

Danaleah Schoenfuss
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Interview taken on 6/1/2018 on 80th and Broadway

My name is Danah, I am an educator and an anthropologist. I love working with kids, I live in Brooklyn, I'm a New Yorker in many ways.

What comes to mind when you think of art class?

I think of lots of materials, paint, and clay. Usually there is some intended goal of something to create. Usually the teacher models how to make that thing.

How comfortable do you personally feel with art materials?

It depends on the art material, but I always love dabbling in different kinds of material. My favorite medium is clay. I like to make little busts and I like making little vessels.

Have you used art or artmaking in your practice as a professional or as a student?

Yes. I've done a lot of it at the Children's Museum. I've used a decent amount of stuff but I think we could be a bit more adventurous with the types of materials we use. At the Native American museums I worked at previously we made corn husk dolls, and we did clay vessels. I've done a lot of artmaking.

Who or what has informed your understanding of art?

Um, a lot of things. I like clay so much because I had a strong influence in high school from an art teacher. He would give a goal and show techniques for achieving that goal, but he would leave it very open to interpretation, and show multiple ways of doing that one thing so you could choose what you did. I liked that a lot. Once he taught me a lot, I jumped off of that and basically lived in the studio and fooled around with clay. I'm also informed by my sister because she is a graphic artist. I've watched her to Photoshop and other things. I know about the art world through that. Beyond that, I am very Brooklynite where there are lots of artists in my vicinity. I have many artist friends and involved in what they do.

Going back to your high school experience, do you feel it resembled choice-based art education? It seems like you were given choices based on your description. How did that affect your artmaking?

I definitely think it was choice-based in that sometimes in previously classes it was "we're going to make a box, here's how to make a box." You could be creative in that you could choose what fabric you used or certain patterns, but that doesn't allow for what is a box. What can you do to make something that is less box-like but still a box. What I like about the choice-based stuff that my high school teacher did and how he showed multiple ways of doing the same thing, is that like- one of our assignments was to make a teapot but people made completely nonfunctional teapots, but they still technically were teapots, because he allowed people to explore that in a more abstract way.

If you were to go look at art where would you go?

Probably a museum. I've gone to gallery showings too, usually of friends. I look at a lot of art online such as Deviant Art. I follow a lot of web comics. I follow them for the art because they're beautiful. I use tumblr, and I follow a couple of artists on Facebook too.

What comes to mind when you hear social issues?

When I think of social issues in the abstract way what comes to mind is I think about people arguing with each other because people get very heated about politics. I kind of see myself as apolitical, even though my work is very political because I grew up with a dad who was extremely political and would get into fights about politics so I kind of try to stay away from it. When people bring up social issues I see that there's going to be anger involved.

Overall, how would you rate the accessibility of social issues?

It's easy to talk about social issues, but I don't know how accessible they are if you want to dive deeper. They are accessible in that we have the beautiful, wide internet but it's not accessible in that the information that you get from the internet is difficult to wade through. If you want specifics it could be hard. If you want to talk about it that's easy, but if you want to get the "facts" that's very difficult.

I'm going to list "social issues"- they are very broad. Out of these several, which one would be most difficult to talk about, which is the easiest?

Race/Racism - easiest
Privilege
Oppression
Occupying people or land - most difficult

As an anthropologist, in my mind, race doesn't exist. It's not there genetically, it's not there in any scientific way, it's a cultural construct. If you want to talk about the cultural parts of race it's difficult to talk about, but if we're talking about race as an "existence" in a way, genetically it's not there and therefore what people are talking about now are, "okay now that we know it's not a thing how do we work from there?" But we have a place to work from, which kind of makes it easier in my mind.

Have you been able to facilitate activities that involve social issues?

I facilitate activities that involve social issues at the Natural History Museum, it's what I like a lot about it. A lot of the course I teach talk about systems of oppression. We had a day that was all about political appropriation, so I do it a lot at Natural History.

How do you think your students handle these topics?

My students handle these topics well, and with a lot of questions. When we talk about the straight science stuff they definitely have lots of questions, but when it comes to stuff that really impacts them on the daily basis they have a lot more specific questions. These are things that they hold close to them. I would say some students are quiet when we start talking about these things. Maybe even one or two rolls their eyes, or feel uncomfortable by it. But even when

they're doing that they are interested in what I'm saying because it is something that affects everyone.

How important do you think it is to talk about social issues in education settings?

I think it's very important to talk about social issues in educational settings. I worked at two Native American museums previously and it was so important to give visibility to a population that I was talking about, that I'm not a part of, but people didn't even know that Native American people are still around, which is very problematic. Even though I'm an apolitical person in my personal life, I do think it is important to still talk about these things. I try not to agenda push, I just ask questions and I pose the social issue and explore it from the information that I've been given.

Do you think it's possible to construct knowledge around social issues through art and making?

I think it is difficult because going into social issues when artmaking can either make people feel like "where do I go?" It's too open ended and it's such a personal thing that it's hard to draw that out right away. At the same time I think it can sometimes be too specific and lead down roads that would visually make people upset. I think it's very difficult. If I was to do it, I would gear more towards open-ended, but try to have a clear focus at the same time.