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St. Gabriel's Students Learn Art-Life Relationship

Lower school art teacher Jen Hirt weaves history, culture, and every day objects into her art lessons much the same way she creates her own artful life. Hirt, along with her partner Scott Webel, has recently been named one of AMOA's "Twenty to Watch," a distinction awarded to emerging Austin artists who stretch the boundaries of contemporary art.

Hirt's and Webel's Museum of Ephemerata, a museum of curiosities in east Austin, provides a link to the kind of respectful appreciation Hirt brings to St. Gabriel's art room. Last month was the Mexican holiday of Dia de Los Muertos, so Hirt incorporated that into her fifth graders' art lesson. Similarities between her personal art and her work in the classroom are almost seamless.

Hirt admits to a blurred line between her work with children and her art. She is highly aware of relationships between art and the everyday. With a docent's diligence she tells of the Mexican custom of creating shrines made to honor deceased loved ones, and then creates a lesson in which children make small shrines from empty mint tins for their own beloved family members or pets.

In the same particular manner with which Hirt relates a Victorian ghost story in her Museum about a haunted East Texas logging road, she describes to her students the domestic customs of the Mexican celebration.

Just as the Museum of Ephemerata has a current exhibit in which visitors may contribute mementos in a "dia de los muertos" corner, so has Hirt led the children on a tour of the school so that each child may choose a place for the shrine he or she made. As Jen says, "a sacred place can be anywhere."

What distinguishes Jen Hirt among art teachers is the reverence she has for the natural world, and its often-transitory beauty. Hirt earned her BFA in Scientific Illustration at the University of Georgia, where she took as many science classes as art classes. As a graduate student at the University of AZ she led tours at the Ansel Adams center for Creative Photography. Moving behind the scenes, she then built exhibits at the Pacific Science Center in Seattle.

While in the Pacific Northwest, Hirt pursued her interest in museums. In order to create, find, or alter the perfect object for placement in exhibits Hirt broadened her creative skills to include welding and woodworking, skills that would later prove useful. The gray, rainy climate made her crave color and heat, a longing that finally led her on a backpacking trek through Honduras and Middle America.

Hirt settled on the island of Utila for a while and enjoyed the unique experience of being an artist, as Hirt explains, "with no access to a Michaels store." Art supplies on an island are scarce, so Hirt was resourceful. She purchased wire from the hardware store, used bamboo to apply paint, gratefully borrowed handmade canvas from a fellow artist, and took weaving lessons from a woman she met at the market. The island children began to

gather around while Hirt painted, so she offered to teach wire sculpture at the local school. The art teacher's soulful eyes glisten as she tells the story of the day she walked through the jungle on her way home from the school and decided that teaching "felt good" and she knew it would be a part of her life.

Today she shares her creative life with lower school children at St. Gabriel's. The respectful use of resources she learned on her trip still motivates Hirt to glean value from the most ordinary things. In her home she salvages others' junk for her art. In fact many objects on display are borrowed from others' collections, which allows for collecting without accumulation. Except for a few objects in the permanent collection, pieces frequently rotate in and out of her museum. Even sink water from her kitchen, through a process called bioremediation, eventually flows out to the garden where it is purified in a koi pond. Similarly at school, she asks families for their cast-offs to use in art projects. Hinged mint tins, old shoes, kids' meal toys, and old costume jewelry are among the items Hirt reclaims to stock the school art room.

This smiling slender young woman, her long hair often coiled in braids, calls to mind a kind teacher from an elegant past era. Indeed, she enjoys teaching people the history of collecting across time, infusing common objects, which she refers to as "novelties and banalities" with meaning, while asking overlooked questions like "what is a museum?" These are the very questions that make her so appealing to children at St. Gabriel's. Simple explanations often bring to light hidden layers of meaning.

For example, in the Ghosts Exhibit at the Museum of Ephemerata is a death mask of a woman pulled from the Seine in Paris over 100 years ago. Oddly, this mask became the model for "Resuscitation Anne," known by all who've ever taken a CPR class. Katie McGahan, a fourth grade student who saw the "Ghosts" exhibit on its Nov. 3 opening, remarked, "it's sad that no one ever claimed her body [at the morgue], but now she can help save lives."

Is the death mask a work of art, a mortician's craft, a scientific or historical artifact, or a vital resource for medical students? These subjects are all fair game in Jen Hirt's Museum as well as her art room at school.

In addition to her creative art lessons, she regularly offers art field trips to her students and their families. In the past year, she has organized visits to Women and Their Work Gallery, the Blanton Museum of Art, and the Cathedral of Junk, a backyard exhibit in Austin. She also offers weekly "crochet lunch hour" to the fourth and fifth graders who like to do their handiwork in a social atmosphere – another way in which Hirt envelops her kids with art every day. Bringing art to life, bringing it from the hallowed walls of a museum into the home, and vice versa, are hallmarks of her teaching style.

With February's "20 to Watch" installation, Austin will come to know the treasure St. Gabriel's has in Jen Hirt.