



Process art is the antithesis of “coloring inside the lines” or using basic shapes to draw a realistic horse. It’s a form of deep play, and a powerful way to access the dynamic life force of creativity that comes so naturally to children. With the support of understanding adults, it becomes a revolutionary way for children to engage with art materials. There aren’t any rules, aside from mutual respect and safety, and the emphasis is purely on the experience that children have of their own aliveness as they follow their impulses.

The teachers at Second Street Children’s School in Tucson, Arizona, are huge fans of process art. The students, ages 3–6, engage in process art every day. Jenny Douglas, director of the school, explains, “Teachers at Second Street School don’t instruct students to create specific projects, such as to make a caterpillar from an egg carton. Instead, they demonstrate the use of unfamiliar materials so students know how to manipulate them. Then they let students follow their own inclinations while learning to take risks, combining shapes, textures, and materials in experimental ways that have never been modeled for them.” The results can range from minimalist collages inside bottle caps to elaborate three-dimensional

Process Art

A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION

by Kirin Alolkoy

When people hear the word *art*, they often associate it with Picasso, Rodin, and art museums. They may conjure up ideas about people they consider “creative” and instantly classify themselves as decidedly *not* in that category. They may not have touched paintbrushes, clay, or any other art materials since elementary school, when a teacher told them they didn’t have artistic talent. These negative associations neglect a critical distinction—the difference between art as *product* and art as *process*. In process art, the goal isn’t to make a pretty picture or a saleable work of art. Instead, the goal is to “let out whatever wants out.”

Imagine looking at five paintbrushes of different sizes on a table and letting your hand decide which one to pick up. The impulse to choose one paintbrush over another may come from a “felt” attraction to a particular

brush—a body-based pull. Or it may come from a persistent, not-to-be-ignored sense that a certain weight of line wants to be painted—perhaps a bold slash, a delicate squiggle, or a jumble of fat dots.

Now imagine scanning a row of paint colors and allowing yourself to be drawn to the one that seems to have the most energy or seems to be calling to you. This approach is very different from beginning a painting with an idea already in mind, such as an outdoor scene with green grass and blue sky. In process painting, even if such an impulse arises at the start, the grass may turn into rocks or waves or a volcano, and the sky may become filled with flames or a flock of giant black birds. The key is to follow the trail of impulses that arise in each moment, while gently inviting *ideas* about the painting to step back and get out of the way.



A participant is absorbed in a Painting Experience workshop.



Process painting brings out children's individuality.



A teacher has "set the stage" for an art activity combining paint and collage.

sculptures from found objects, and from paintings of simple black circles to complex fantasy creatures.

Second Street School's teachers don't praise their students' artwork. Douglas clarifies, "We don't want students to be proud of their work because it earns them approval." Teachers respond to student artwork with enthusiastic but judgment-free comments such as, "Wow, look what you did!" "I can tell you really worked hard on that!" and "Can I hold your picture up so you can look at it?" These comments keep the students from forming links between the process of art and outside assessment.

Fun and self-expression aren't the only benefits of process art for children. Bev Bos, an internationally known early-childhood educator, asserts that taking risks with art has been shown to be a building block for later academic success.

People who haven't had early exposure to process art often grow to adulthood certain that they have no artistic "talent." When faced with the prospect of using art materials, they may feel intense shame, recalling a childhood art teacher who told them they shouldn't waste their time with art or that they should know better than to draw a purple tree with blue leaves. For many people, a few pointed incidents of shaming during childhood are enough to turn them away from art forever. But others, responding to an inner prompt that

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urges them not to forfeit their creative desires, may be fortunate enough to find their way to a Painting Experience workshop. These workshops in process painting offer an opportunity to work through and get beyond the "old tapes" from childhood; they welcome people with all levels of experience, even those who have never picked up a paintbrush.

Stewart Cubley, director of The Painting Experience and coauthor of *Life, Paint and Passion: Reclaiming the Magic of Spontaneous Expression*, has traveled throughout the world for more than 30 years, working with individuals and groups to access the potential that lies within the human heart and imagination. Cubley's approach to expressive arts is a radical departure from the traditional product-oriented focus of painting instruction. Instead of perceiving art as something to learn or get better at, he views the act of creation as the deepest point of contact with our essential self, an environment in which the process of

facing the unknown color, form, and image becomes both a vehicle for entering into the mystery of one's own being and a tool for liberation and awakening.

"The transformation that occurs when we touch our creativity is nothing short of miraculous," says Cubley. "There's an expansiveness in which the circumstances of our lives are held differently, and our world appears in its potential rather than its limitation. Each color is a delicious revelation, forms appear that are strangely satisfying, and mysterious images emerge with amazement and fascination." As at Second Street School, there are no comments, critiques, or analyses of the work, and no focus on the finished product—just a supportive and inspirational community of people engaging in art together.

For children and adults alike, process art offers a powerful means of freeing self-expression, cultivating presence, tapping into creativity, and coloring way outside the lines.

Kirin Alolkoy, M.A., is a freelance writer and Board Certified Coach who is passionate about process art. She can be reached at kirinalolkoy.com. For more information about Second Street Children's School, visit secondstreetschool.org. For more information about The Painting Experience and to register for a workshop, visit processarts.com.