

By Mary Hafeli

This piece of arts-based educational research, though stemming in part from data from a qualitative study of teens and their artmaking practices, is a work of narrative and visual fiction.<sup>1</sup> It is an invented artist's journal kept by Sondra, a fictional high school student enrolled in a painting class taught by Mr. R. (Mr. R. is based on Roberto Romani, a real art teacher in Poughkeepsie, New York, whose art classes were the focus of my original case study).<sup>2</sup> As in many works of fiction, representations of actuality and observation are sprinkled among and become part of invented characters, plots, and pretenses. Here, the characters—Sondra and her classmates Derrick, Tony, Mika, and Maya—are at work on a real-life painting assignment in Mr. Romani's art class. The pretense is an invented journal assignment and the story of its unfolding in Sondra's hands and mind during a one-week period. All of the words and images attributed to Sondra in the journal pages that follow are wholly of my own invention.

Bruner (2002) wrote that "story is enormously sensitive to whatever challenges our conception of the canonical" and that its use is "not so much for solving problems as for finding them" (p. 15). A good narrative, according to Bruner, is one that does not seek verifiability but instead achieves verisimilitude, or "truth likeness," in crafting a persuasive story (1996, p. 90). Of course, as this is a piece of research, I aim to do more than tell a compelling story—there is a message here based firmly on the empirical evidence documented in Sondra's journal. I chose the student journal format as the medium for this message and Sondra as its voice because I believe this form to be more persuasive (and in many ways more fitting) than presenting or arguing a point of view about educational practice through the kind of traditional expository writing typically featured in professional journals. This way of working, for me, was also a refreshing change and a lot more fun.

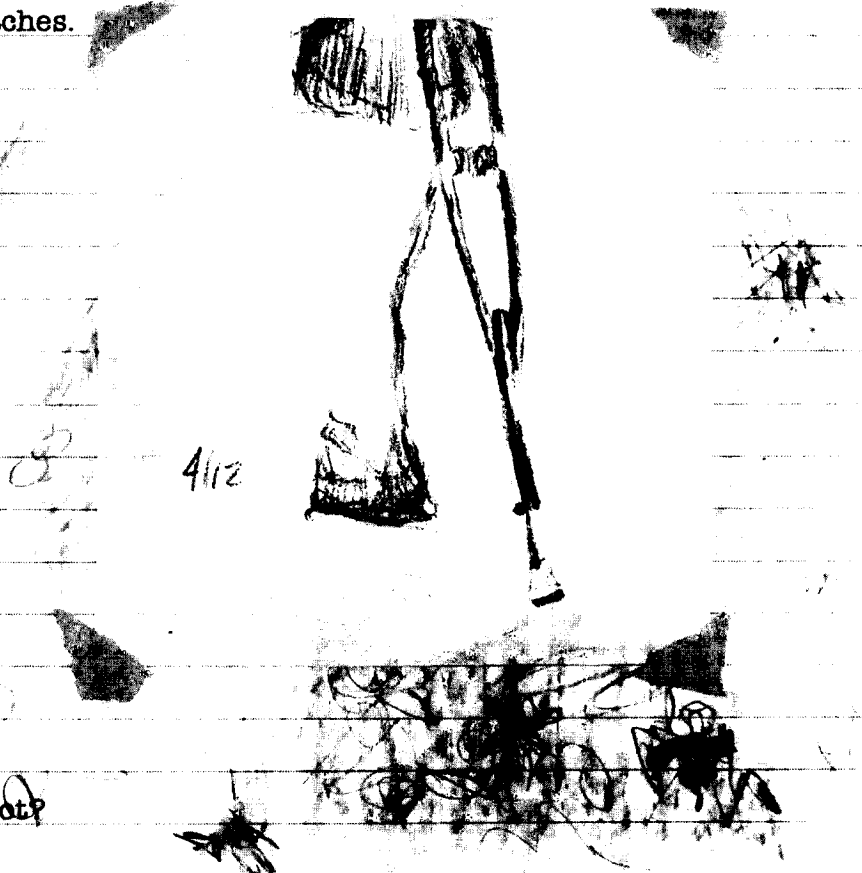
To commit to the student journal form and in doing so attempt verisimilitude, I had to part ways with APA guidelines for citing sources. All sources (artists, cited artists' works, websites, books) contained in Sondra's journal are accurate and are listed in the reference page at the end of this article. In adopting the student journal form, I also had to use language in the way that Sondra would; so, there is some of the ubiquitous text messaging lingo used by teens that has now made its way into their everyday writing and speech. Below is a key for these acronyms.

