Theorizing Experience: Four Women Artists of Color

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This article derives from a qualitative study in which four women artists/educators of color shared narratives of the input of feminism and ethnicity in various areas of their lives that included identity, education, professional activity, and artmaking. The scope of the article is limited to their art making (connected to personal experience) because of the significant role that art production plays in K-12 art classrooms, preservice, and inservice art education.

I provide a connection to Laurie Hicks’ (1990) recommended feminist approach to art education and suggest that the teaching of cultural diversity can be enhanced and improved upon by sharing the personal experiences of the artists in combination with Hicks’ goals of feminist art education. I advocate that the experiences of these women artists of color contribute to strengthening the field of art education by helping us reshape the material we present to students.

In our daily lives, we women of color strip off the mascaras others have imposed on us, we see through the disguises we hide behind and drop our personas so that we may become subjects in our own discourses. We begin to acquire the agency of making our own caras. “Making faces” is my metaphor for constructing one’s identity. You are the shaper of your flesh as well as of your soul. In our self-reflectivity and in our active participation with the issues that confront us, whether it be through writing, front-line activism, or individual self-development, we are also uncovering the interfaces, the very spaces and places where our multiple-surfaced, colored, racially gendered bodies intersect and interconnect. (Anzaldua, 1990, p. xvi)

This article derived from a qualitative study in which Black American and Native American women artist educators shared their stories regarding feminism and ethnicity in relation to various components of their lives. As a Black American woman artist educator, I was interested in the impact (if any) of feminism and ethnicity in the lives of other women artist educators of color. In addition, a search of literature at the time of the study revealed limited research (case studies) specific to art education concerning feminism and ethnicity in association with women artists of color, especially noticeable in connection to Native American women artists.

A large volume of data was garnered from interviews on this topic, in which the women talked about identity, education, professional activities, and artmaking in relation to feminism and ethnicity. Unfortunately, it was not possible to share the results of all the areas in this article. For example, one participant revealed the need to become knowledgeable about her own history because of the gaps in this information during her public school education. She recalled feeling ashamed when Native history was taught because it only addressed battles and massacres, excluding the context that created the struggles, as well as the
exclusion of the contributions of Native Americans to the dominant society (C. Teters, personal communication, September 11, 1999). Her experience was reflected in Allen's (1986) opinion that no Native American reaches adulthood without being informed that her people were savages, in addition to Huff's (1997) suggestion that distorted history is a part of the American mainstream. The American mainstream has not included the accomplishments of Native Americans and has contributed to generations of Native American students moving through school systems confused and fragmented with hidden and mixed messages negatively impacting their self-esteem.

The scope of the article has been limited to artmaking and experience because of the significant role which art production plays in K-12 art classrooms, preservice, and in-service art education. This focus also has connected to Hicks' (1990) idea of art education informed by feminist interest in empowerment. Hicks suggested that educating students to value the various array of human experiences is important. She linked this suggestion to her three goals of a feminist art education: (a) education to diversity and difference; (b) education to context; and (c) education to a community of difference. Hicks advocated that the result of these goals is a learning process that recognizes the realities of cultural diversity of society.

My personal experience teaching preservice and inservice teachers in addition to teaching courses specific to aspects of cultural diversity, has informed me of the limited, and sometimes lack of, knowledge that future and present K-12 art teachers have of non-European and non-Euro-American female (and male) artists. Educating the continuously growing diverse student population to value their own experiences, the experiences of their peers, and to become knowledgeable about experiences of non-European and non-Euro-American artists has continued to be difficult for classroom teachers. I have acknowledged that culturally diverse experiences are not limited to ethnicity and gender; however, women artists of color are the emphasis of this article. According to Machida (1991), women artists of color have continued to view themselves in relation to factors that may include race, gender, sex, and class. It has become difficult to broach a discussion of feminism without addressing gender, and similarly, difficult to discuss ethnicity without addressing race.

