Case Study: Student Art as Construction Beautification

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Case Study

Student Art as Construction Beautification

As the newly hired science librarian at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA, I was dismayed to learn that the atrium windows of the science library would be boarded up with plywood for a year beginning in January 2009 during renovations to the atrium. Not only would this appear ugly, but it also obscured all of our natural light and eliminated our most aesthetically appealing feature—a view of the atrium. Moreover, people might not even realize that we are still open for business. Just thinking about this invoked a dreary, claustrophobic feeling.

Enter Cristi Rinklin, visual arts assistant professor, whose “The Art of Color” course, a study of the principles and practices of color theory and application, was on the roster for the fall 2008 semester; she developed my request for help into the course’s final project by having the students create scientifically inspired color drawings. The students’ sketches on 8” x 10” art paper were transformed into wallpaper strips and mounted on the windows. “The initial paintings were scanned into Photoshop in high resolution and then manipulated through various simple layering and filtering processes to create large images that could fill the window spaces,” explained Rinklin. “The prints were made on an Epson large-format archival inkjet printer onto special adhesive-backed vinyl.”

FINDING INSPIRATION IN THE SUBJECT MATTER

For inspiration, the student-artists viewed magnified images in the microscope labs under the guidance of Mary Lee Ledbetter and Robert Bellin, biology professor and associate professor, respectively. For many of the students, this was a rare visit to the science complex, after which they stopped in the science library to survey the display space and browse science journals for additional inspiration. Rinklin recruited Roger Hankins, director of Holy Cross’s Cantor Art Gallery, to install the artwork on the library windows during the winter semester break.

Upon returning to campus, students were greeted by the brilliantly colorful images of the officially named “Hidden Worlds: Color in Art and Science—Works from VAST 299”—The Art of Color” exhibit. Each of the 11 students has a 2” x 6’ wallpaper strip displaying his/her design. Two 3’ x 3’ composites, each containing nine squares representing nine of the 11 creations, are also on display. The colors and patterns pop out to command attention, diminishing the impact of the plywood.

AN INTERDEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION

In January, the science library and visual arts department held an opening reception, attended by 50 people, including parents of some of the student-artists, where the students shared their thoughts and sources of inspiration; their comments are mounted alongside the artwork. Although the original objective was to beautify the science library during renovations, the project developed into a student-focused collaboration between two campus departments that rarely have the opportunity to interact—Science and Art. The publicity generated by the project helped let people know that the science library is open during renovations. The artwork is digitally stored so that when the originals are removed from the windows, they can be re-created on canvas or silk for permanent display in the science library and possibly the microscope lab and the newly constructed Smith Laboratories building.

This project was successful owing to the collaboration of many people in several departments. Starting early to sell the idea and plan the project and maintaining communication with all the main players throughout the process were important. Most especially, the students embraced the idea of creating scientifically inspired artwork and did a fantastic job of designing beautiful, colorful images—Barbara A. Morelli, Science Librarian, O’Callahan Science Library, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA.
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