lol: laugh out loud...omg: oh my god...swl: scream with laughter...sk8tr: skater...yr: yeah right...wt: what the...gmab: give me a break

# Sandra Valle Painting Journal

**4/18 thursday**

ok so in painting 2 we're supposed to keep this journal for the next week where every day we write notes and other things showing what we're thinking about as we plan our final project. lol won't that be a surprise ;) I don't know if mr r really knows what he's getting into with everyone's deep inner thoughts (especially derek and tony). oh well he says he won't read them if we don't want him to he just wants us to document our process. today in class we finished up a week of life drawing. maya modeled and I had extra time so I drew her crutches.



i wonder how she hurt her foot?

tomorrow everyone puts up their drawings and we're supposed to talk about them. we have to find some artists and do a report and then make a painting or pick something else we want to work with. mr r says our drawings will be the starting points for the final works—I wonder where they'll go from a starting point? no ideas we're just drawing each other. people are getting good at it and i'm getting better at



omg haley plays one of bruce's cds driving to school. bruce always turns it up and sings like a wild man we say stop your embarrassing everyone can hear you. we sing it loud like bruce—swl—a song by joe jackson 1980

*I know a lot of things that you don't.*

*You wanna hear some?*

*She said, just give me something*

*Anything*

*We'll give me all you got but not love*

*No, not love she said*

*Don't you know that it's different for girls?*

*(Don't give me love)*

*No, not love she said*

*Don't you know that it's different for girls?*

*You're all the same*

today we had to pick our 3 best drawings (i had 1 good one and 2 ok ones but everyone said all of them were good) and put them on the wall with sheets of paper next to them. and we walked around and we each wrote down words we thought of when we looked at the drawings. the one of maya i did people wrote loss (i think that was derek), abandon (mika), memory longing resolve. i wonder if it's the crutch? some more words for the other 2 drawings. then mr r had everyone pick 1 of their drawings they wanted to make into a painting or we can use other materials instead if we want to. mr r says we have to use the figure from the drawing as a character in some kind of narrative, put the person in a scene. add clothes, props. everything is supposed to add something to the story even the colors and composition. we looked at some art and mr r asked how can composition say things?

4/13

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someone said maya got hurt from doing ballet. so sad she's really good at it. mr r gave us homework--find 5 artists whose work we think can somehow inform our own. i like the way he says **inform**.....