Piper (2006) argued that women artists of color experience triple negation as persons of color, as women, and as artists in the art world. In order to challenge the foundations of ethnocentric culture (Lippard, 2000) and not contribute to negation of women artists of color in the discipline of art education, educators have needed to more fully incorporate experiences of these artists. Inclusion of the artists’ experiences has enhanced the knowledge base of our preservice and in-service teachers regarding multiple perspectives on shared history.

Theoretical Foundations

The quote by Anzaldua (1990) preceding the introduction of this article employed descriptive language regarding women of color. Similar to Anzaldua's insight, the women in this qualitative study became subjects in the conversation regarding feminism and ethnicity through their active participation. It has continued to be important for women of color to occupy space in the theory of knowledge because of historical exclusion. Theories needed to be created
that use gender, ethnicity, race, and class as categories of analysis (Anzaldua, 1990). Nochlin (2006) reminded us that the implicit domination of white male subjectivity must be corrected to accomplish a more adequate and accurate view of history.

Anzaldua’s (1990) and Nochlin’s (2006) comments have maintained their relevance to the idea that women naming and describing their experiences is an important epistemological act that contributes to women and other marginalized groups achieving subjectivity (Harding, 1995). Feminists such as Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, Donna Haraway, Nancy Hartsock, Dorothy Smith, and Hilary Rose (Ho & Schraner, 2004) have argued that the lives of marginalized groups, which include women of color, provide a vantage point that challenges mainstream understandings of society.

Concepts from these previous arguments have been used to build standpoint theory—an approach by some feminists to understand and explain the world from the perspective of women’s lives informed by women’s experiences and activities (Ho & Schraner, 2004). Standpoint theorists have argued that scientific and social knowledge has been limited to the social situation of white, middle-class men. This predominant standpoint has created incomplete knowledge and understandings unreflective of the different experiences of women. Therefore, other voices have been necessary to contribute to the expansion of knowledge (Ho & Schraner, 2004).

This study has presented other voices and has been informed by the concept that it is important for women to name and describe their experiences, as well as by the idea that individual experience can be used in creating knowledge in combination with the experiences of others (Griffiths, 1995). The study additionally has been informed by the premise that when individuals and groups with different historical experiences and positions are located within a tradition that denies or silences their experiences, this becomes an institutionalized form of oppression (Hicks, 1990).

Hicks’ (1990) suggested that feminist art education (in which she puts forward that a general theory of education) must acknowledge and analyze the political nature of the concept empowerment as it pertains to students. She maintained that if art education only empowers students by giving them enough knowledge and skills to be appreciative consumers of the cultural mainstream, the empowering process is incomplete. Hicks suggested feminist art education process consisted of three goals:

An education to diversity and difference focused on increasing students’ awareness and knowledge of their personal cultural backgrounds and that of other diverse traditions. Empowerment will occur by encouraging students to value themselves and others.

The emphasis of an education to context will encourage students to understand art as a culturally defined and validated form of communication. Empowerment will result through students’ involvement in learning how to critically assess circumstances significant to art production.
An education to community of difference placed an emphasis on the ideas and abilities students need to understand, criticize, or oppose oppressive mainstream traditions.

Hicks (1990) advocated that the result of the three goals of a feminist art education is a learning process that recognizes the realities of the cultural diversity of society. She also maintained that an overall effect of this process would allow us to see the empowerment of our students in terms of their freedom to engage in the change of social relations of power. Her goals’ connection to the artists’ experiences studied here have been more fully addressed in the Implication section of this article when engaging in aspects of the artists’ personal narratives. Narratives of the artists’ experiences were obtained through the technique of qualitative interviewing.

Methodology

I used Seidman’s (1998) approach to in-depth interviewing, wherein the women artists shared their experiences through on-site interviews, telephone conversations, and electronic messages. Qualitative interviewing of women also has been associated methodologically with the theory that the positioned knowledge of women, informed by their lived experiences, shapes a more integrated or complete understanding of the world (Ho & Schraner, 2004).

