careers. Hannah still dealt with doubt and chose to study another subject before figuring out that art and teaching were what she really wanted to do. Even in the past year, Kim has taken English courses to make sure that art education is where she really wants to be. Melissa, only a year out of high school, might find that art therapy isn't her passion and decide to follow another route of study. After graduating with a

B.A. in Studio Art, I floundered in the world of receptionists and executive assistants before coming to the understanding that teaching art made sense for me.

Goldstein, Shulenberg, and Vondracek (1991) state that a major developmental task of the adolescent is the formation of a career path, "... a plan that partly derives from, and in turn influences, the adolescent identity exploration and commitments" (p. 38). All of the participants had early interests in the arts and explored these interests in high school. It seems right that the exploration, for which they received positive feedback and encouragement, led to further studies in art and art-related careers.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

My research regarding what it means to have an artistic identity as a female high school student brought together my past experience as a student and my current role as a teacher. By reflecting on the story of my artistic identity along with the stories of these five other women, I came to better understand what it means to have an artistic identity as an adolescent as well as how teachers influence the development of that identity and have an important role in said identity.

These five women made the choice to further their artistic talents and identities because they saw in themselves talent and desire at an early age and were encouraged throughout childhood and adolescence by adults and peers. Their choice to focus on art, in some cases rather than English or athletics, was because art was what they saw themselves excelling at, or because there was something inside of them that knew they'd go into art. Additionally, three out of five mention having a moment of clarity in which they made the choice to focus on art.

All of these women came to their artistic identity through a similar path. They had some understanding of their artistic talent as children, either through the comparison of their work to their peers or due to positive comments they received from family and friends. This innate talent and the encouragement it fostered led each of them to desire higher levels of skill through self challenges (i.e., taking more than the required art classes or working on self-initiated projects) and more moments of success (the feeling of a "job well done" created from overcoming a challenge as well as the attention their actions and artwork received).

Based upon my experiences and the experiences of the participants, the high school artistic identity can be broken down into four primary features: action, product, space, and perception. The action: making art, learning techniques, being introduced to new mediums, and developing relationships with their art teacher and like-minded peers. The product: the works of art they made as well as the relationships they forged. The space: the time spent in and devotion to the physical art room as well as the feeling of belonging and acceptance in that space that is created by the teacher and felt by the student. The perception: being viewed as someone with artistic talent and passion, if not an artist. There was a desire to be viewed as an artist, to be called an artist by peers, even when the participant did not have the confidence to name herself by that title.

All of the art teachers mentioned in interviews took part in fostering adolescent artistic identities, though each case was unique to the student and teacher. Based on the experiences of the five participants and my own experiences, it is clear that teachers help students develop their artistic identities through positive and supportive attention (in regards to artistic activities and, in some cases, personal matters), demonstration of what it means to be an artist (through passion, skill, and artwork), and through challenges. These challenges can include pushing a student to further her understanding of a material, to do independent research on artists and movements, or to display work in shows and competitions.

Students strengthen their artistic identity through the choices they make, such as signing up for additional art classes, finding opportunities for creativity in their communities, visiting local museums, using the libraries that art teachers, schools, and communities have to learn about artists and mediums, and developing relationships with

creatively-minded peers. Above all, one's artistic identity is strengthened by actively creating. The act of creating art and the mind set of flow one enters when creating is a boon to the spirit and confidence.

The purpose of my research was to look into what it means to have an artistic identity as a high school student. I sought out individual stories and histories that show the participant as a whole person, rather than simply a blend of certain personality traits and values. I believe that understanding how each of these women came to embrace themselves as artists is important for teachers and artists alike. Considering how these five women came to art can help teachers understand, challenge, and encourage their own students who exhibit an artistic identity to grow further, both technically and in their identity. By reading the personal stories of individuals who chose to focus on art as adolescents, artists can reflect on their experience and perhaps come to a better understanding of their own story.

Personally, the task of reflecting on my story of artistic identity has given me fresh insight on my path to becoming an artist and teacher. Previously, I didn't know that as a young child I surprised my parents with how I expressed myself artistically, nor had I ever considered how my ninth grade year was a gap year in terms of art and how it might have spurred me to take more art classes in high school. But perhaps the most important thing I take from my story is the importance of the teachers who taught me and held my admiration. I looked up to Ms. Gerring because she was an artist as well as a teacher. She showed the creativity and technique I desired in myself, while her sweet demeanor and loving nature bound me, the shy and quiet teen, to her emotionally.

As I look forward to the art room I will someday have and the students who will sit at the tables and create art, I hope to demonstrate the artistic knowledge, passion, artistry, warmth, compassion, and openness expressed to students by Ms. Gerring and the teachers describe the five participants. None of these teachers were perfect, nor will I be. But I hope that through the research and time focused on this topic as well as the understanding I have gained from the stories and experiences of these five participants, I might come to be a supportive and encouraging figure in many students' stories of artistic identity.

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