

A New York City Sketchbook: Students Rebuild Hope Through Art

This print publication contains the core narrative and student work samples from a recent WKCD story posted online at www.whatkidscando.org.



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“I live a block away from where the World Trade Center used to be, and it’s appalling, to put it plainly,” says Saruh Lacoff, a New York City high school student, of some of the activities that have sprung up where the twin towers once stood.



“The day my block was [reopened], there were tourists all over,” she recalls. “They go there and smile in front of the camera, climb the fence, take pictures. I don’t think they realize, this is somebody’s home! Every day it’s like this battle—it kills you every time you walk by there, not only because that was your childhood, but because these people will never understand how much those two buildings could mean to someone.”

Pride mixes with her sorrow. “But I feel so happy that I had the opportunity to grow up down here.”

Tony Preldakaj, another Manhattan student and resident, shares his own mixed emotions about September 11 and its aftermath. “At my school, we took the kids in [from schools near Ground Zero], and we were cramped in one building, but we didn’t care. The only thing we wanted to do is lighten up their world, and I feel that’s what we should do more. We should try to get closer to each other, not separate people into groups.”



He adds, “On CNN and all those shows, it was grown up people talking and talking... I think everyone’s voice should be heard. Older people and politicians shouldn’t be talking for us, because they don’t know what we’ve been through.”

Helping young people identify and process what they have gone through is just the aim of an intensive month-long arts program offered to NYC high school students like Saruh and Tony this July. Sponsored by the



Manhattan High Schools Superintendent's Office and the non-profit arts group Working Playground, the Summer Arts Institute (SAI) provided 200 students from 40 public schools an opportunity to hone their skills in theater, dance, music, and visual arts, as they sifted through their responses to the September 11 attack on their home.

The young artists spent mornings in rehearsals and workshops, developing their own projects with help from SAI mentors—all professional artists, with many also teaching in the city's public schools. In the afternoons students fanned out across the city, working at paid internships with local arts organizations.

The program culminated in a performance festival called "Making Art and Building Hope," held at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center in late July. Before a packed audience of families, peers, and fellow New Yorkers, teens took the stage for performances ranging from choral music and chamber ensembles to rap poetry, modern dance, and dramatic presentations. In the lobby, students' photography, sculpture, paintings, sketches, and murals displayed snapshots of city life.

"There have not been many opportunities, I believe, to express feelings about September 11," said one student about the festival. "And this is a great opportunity. It provides that boost that people need to open up and not be afraid to show their true talent to the public."

Through Smoke and Dust

The curtain rises. Young actors stand on stage in pairs, speaking in turn and in unison. "Remember how normal New York City seemed early on September 11?" one begins. "The polls had opened for a primary



election. Everyone was preoccupied, as they usually are.” Her partner breaks in: “But suddenly, for all Americans, the unimaginable became real. History split and redefined the world as ‘before’ and ‘after.’”



Picking up the narrative, two girls speak together: “We sat in class chatting and laughing.” But in one swift moment the laughter vanishes, as another pair of voices interrupts: “We saw the World Trade Center on fire from our classroom window. We watched in horror as glass flew. It was chaotic...surreal. We were all afraid.” Two-by-two the actors move through a human time line of the day’s events, leading to Mayor Giuliani’s answer to how many people had died: “More than any of us can bear.”

Accompanied by haunting piano, the couples create still tableaux, now reaching an arm toward the skyline, now shielding their eyes before turning heads away. “We look back at sunrise of September 11, through pillars of smoke and dust and we understand that everything has changed. We ask ourselves, ‘Can this city survive?’ We ask ourselves, ‘Can we move forward?’”

Despair turns to energy as the young actors burst into a collage of New York City life. Commuters dart through a subway choreography. “It is people that bring this city to life. Walk down the street and you see 20 different faces, wearing 20 different things, listening to 20 different kinds of music.” Like a “jar of multi-colored jellybeans,” the actors share glimpses of their heritage:

People always think I’m Puerto Rican, but I’m also black, white, and Native American.

My grandfather is Polish, my grandmother is Russian, and we’re also Jewish. Ever since I was little, most of my friends have been Spanish, so hanging around them made me feel like I was Spanish too!

My father is from China. He emigrated to the US when he was 12. My mother who was born in Pennsylvania, is Irish, German, Swedish, and a little of everything from Europe. We use chopsticks at every meal...but one of my first books was a collection of Irish fairy tales.

The stagelights dim. Several young actors step forward, asking for the responsibilities that come with bearing witness, not just to immense tragedy but to everyday life. “When you look at me, you’re looking at the same person who can either change the world for the better or totally corrupt it. So don’t give me that cold stare... Look at me like I’m a human being capable of intellectual conversation and actual thought.”

“Give me the same chance that someone gave you. We are the future.”

The curtain falls.

Sculpting Visions of Past and Future

Near the theatre doors, a long table supports a collection of student sculptures, made from all kinds of materials. Each represents a personal vision, explains SAI’s visual arts teacher, Jan Juracek. “It was important to us to work with the kids individually and have them work out their feelings through their own processes,” she says.

In the first week, students got to know Lower Manhattan, Juracek explains. “We went on a walking tour and we paid a lot of attention to the ornaments on buildings and what they symbolize—protection, power—and they did observation drawings. The next project was to design a sculpture and write a proposal for it. The kids really found their own way—it wasn’t just someone else’s idea they were working through.”



In “Lives, Without Fear” wire figures recline in the park, read a newspaper, hang from monkey bars, and play with a dog. “I think the way wire winds and twists and wraps around, the unsettling and un-smooth texture of it, it’s a lot like human behavior,” explains its young creator, Hillary Scott. “The wiring signifies the confusion, but the positions signify the getting back to normal, after 9/11.” She hopes her figures “act as inspirations, persuading people to...partake in the more peaceful and innocent things in our *lives, without fear* of them being taken away.”

