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Welcome To Girl World

For my study on child art, I wanted to focus on how media culture informs and influences adolescent society- mainly adolescent girls. As a mentor to a group of pre-teen girls in my community, I am often shocked and concerned at some of the things I hear them say and see them do. For my annotated collection of youth-created art, I comprised a Pinboard of youth art inspired by sense of self and self-image. The original exhibit was entitled “Body Image and Art”. These images were created by students who were encouraged to reflect on positive qualities they possess, which can be difficult for students who are bombarded by media culture and visual culture that impresses they should look and behave a certain way.

A visual culture perspective may enhance art education instruction in the classroom by encouraging students to consider the importance of visual aesthetics in our everyday life and how these visuals affect our society and our culture. Everything from advertisements and marketing, music videos, television shows, movies, media, and online social networks provide a constant bombardment of how we are supposed to look and appear to fit in and/or behave or appear normal. While most other subjects teach students to learn the right answer to a question, the art classroom provides an opportunity for students to explore information and develop their own opinion on the subject. Visual culture art education encourages students to observe and analyze the different aspects of visual culture they are surrounded by daily and express their feelings and opinions on the issues. The Tavin article *Wrestling with Angels, Searching for Ghosts: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Visual Culture* introduces the term “Interstanding” or the process of “operating on and through theory in order to set yourself and the world in question”

(Tavin, 2004, p.3). Interstanding allows students to critique pop culture to construct meaning and develop agency for promoting social justice. Using visual culture as a means to study popular culture to understand the sociology or politics of an image also allows a better understanding and appreciation of contemporary art and art that expresses ideas and opinions on social, political, gender, or race issues. A visual culture-oriented approach to art education would be composed of lessons that encouraged students to examine social and political issues in their community and explore those concepts and ideas through different forms of media and techniques.

In the art classroom, it is important to promote the study of art from a visual culture perspective that would guide students in allowing them to realize the power and impact visual experiences can have on our daily lives and beliefs/opinions. While visual culture lessons differ from traditional art lessons (because they focus more on popular visual culture and society and less on traditional fine art focuses such as principles and elements of design) it is expressed that a Visual Culture Art Education is more effective in helping “shape and regulate student’s understanding of themselves and the world” (Tavin, 2004, p.1). I also believe as educators we should encourage students to explore the media and advertising world and the psychological effect it has on self worth and body image. Advertising is one area where meaning is intentionally created to influence the viewer, and emphasis is often placed on the stereotyping of women via their physical body and class status. With the media becoming the main source from which the current society gets their daily information concerning products, news stories, and entertainment, it is wise to think critically about the messages they are conveying to us. *Sexualized Images in Advertising* describes that while it is not unusual in the fashion industry to see

very young models setting standards of beauty, what is new is the emergence of highly eroticized portrayals of young women, as well as young men (Tallim, 2003). Over the past few decades, the use of sexualization in advertising has become more common. With advertising decisions like these come negative consequences such as the common practice of objectifying and degrading women, along with influences on the cognitive growth of young girls. Tallim's article also claims, "increased exposure to unrealistic sexualized role models- for both boys and girls- can also affect self-esteem, body image, and expectations regarding the appearance and behavior of the opposite sex" (Tallim, 2003, p.7). Societal standards of what is deemed appropriate to expose children to are rapidly declining. Media is the main offender with advertisements, T.V., film, and music that suggests sexual overtones around males, females, and now even children. Because children do not instinctively understand these things, it is up to us to teach them about the world, and to know what is developmentally appropriate for them to be learning. As art educators, we are awarded the unique opportunity to explore issues of visual culture in the media. By teaching students how and why these messages are embedded in the media, they will be better prepared to consider the messages they are exposed to and maintain their own beliefs and ideas of what is right and wrong.

The Tavin article describes visual culture as a "field of study that analyzes and interprets how visual experiences are constructed within social systems, practices, and structures", and communicates that an art education based solely on creative self expression ideologies, or studying art works exclusively from the museum realm, ignores the way that children and youth construct their ever-changing identities through popular culture. (Tavin, 2004, p.1). Utilizing different strategies to promote the study of art from

a visual culture perspective, I hope to equip students with the knowledge and ability to recognize visual culture and understand it enough to grow in their own identities without being effected (too much) by societal influences.

For my original artwork, I decided to use some of the same materials, programs, and applications that adolescents use for creative and emotional outlets in their daily lives. My intent is to portray a little bit of what adolescent girls deal with all day, every day. I included images from social networks, of song lyrics, pop stars, and advertisements. Media culture has completely changed what adolescents are exposed to. These are just some of the (less offensive) images that are influencing adolescent girls and informing them 'what it means to be a woman'. Welcome to girl world.

References:

Tallim, J. (2003). Sexualized images in advertising. *Media Awareness Network*, Retrieved from http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women_and_girls/upload/article_sexualized_images.pdf

Tavin, K. (2004). Wrestling with angels, searching for ghosts: Toward a critical pedagogy of visual culture. *Studies in Art Education*, 44(3), 197-213.