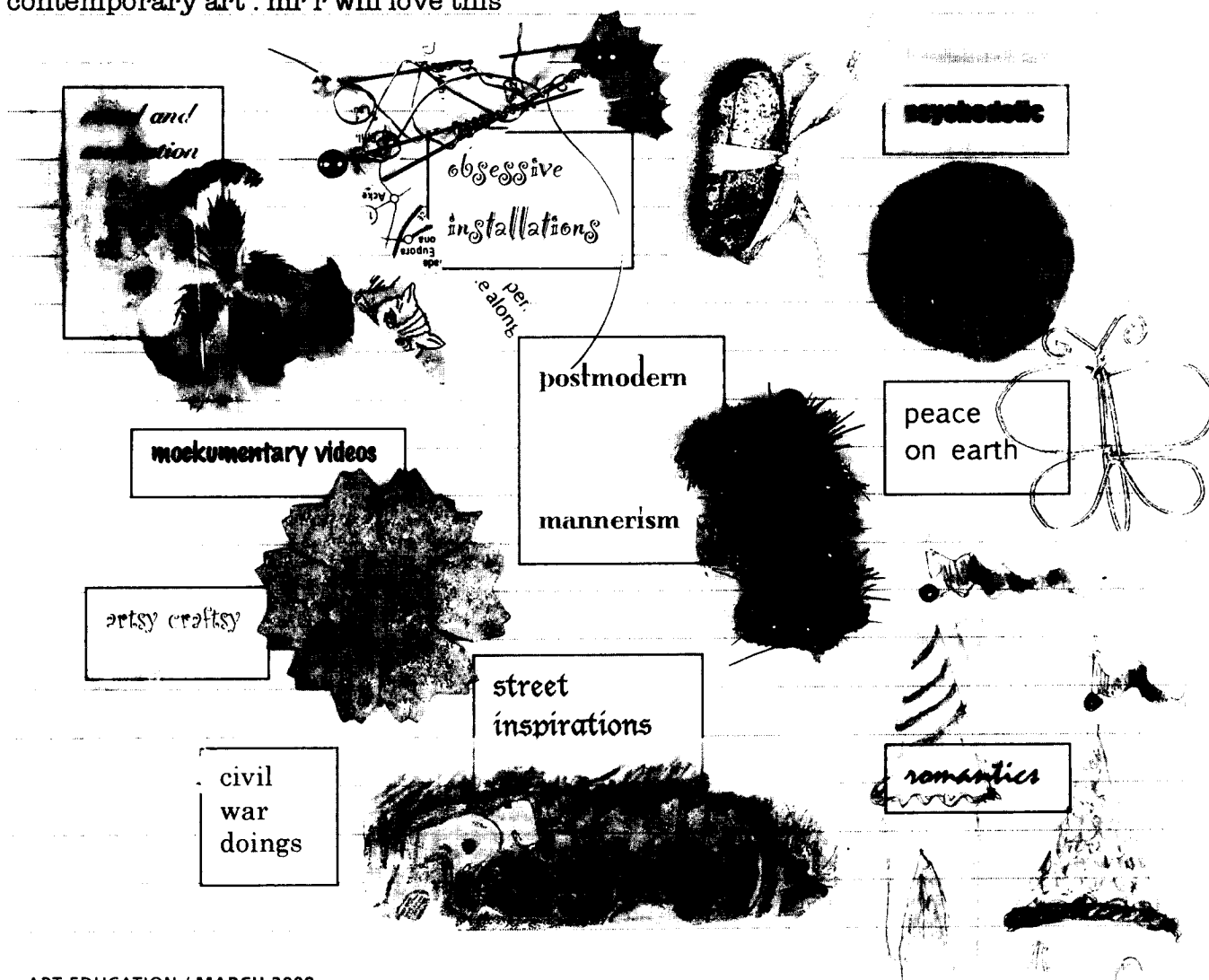
i like doing research on artists mr r always has us do that. usually it's specific but this time we're also just finding things we like and want to know more about. things that are **intriguing** he says. we have to do 2 things, find out what are recent or current **trends** and then find some artists we want to research. they have to be **contemporary** artists, people from the last 20 years. mr r makes us write down our search terms so we don't lose track and so we can find things again when we need to.

search #1: contemporary + art + trends

art news blog: contemporary art trends

(<http://www.artnewsblog.com/2006/02/contemporary-art-trends.htm>)

if you follow the link you get to what artnews (feb 06) says are the top 10 trends in contemporary art . mr r will love this



4/16 monday

mr r liked my **findings** that's what he calls our searches. everyone talked about the artists they found. I don't know.....i don't know how they **inform** my painting. i don't want it to be about mockery and it's not video not installation. i've got a girl with crutches and need something that happens to her. what were the words people wrote?? **loss, abandon, memory, longing, resolve** not rituals, artsy craftsy, psychedelic. she could be from some time in the past. she could be a sk8tr girl, street culture i could dress her like avril lavigne.

maybe some contemporary artists just paint girls and boys and what they do in their lives, relationships they have...like what we paint about. not! yr that would just be sooo adolescent as they say... anyways who would be interested in paintings about us or should I say **adolescents**? wt hell nothing to lose here

search #2: adolescent + **contemporary** + art  
university art museum/press release

(<http://www.albany.edu/museum/wwwmuseum/pressrelease/20040817.html>)

omg I can't believe it! a show from 2004 called *first happiness*. here's what it says