Made from papier mache and popsicle sticks and spray painted winter gray, “My Strength,” presents an open hand, cradling a lifeless head, flanked by two tilting towers. “I picture this sculpture in front of the memorial dedicated to the firemen by Battery Park,” says its creator, Anais Rivera.

In “Only If” Jason Braun presents the thick torso of a firefighter gazing upwards, his own helmet on his head, another in his hand. “If you were able to help, but did not make it in time, how would that make you feel?” Jason writes on the display card next to his ceramic figure. “Think about that for a moment. This firefighter you are looking at right now did not make it in time to help his friend. All that he found in the debris was his friend’s helmet.”

Songs in Many Keys

“I’m a songwriter, and I just told myself, I think I can pull off an opera,” says Latvian-born student Pavel Bezboradov, whose contribution to the festival is an operetta in several acts, complete with a “WTC Rap” written and performed by fellow student Isaiah Gage. “I have everything here: resources, talent, dedication.”

As the opera unfolds on stage, a clairvoyant predicts a natural disaster, then helps the victims who earlier call him a liar. “He brings other villagers to save them even though they hate him and don’t trust





Black and white city scenes complement the self-portraits. In one, a mother and son link arms, staring at a sidewalk kiosk of NYC souvenirs and 9/11 memorabilia. In another, the sun bursts through trees in Central Park. Off in a lobby corner, colors leap from a photo collage of post-9/11 street art.

Students often paired their images with words. “Photography is a chance to reinterpret the world, a record of dreams. A photograph begins where personality and reality collide,” writes one. Observes another, “Photography is more than just pictures—it’s a language, it’s history, captured in a piece of paper. Photography is MAGIC.”

The photographs convey both sorrow and hope. “My favorite image that I took was the one with the lady on the subway holding on to the pole. When I look at that, I think of inspiration,” explains one student. “I tried to take pictures of re-building. I didn’t want to dwell on the sadness too much, because we had our time for that.”

These student photographers—along with all their peers whose work lit up New York City one night this summer—remind us that better times can come from tragedy: “So many people were affected by the disaster, not only in Lower Manhattan, but all over the world. Everyone has a story to tell, and that is what is so compelling. We all went through an experience, and through it we’ve found a way to come together.”

Student Drawings



Visual Arts Students:

Janice Alcivar, Ashanty Arzu, Jason Braun, Amy Cheng, Steve Chung, Hope Daniel, Megan Ferrer Sheehy, Marlisha Germain, Talia Jacoby, Shamira Naznin, Belinda Park, Dong Li Qu, Anais Rivera, Jose Veras, Meraris Saldana, Josh Salim, Hillary Scott, Persephone Tan, Rita Valkovskaya, Christina Ward, Fallon Wong.

Photography Students' Self Portraits



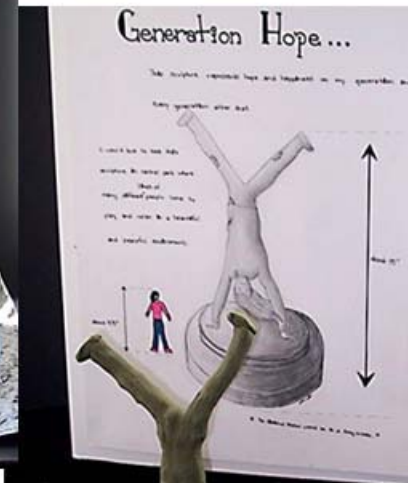
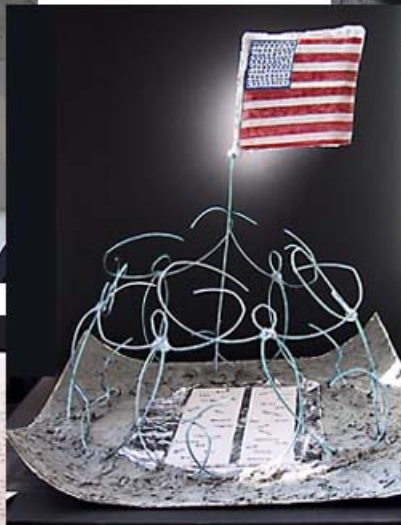
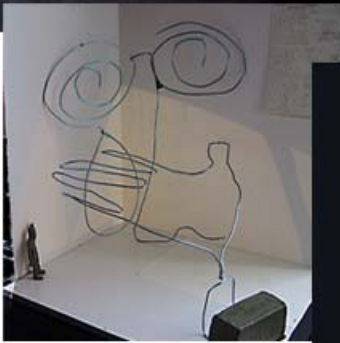
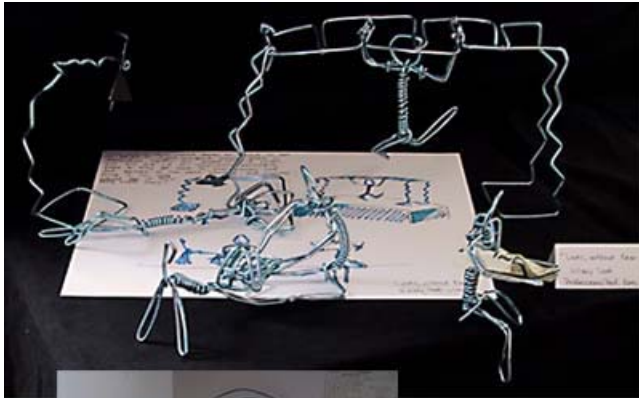
Self Portraits



Self Portraits



Student Sculptures



Sculptures from NYC Sketchbook