Interviewing has made the most of a person’s ability to make meaning through language (Seidman, 1998) and has given a more complete picture than a yes-no, multiple choice, or even short-answer survey because follow up questions and clarifications can be obtained immediately. Martha Jackson-Jarvis, Annie Nash, Howardena Pindell, and Charlene Teters were interviewed for this study.

The Artists

Martha Jackson-Jarvis, Annie Nash, Howardena Pindell, and Charlene Teters indicated through a prior survey a willingness to talk about the topics of feminism and ethnicity. These women have established exhibition records, degrees in art and/or art education, and vary in age. The intent of this qualitative study was to select a small, but not necessarily representative, sample in order to obtain in-depth understanding (Gay, 1996).

Martha Jackson-Jarvis (Black American) is a full-time practicing artist who resides in Washington, DC. She has received degrees from Antioch University, Temple University, and Howard University. Her honors and awards have included a study grant with Pilchuck Glass School and a National Endowment for the Arts National Sculpture Grant. Annie Nash (Quinault-Cowlitz) has received degrees from Barnard College and Columbia University. Nash resides in Albuquerque, New Mexico where she is a practicing artist and elementary art teacher. She has received awards from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Fulbright Foundation. Howardena Pindell (Black American), an activist, artist, educator, and author has received degrees from Boston University and Yale University. She is a professor of art who lives in New York City. Her honors and awards have included a United States/Japan Friendship Commission Creative Artists Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Charlene Teters (Spokane) is a university professor, artist, writer, and activist who resides in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She has received degrees from the University of Illinois, the College of Santa Fe, and the Institute of American Indian Arts. Teters is a founding Board
Member of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media and is known for her activism to remove the use of Native Americans as mascots for sport teams.

Voices

Artists’ Definitions of Feminism

In that feminism and ethnicity shaped this study, the participants were asked to provide their definitions or understanding of the two concepts, in addition to their personal narratives. For Jackson-Jarvis, feminism was not something she readily embraced at first. She, however, described feminism as a means to think about oneself in a way that allows for personal examination. Jackson-Jarvis (personal communication, August 20, 1999) explained:

It means different things to me at different times like everything in life. I did not relate to feminism early on. Part of it, you say, I am not buying into that—that’s for white women. That was said a great bit within the community, but you evolve and times change. Feminism is a way to think about yourself in a way that you can engage in self analysis and self.

This viewpoint affirmed Hein’s (1990) idea that feminism has created new ways of thinking, new meanings, and new categories of critical reflection.

Jackson-Jarvis’ initial response to feminism was similar to other women of color who felt marginalized by what was viewed as a middle class white women’s movement during third wave feminism (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003). Many women of color did not associate themselves with early mainstream feminism (Lippard, 2000; Almquist, 1986). According to Almquist (1986), women of color faced the double jeopardy of racism and sexism and some perceived the barriers imposed by racism as more of a burden than issues associated with gender, and as a result, placed lower priority on feminist activism.

The decades of the 1970s and 1980s have been associated with third wave feminism during which women of color and gay women in the United States began theorizing about their experiences. The ideas were emphasized that gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are interconnected aspects of identity, and that the need to recognize that not all women’s lives and experiences are identical (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003).

Nash’s definition of feminism did not emphasize the interconnected areas of identity but did address individuality.

I guess I would presently say that a feminist is someone who gives women and men room to define themselves because of the understanding that there is not one definition for the way a person should be in the world and accept that definition on an individual case by case basis. (A. Nash, personal communication, September 12, 1999)

Pindell (personal communication, November 19, 1999) described feminism as a stance that calls for equal rights for women and also an approach of not viewing things from a male perspective. Her description of feminism reflected second wave feminism, which focused on human rights for women and included issues such as equal opportunities in education and employment, violence against women, and the Equal Rights Amendment. The second wave of feminism was
propelled by events such as the Civil Rights Movement and developed during the
1960s (Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003).

Teters (personal communication, September 11, 1999) also associated
feminism with human rights struggles. She felt that social and political rights are
still not equal for women, and she personally has continued to work harder than
her male colleagues. Teters has not desired a return to the times when women’s
contributions were not acknowledged and/or valued to the same degree as those
of their male counterparts.