ALBANY , NY--- The University Art Museum is pleased to present *First Happiness*, a drawing exhibition that brings together nine contemporary artists whose work is inspired by events and experiences from their own childhood and adolescence. The artists in *First Happiness* employ traditional materials and drawing styles to render unconventional and idiosyncratic visions of maturity gone awry. Pencil, ink, watercolor, and gouache are their mediums of choice. Fluctuating between elegant fastidiousness and oddly **erotic**, these artists handle line and shade with labor-intensive specificity. Candy color, fairytale exploits, fallen heroes, dated hangouts, and blissed-out **idleness** abound in these beautifully off-kilter drawings that either exceed the boundaries of the page or hover in the center of a nebulous blank space. Even though an unabashed nostalgia permeates much of the work, the artists in *First Happiness* aren't interested in taking a trip down memory lane. Instead, nostalgia serves as a metaphoric device by which to confront the emotional longings and dislocations of adulthood.

For these artists, storybook escape, **nostalgia**, comic book crazies, great guitar riffs, and grandma's kitchen wallpaper are just a few of the inspirational sparks that fuel the desire to stay in touch with what Walter Benjamin refers to in his *Dialectics of Happiness*, as the "eternal repetition of the same situation, the eternal restoration of original first happiness."

here's another one

press room ([http://www.museum.cornell.edu/HFJ/about/press\\_boys.html](http://www.museum.cornell.edu/HFJ/about/press_boys.html))

Ithaca, NY—The Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University will present *Will Boys Be Boys? Questioning Adolescent Masculinity in Contemporary Art* from November 5, 2005, to January 8, 2006. The exhibition is organized and circulated by Independent Curators International (ICI), New York.

Examining the nature of adolescent masculinity, *Will Boys Be Boys?* explores what defines boy-hood as a socially determined identity in terms of physical appearance (clothing, hairstyle, accessories), pastimes, behavior, and "toys."

brings together 48 works by 19 nationally recognized artists or artist teams: Slater Bradley, Larry Clark, Lilah, Tim Gardner, Luis Gispert, Anthony Goicolea, Janine Gordon, Humphrey, Nikki S. Lee, Matt Luem and Greg Fiering, Julia Loktev, Maria Marshall, Ryan McGinness, Chloe Piene, Jeff Reed, Tom Sachs, Dean Sameshima, Collier Schorr, and Type A (Adam Ames and Andrew Bordwin).

search #3--what about girls?? girls + adolescent + contemporary + art

orange county museum of art a show called girls' night out

([http://www.ocma.net/index.html?page=past&show=exhibit&ce\\_id=395](http://www.ocma.net/index.html?page=past&show=exhibit&ce_id=395))

Eija-Liisa Ahtila  
Elina Brotherus  
Dorit Cypis  
Rineke Dijkstra  
Katy Grannan  
Sarah Jones  
Kelly Nipper  
Daniela Rossell  
Shirana Shahbazi  
Salla Tykka



*Girls' Night Out* brings together the work of an international and intergenerational group of women artists. Their works in photography and video reflect a new approach to issues of femininity and identity. The artists in *Girls' Night Out* create works that possess a quasi-documentary feel and a directness of approach as they engage with such classical art genres as self-portraiture, portraiture (especially featuring young women in the passage from girlhood to adulthood), and landscape. Some of their shared themes include provocative inquiries into youth culture, new notions of beauty, ethnographic techniques mixed with fashion devices, and an interest in journalistic aspects of the media. Formally rigorous and aesthetically resolved, this seemingly traditional imagery is infused by lyricism and psychological complexity.

ok so does mr r have it all wrong? instead of finding artists who can ~~inform~~ our work isn't the question really how we ~~inform~~ the work of contemporary artists?? aha—here's the scoop on adolescence...omg read this! it's from australia

artlink--teenage riot: representations of adolescence in contemporary art, by k.p. hall  
(<http://www.artlink.com.au/articles.cfm?id=2602>)

Adolescence, from the Latin *adolescere*, meaning 'to grow up', is a time of ripening and maturing and is typically recalled as a time of crisis. Often marked by confusion, ~~embarrassment~~, ~~rebellion~~ and sexual uncertainty, the combined states of emotional and physical upheaval can make for uncomfortable memories. Think back to that moment in time when you strayed between childhood and adolescence, to the sense of ~~melancholy~~ as everything familiar and comforting was abandoned for a calling unknown: dolls and toy trucks on one side, and an inconceivable world of training bras and electric razors on the other. The child/adolescent possesses what adults once had but can never have again— a delightful budding body and an uncommitted future full of promise. Resulting images of childhood/adolescence are understandably ambiguous: heralding the future and at the same time leaning nostalgically to the past, capitalising on innocence while suggesting sexuality, rejecting and provoking desire simultaneously.

