NO FIELD TRIP REQUIRED

Exploring the High-End Galleries of New England Prep Schools

ALEXANDER CASTRO

At preparatory schools across New England, art class is a little more refined thanks to on-campus galleries. Alongside dense populations of commercial and nonprofit galleries in the region, prep schools house their own prestigious spaces for art. Commitment to a rigorous and comprehensive academic program has, perhaps unexpectedly, carved out a thriving space for artists, both professional and students. The once hyper-conservative institution of the prep school now deals in the unchained energies of contemporary art.
The socially conscious context shown by galleries reflects an evolution. Social realism, an upcoming exhibit at Milwaukee’s Naomi Gallery in Milton, MA, promises to “touch a lot of chords,” says director Larry Pelana, noting that the audience will be “surprised” by the liveliness of Afghan women. Artist David Petersen visited St. Paul’s School. Describing it as “a Muggle Hogwarts in New Hampshire,” the studentGuard author welcomed students through inkling and coloring the art of medieval mics. Callahan believes “the problem with some academic galleries is that they’re really no different from a commercial gallery.” An issue he rectifies by showing “stages of work being done: schematics, sketches, blue-sky work.” The Thompson Gallery requests that artists “exhibit some aspect of their practice that is generally invisible in their work.” Bartel says, “Bring in a sketchbook, and they’ll photograph every page. Students can ‘develop their strategies for their own work as a result of having access to these shows,” says Bartel. Complex and well-made art can seem to have arrived early, its process etched by time, existing only in filmy words. Residences, talks and workshops make art’s methods more opaque for students. Schools emphasize art from gallery walls with presentations, assemblies and class exercises by visiting and exhibiting artists. In terms of how [Naomi Gallery] supports our [academic] program, we get huge mileage,” says Ian Toroney, Naomi director and chair of the Visual Arts Department at Milton. “It adds to the depth of ear programs.” Calling out the actors’ invisible issue of social justice, like 60’s F. M. Rockwell, which memorialized the American Ghetto. Such themes are easily amended to other subjects, showing students that art is not just pretty, but an essential source of social inquiry. Even curricula can benefit from teaching galleries. Nearby public schools regularly hold elementary and middle-school students to the Lambert Gallery. Retirement community members are big fans of the gallery, too. A show like Las Hash, which included box art, mostly diablos Elbert’s young and Natalie Avery’s Harper’s Marriage—a piece inhabited by fashions, sides and stories—must have awakened audiences to this undersigned artist’s and neighbor’s. As Roche notes, prep schools are full of “many people with many talents,” and, by extension, many options. Frequently midseasoned as an avuncular career choice, the visual arts can appear barren of opportunity, deterring even gifted students from pursuing visual arts. It is unclear if there are simply exceptional caves, like international artist and Milton alum Sarah See-q

The prep school gallery unifies the vague but mighty power of art with pedagogy, but are there lasting benefits for students? CSW grad Julia Lee Presener curated a Poland show for her senior capstone project in 2010. It traveled to three different locales, including Poland. Faced and confident in writing and art, Presener felt empowered to major in art history at Oberlin College. “[CSW] had a huge impact on why I went that route,” she says. “The classes I took [here] are some of the favorite classes I’ve ever taken.”

After college, Presener moved to New York and worked at an art advisory firm. New York (perhaps the epitome of American dream and disillusion) restored Presener to the cosmopolitan capital of the art world. As a student, Presener says, “The whole idea of art being commercial was something that really wasn’t discussed.” She has since distanced herself from the gallery world, and now works as a writer. “I’d be curious,” she says, “to hear what [other students] have to say.” A schism arises between the idealism of aca-
demia and the Animation world. School galler-
ies enlist students to the ecotopia of art, but explaining the market’s unhealthy price tags is a less-engaging conversation for 15-year-olds. That dilution and artistic success are often bedfellows is an unfortunate fact. Thankful, enduring and making art requires no permissions. Roche demonstrated this with his exhibition of artwork by non-arts faculty. “It was amazing to see the chaplin painting pictures of waves and surfers,” she says.

Who knew a sun burn meant ingenuity beneath the clouds? Roche says the faculty art show demonstrated “there’s more to life than not your livelihood, it still adds to your life.” That’s another understatement.

Contemplation, rhapsody, epiphany: the stuff of art, but none of it is very useful to the budget-bound bureaucrats who shape most kids’ art education. Rather than suppress the liveliness of art, prep school galleries pursue it to ends that seem unattainable elsewhere.”

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