The artists’ explanations of feminism echoed Britto’s (1994) idea that no one
definition fits all interests, and that the meaning of feminism depends on who
defines it and the purpose of the definition. Recent literature (Enns & Sinacore,
2005; Henry, 2004; Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003) has further supported the idea
that no one classification fits all. I have added that generational differences have
contributed to varied perceptions of feminism. The perception of feminism has
not remained constant for some of the artists, and their comments reflected
issues more closely associated with second wave feminism, even though as
women of color, there is a connection to the focus of third wave feminist issues.
None of the artists’ comments related to the first wave feminism that began
during the mid-19th century and focused on women’s legal identity, which
included rights to own property, to sue, to form contracts, and to vote.

Artists’ Definitions of Ethnicity

The artists’ definitions have varied, but culture has been a word common to
the meaning of ethnicity according to three of the artists. Jackson-Jarvis (personal
communication, August 20, 1999) described ethnicity as connected to lineage,
family and self-history, and a legacy of cultural identity. She has viewed ethnicity
as an immediate way of synthesizing a person’s experience leading her or him
down a directional path of cultural traditions. This viewpoint has similarities to
that proposed by Ringer and Lawless (1989), that a distinct characteristic of an
ethnic group is its history and culture with history giving a common ancestry
and basis for organizing the present, as well as the idea that ethnic origin relates
to individuals’ sense of heritage.

Pindell (personal communication, November 19, 1999) felt that ethnicity
is associated with basic cultural sources in terms of individuals’ attitudes and
mannerisms. She also felt that everyone is ethnic, and that the way we see and
do things, and our experiences of culture are ethnically based. This idea reflected
Royce’s (1982) explanation of the term ethnicity, which includes ethnic based
action as the definition. Pindell’s belief that everyone is ethnic echoed Grigsby’s
(1977) and Hall’s (1992) view that all people derive from an original heritage
and that all people are ethnic.

Hall (1992) suggested that the politics of representation regarding the
“black subject” set in motion a philosophical dispute concerning ethnicity.
This involved a different view of ethnicity built around new cultural politics
that engaged, rather than suppressed, difference and depended, partially, on the
cultural construction of new ethnic identities. Hall (1992) further suggested a
need to recognize that all persons speak from a particular place, history, expe-
rience, and culture. In other words, everyone has been ethnically located and
ethnic identities have been crucial to a subjective sense of who one is.

2 Hall is referencing the British Population. He has stated that work was
required to decouple ethnicity as it functions in a dominant discourse
from equivalence with nationalism, imperialism, racism, and the
state. These are points of attachment around which a distinctive
British or English ethnicity have been constructed.
Teters (personal communication, September 10, 1999) also communicated that ethnicity is associated with cultural origins but that it is a broad term with a larger definition for Native peoples, due to more than 500 different nations amongst Native peoples in the United States. Nash (personal communication, September 12, 1999) did not have a specific definition but associated ethnicity with her Native American and Celtic identities. As Hutchinson and Smith (1996) indicated, ethnic identity for an individual is the level of identification with a particular cultural population.

Definitions and meanings of ethnicity and race have been to some degree determined by historical forces that shape society (Harris, 1995). Sociologists have distinguished ethnicity from race, primarily by making ethnicity an issue of culture, and race a matter of systems of white supremacy. Racial groups have been categorized on the basis of presumed physical characteristics whereas an ethnic group has been defined by its commonly shared cultural heritage (Anderson, 1999). Anderson further has explained that sociologists, however, do not view ethnicity and race as fixed categories, and that neither should be viewed as an individual attribute. Each term has represented social processes and experiences that have evolved and changed over time and in different social-historical contexts.