Observed as both a symbol of hope for the future and a threat to the existing social order, adolescents have become objects of ambivalence wedged between contradictory discourses and spaces of transition. Prohibited from having a moral or a political voice, adolescence becomes a vacant category inhabited by the desires, fantasies, and interests of the adult world. This adult world is paradoxically puritan in its vociferous protection of children while at the same time promoting a culture where the child/adolescent is increasingly sexualised and commodified by legitimate industries, and endorsed by a consumer society fed on advertising slogans and imagery.

Ours is a global popular culture where threats to and from kids are expressed via media reports of escalating rates of drug addiction, eating disorders, date rape, suicide pacts, ~~hate crimes~~ and gun-toting schoolchildren. The idea of troubled teens is nothing new - it just seems to be the only way to represent them. Diane Arbus's seminal images of ~~young outcasts~~ hinted at a corrupted childhood; Sally Mann's vulnerable yet tough 12-year-old girls struggling with sexual abuse and pregnancy, and Larry Clark's *Tulsa* (1971) and *Teenage Lust* (1983) series, followed by his 1995 film, *Kids*, reinforced the shift in social perceptions of childhood. Clark propels us into a world inhabited by adolescent speed freaks with guns and sexually predatory boys who dispel any notion of an innocent and carefree existence as they sway perilously on the edge of adulthood.

mr r is so cool. he comes around and says hey sondra what artists have you found? I show him all this and he's really interested. he sits at my computer with me and we look at my journal. he brings everybody around and I show them and everyone's really into it we're all laughing especially the stuff about adolescence gmaab. mr r says why do you think

all these artists make works about teenagers? he says let's take 15 minutes and search for artists who deal with adolescent themes, see what kind of work they do. we find

**the gardner: untitled** (sto and mitch) and a lot more watercolor paintings of guys on spring break and things like that. <http://www.offoffoff.com/art/2001/gardner.php3>

**roger carlson: book**—letters from mayhem. "each letter is embossed in a fairytale setting in which long haired teenagers lie around stoned, sniffing glue, listening to heavy metal, and so on." <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/events/rogercarlson.php>

**jane engerman and mike long: 10 beers in 10 minutes**

video of...need I say more? pretty self explanatory

derrick finds another video called receiver by **jon leone**, "a documentary investigating the unpredictable subculture of backyard wrestling, a sport practiced by teenagers around the u.s. in order to alleviate small town boredom."

<http://www.astriasuparak.com/adolboys.htm>

**willie holly: an entire** show of stuffed animals that critic jed peri hates and critic michael kimmelman really likes—"beneath the state-managed adolescent comic exterior can be sensed sorrow. this is the strength of the art and its soul."

<http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/2001/peri2.htm>

**boy-oh-boy art** <http://aweekly.com/general/features/boy-oh-boy/4425/>

and lots of things about girls

**justine kurland: photographs of teenage girls.** "to this theme, kurland brings a particular american point of view, photographing her models in roving packs that crisscross and occupy the landscape like the wolves."

<http://the-artists.org/ArtistView.cfm?ID=644791B8-0B69-4D02-B281066D719DA8BE>

**nikki a. lee: more photographs of girls** <http://www.tonkonow.com/lee.html>

**alex mequien: dvd and video** "i want to somehow portray the overwhelmingness of being alive - slow things down a bit to reveal what's there."

<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/honigman/honigman3-29-06.asp>

**lauren greenfield girl culture: photography**

<http://www.laurengreenfield.com/index.php?p=1VE4GOQJ>

**carolina reese: photography** "she has gained critical acclaim for these images that feature the (mostly) young and blonde nouveau riche of mexico in their opulent homes."

