

Mentoring



Portrait of the Artists

An after-school arts program bridges the gap between a gentrifying neighborhood and local students.

By Ariana

Last spring a series of chalk drawings appeared on a billboard on 18th Street and Tenth Avenue, in the heart of New York's Chelsea neighborhood—no surprise in an arts district thrumming with black-clad creative types, haute fashionistas, high-end restaurateurs, and dolled-up gallerygoers. But instead of graffiti by disaffected artists or guerrilla marketing for fashion companies, they were works produced by students from the Clinton School for Writers and Artists as a part of Art Creates Communities: Project in Chelsea, a program enabling neighborhood kids to tap into the creative energy of the area.

Initiated last year by Italian-born art historian and curator Micaela Martegani of the nonprofit More Art—and continuing this fall—the eight-month-long program paired ten seventh-graders with six artists to work in media such as watercolor, comics, and video. Gary Simmons, an artist known for his erasure drawings, used examples of his work as a guide for self-portrait exercises, asking the students to choose a self-descriptive phrase or favorite sentiment to write in gymnasts' chalk on painted pressboard and then partially erase what they'd written. "That's almost like asking you to partially erase your identity, and the students felt that," Martegani says. "But as artists you sometimes have to define or affirm your identity on one side and take two steps back on the other."

It was a fitting exercise for students who walk through a

rapidly gentrifying area every day with little connection to it. The method engaged the students and eschewed traditional instruction, to bridge the gap. "They were *collaborating*," says Julie Applebaum, of one of the students as well as an artist and designer herself. "The treated us like we were professionals," student Perri Hofmann says.

At the end of the program Chelsea's Bohen Foundation donated space for an exhibition of the projects. And a distant inkling of the success came in June, when a video-based project with artist Anna was accepted for exhibition at Art Basel, in Switzerland. The student making a splash across the Atlantic Ocean.

But it was the billboard of their work towering over the chichi Park rant that really drove the point home. "The clear effect is to make each heard, each individual count, each identity affirmed. This is empowering people who normally feel marginalized in the progressive gentrification neighborhood," Martegani says. "It was great," B says, "because the public was seeing it. It wasn't gallery show—just for the people who come inside."



Seventh-graders worked with artist Gary Simmons on this text group self-portrait exercise (above), posted on a billboard in Chelsea. Left, student Sophia Allen preparing her chalkboard.