**Artists’ Narratives**

Excerpts of the artists’ ‘voices’ naming and describing their experiences relevant to artmaking activities and the concepts, *feminism* and *ethnicity*, have been included in this section. Jackson-Jarvis (personal communication, August 21, 1999) said her work cannot be firmly categorized or defined as feminist. Nash (personal communication, September 12, 1999), however, created work that she views as feminist and states:

I was cutting up fashion magazines, body building magazines and porn magazines, and re-piecing the people in them with my drawing and painting. I think I started with cutting up pornography magazines because I was so mad at the way they cut women up. It was sort of reclaiming women's bodies and women's spirits—spirits of these women in magazines. I found it so disturbing. I felt they were in a very unsafe place, and so I was trying to put them in a safe place.

This approach has related to the present emphasis in art education to more fully incorporate aspects of visual culture into the curriculum from a production standpoint as well as critical analysis of the portrayal of women.

Pindell’s work has connected to feminism through her content, which deals with women’s issues, and also by her choices of materials. Issues such as women’s spirituality and the different cultural treatment of women have been subjects she addresses in her works. She has associated elements such as powders and perfumes with feminism and viewed the use of free-flowing fabrics, ovals or circles, sewing, and use of certain additions as feminist. She also has attributed her use of less formal design restrictions in the creation of her works to feminism. For example, the freedom to create a work about her father’s heart attack by embroidering a heart and using beads on a stuffed structure. This also has been reflected in her decision to move away from the rectangular which she views as masculine and incorporating rounded and oval shapes in her works.
Teters (personal communication, September 10, 1999) described her artmaking experiences and feminism as an act of reclaiming herself as a Native woman while she was an undergraduate student by mainly creating dignified portrayals of women and children with an emphasis on their roles in society. That whole period I was here—the two years were about making these very noble, respectful presentations of women and children. The women are really the carriers of culture; the carriers and the communicators and the ones that have the responsibility of passing this to the next generation.

The artists' narratives related to the influence of early feminism on art and art theory that helped initiate postmodernism in the United States. Postmodernism included an understanding of the social construction of gender; widespread validation of art forms such as craft, video, and performance art; and questioning the brilliance and greatness in Western art history (Broude & Garrard, 1994). More recently, Broude and Garrard (2005) proposed that as a result of poststructuralism's negative impact on women's agency and suggested distrust of meta-narratives, the original feminist effort to challenge the distorted or inaccurate art historical accounts has been brought to a standstill. Many of art history's meta-narratives have continued in place and the cultural power of women has continued to be suppressed. The authors have maintained that it is necessary to reclaim female agency by addressing the ongoing participation of women in culture as active agents at every level. Adhering to Broude and Garrard's (2005) suggestions, telling the stories of the artists of this study as well as those of other women artists has continued to be imperative.

Ethnicity and Art

Racial and ethnic identities also have been important factors related to the creative process and the forces of society (Harris, Blue, & Griffin, 1995), with struggles of identity occurring in the creative area, in addition to the social and psychological forces that shape racial and ethnic identity in society (Harris, 1995). These dynamics have given meaning and definition to the self and, in turn, have influenced the creative drive, and impacted the process of creative expression (Blue, 1995).

Grigsby (1977) posed whether ethnic heritage has an effect on one's aesthetic expression, and if sociological, economic, and political pressures affect art produced by people on different sides of the power lines of societal control. Jackson-Jarvis (personal communication, August 21, 1999) suggested that her work addresses this question regarding the connection between ethnic heritage and artistic expression.

You find bits and pieces of legacy and lore and myths and stories and historical documents. I feel all of that goes into the work, and the ethnicity is there. I did this project titled, “Race, Rattlesnakes, and Rainwater” and the site I selected was a small historic clapboard black church in the center of the black community. It was about the research of the cultivation of rice; rice was brought over with Africans. This piece used the scale of slave cabins, which is a link to African architecture, and how the compounds, and the yard … all of these kinds of cultural carryovers that were directly placed.
The foundation of Jackson-Jarvis’ artwork also has derived from family stories. She has viewed her work as residual evidence of the energy, ideals, and thoughts of previous persons and past traditions. She has described her art as a projection of her ethnicity, identity, and self. When asked if ethnicity is reflected in her art, Jackson-Jarvis (personal communication, August 21, 1999) said it is present because of the historical research, not the cliché ethnicity that is often directly related to a certain kind of representational imagery known as “black art.”