<http://www.artpace.org/aboutTheExhibition.php?idExhibition=3019&sort=title>

**su-on wong: painting and drawing** <http://www.suenwong.com/>



4/18 wednesday

we all come in and mr r says what do we make of all of these artists who **mine the themes of adolescence...YOUR THEMES...**for their work? tony says he doesn't think they must make much money. lol. but i think he's right I mean who would buy a painting of guys on a road trip? maya says maybe people buy it and hang it in their home to feel young or to remind them of when they were our age. derrick says maybe high school is the best time that people have in their lives. mr r says maybe but why do you think so many artists do this kind of work? this is not a new thing, remember when we looked at egon schiele's paintings last fall? we look at them again and talk about how some of the themes are just like the artists we just found. he shows us a book by jonathan fineberg about how artists like klee and kandinsky collected kids' drawings and used them as inspiration for their own paintings. there's a whole page of paintings by an artist named gabriele munter that are pretty much exact replicas of the kids' drawings she had--same sun, same house same colors...what's that about?

i'm still wondering why teachers always want us to look at other art to **inform** our work when artists are copying us. absurd. mr r says sondra what are you thinking and i tell him cause he's probably going to read all of this anyway. i'm embarrassed no one says anything...but he says you know you're right it's **ironic**, isn't it?

ideas for my painting:

i don't like to have everything all thought out. i don't even know what to write down. i've got my drawing of maya and somehow the girl got hurt. she needs a friend. dark colors blues purples. maybe someone else there with her for comfort...like that new avril lavi ~~the~~ song

*you're not alone, together we stand  
i'll be by your side you know i'll take your hand  
when it gets cold and it feels like the end  
there's no place like you know i won't give in*

more later.....

## Epilogue

What can be concluded from this investigation into young people's perceptions and experiences of instruction in art class? How might art teachers address prevailing institutional assumptions that privilege themes and forms from cultures "out there" as models for, and as being somehow better than, our students' own ideas for making art?

As Sondra shows us, conceptual themes for contemporary art come from all kinds of sources, not the least of which are the musings and reflections that emerge from everyday experiences of the young people we teach. Sondra's research also makes it clear that adolescents' experiences and ways of thinking are regularly appropriated or revisited, to great critical acclaim, as source material by contemporary artists. Re-thinking the canon of what we take to be the official and essential artists and artworks in the world began most recently with postmodernism's practices of widening the scope of the lens used in this process. As art educators, we simultaneously need to direct our gaze more locally, to focus on the art worlds happening in our own art classrooms. Sondra shows us that until art teachers consider students' ideas and experiences as valid content—on par with those of artists "out there"—we are at risk of operating under dated assumptions about what constitutes authentic and contemporary studio practice.

Finally, what can researchers gain from engaging in this kind of inquiry that is so firmly rooted in the material and symbolic forms of our own disciplinary practice? Certainly, various forms of art-based educational research are possible, and hold much potential for alternative understandings of ourselves and of what we do as art educators. But the kind of inquiry that roots itself in the empirical, or experiential world of the art classroom can be especially powerful in moving the field and its thinking in new directions. Moreover, stories and their dialogues, contained in both visual and verbal forms, have the ability to divulge bits of reality and certainty that are, as writer Anne Lamott (1994) put it, "even more true than what was actually said" (p. 65). Empirical investigations that use candidly narrative strategies and authentic, and inventive voices can reveal our practices and suggest refinements in ways that elude some of our more distanced philosophical and theoretical works. Arts-based empirical investigations have the potential to expand the field's more traditional forms of scholarly insistence. In basing investigations on what can be learned locally and by purposeful looking and listening in classrooms and then communicating our findings through engaging, discipline-specific forms of discourse, new forms of research hold potential not only for clarifying "what is" but also for suggesting what might otherwise be. There are many students like Sondra, and they have a great deal to teach us if we care to listen. ■

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>To view this work in color, visit <http://www.mica.edu/faculty/hafeli>.

<sup>2</sup>Hafeli, M. (2002). *Content sources and influences in adolescent art works: A collective case study*. Unpublished manuscript.

