Mentor's Introduction

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Oliver Sacks (1985) persuades us that "the concrete is elemental--it is what makes reality 'real', alive, personal and meaningful" (p. 164).

Patrick Fahey demonstrates an analogous approach to teaching art in his account of first graders' drawing traffic jams in his classes. Do six-year-olds in Iowa City experience traffic jams? Apparently they do, as evidenced in the detailed contexts--bridges, churches, houses, cars, trucks, bicycles, and trains that halt the progress of other vehicles--with which they vivified their recollections using crayons on 18" x 24" papers.

For a couple of weeks their drawings filled the walls of the art education seminar room at The University of Iowa, where students and visitors expressed amazement that young children had sustained their efforts to realize such involved and involving portrayals in one session of drawing.

But, as Pat's story reveals, these first graders had a more concrete and personal experience of traffic jams, immediately before drawing, than we may suppose from merely hearing or seeing the subject. They created their own traffic jams with toy trucks and cars in the midst of their everyday classroom that imminently would be their studio. This enactment was 'real' while it evoked another reality outside the room's walls, and it left a
sculptural residue, a concrete reminder of traffic jams, there and elsewhere, created and undergone.

Pat's paper recounts an approach to curriculum in art that can be meaningful to particular children and their teachers. It also is a story of how research can be meaningful to an art teacher. Already an experienced artist and art teacher when he began graduate studies at The University of Iowa, Pat reflected on his journal writings in a graduate seminar paper at the end of that initial semester: "My first entries seem to contain many questions. Why did I choose to leave? What will be in store for me? What more can I do?" One matter "in store" for him was an opportunity to again teach elementary art after several years of teaching only high school art classes; Regina Elementary School was a location for enacting his questions about traffic jams and children's art and many others as well. Graduate study was the location for raising these questions, as he acknowledged in his paper: "Searching. Reflecting. It leads one on a path of self-discovery... My papers seem to take me 'back'--'back' to a time once lived and experienced, but, obviously, not forgotten. A time of innocence, naivete, and perhaps--to a certain extent--fearlessness... The innocence and naivete of the situations are found in the young children that are a part of my life: my nephews, niece, and the children that occupy my time each Tuesday. I find myself carefully examining and observing these students at 'play' and 'work.' What will the experiences I bring to them mean? What affect can, or will, I have on them? How, if possible, can I make it better?"
Readers may recognize their own questions in the following paper. In response to his questions, Pat explores what makes art curriculum 'real', alive, personal and meaningful.

Reference