The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990\(^3\) influenced Nash’s art regarding ethnicity in terms of her status as a Native American. Her response to this act has reflected self-naming (Lippard, 1990/2000) in which an individual defines herself and community reflected in art and statements of racial pride.

It was not until the Native American Artist’s Act was passed that my ethnicity in terms of my Indianness became such a large issue within my art. The Native American Arts and Crafts Act came along, and the U.S. government mandated who is an Indian, and who isn’t an Indian. That’s when I consciously said, okay you’re telling me that maybe I’m not, well I’m going to tell you I am, and I am going to be in your face about it. I did a series called “Borderlands,” which was about race, identity, ethnicity, land, and Indian rights. I was so angry by what was happening. (A. Nash, personal communication, September 12, 1999)

Ethnicity has played a significant role in the issues that Howardena Pindell addresses within her art. The issues have been concerned primarily with African American history, other ethnic groups, abuse by European ethnics, and herstory through autobiographical series of work. She has used her work as an educational tool regarding the history that she feels has been manicured or distorted in books.

It has to do with that which I sought out as information trying to find the history we are not told in school … it had to do with seeking out images of self and people I identified with and seeking out history to find out why things are the way they are…. Another piece I did has slave narratives. I have books on a shelf next to this painting with names at the top of the painting and you match the names with the text panels, which tell you which book to read the narrative. I like to do things that involve people in terms of education. (H. Pindell, personal communication, November 19, 1999)

Pindell has talked of a black aesthetic, which to her means being aware of African art and the use of certain materials.

Black aesthetics for me, means being conscious of African art. I think using aggregates is African, like mixed media putting a lot of different substances together. I see the free flowing thing in my work as African. Also, the kind of surface that I used in the late 1970s when I was adding paper and paint. I can look at specific African references that have a similar surface tension. I think one can also use abstraction and have a black aesthetic because of the way abstraction has been handled in Africa through the use of geometry and patterns. (H. Pindell, personal communication, November 19, 1999)
In terms of ethnicity, Charlene Teters has described her art as being related to political Indian issues. This choice in content had occurred after her graduate school experience at a predominantly white university where she was harassed as a result of her objection to the use of a Native American mascot\(^4\) for the university. Teters’ discussion of her work has provided a ‘yes’ to Grigsby’s (1977) question whether sociological, economic, and political pressures affect art produced by people on different sides of the power lines of societal control.

They are using the history of Native people and the culture, and icons in images in a way that was deflating my children and me. They were using what represented a chief and turning him into a clown. The oppressor uses your history to deflate you, and he can do that in the way he tells the story. Our story has been told by the conqueror for so many years. But when you use your history, you can use it in a way that inspires you…. I decided to take their hero, Lincoln, and put him on black velvet, which you know is tacky so the choice of material was on purpose. If there is a line that goes through all my work, it is about the presentation of images, the presentation of history, and the presentation of information. (C. Teters, personal communication, September 11, 1999)

Rhea (1997) stated that, in American society, the power of historical representation is mostly delegated to universities, schools, history sites, and museums, and that these institutions exert a huge influence over the public’s perception of the past. According to Teters (personal communication, September 11, 1999), the bounty for Native Americans has continued to be on the legal books in some parts of the country. One means of providing proof of death was to bring in the head of the individual; this was eventually reduced to the scalp or red skin, which is why the tomahawk chop is painful for Native Americans who are aware of their history. The image of a “little red sambo” by the Cleveland Indians, an image of the Washington Redskins, and the chop of the Florida State Seminoles have trivialized the genocide of indigenous people.

Teters’ personal experience and knowledge of history have pointed out why it is particularly important to remember that when individuals and groups with different historical experiences and positions are located within a tradition which denies or silences their experiences, this develops into an institutionalized form of oppression (Hicks, 1990).

Visual stereotypes are psychologically damaging and socially distancing, yet children are exposed to them from early on, via television, comic books, schoolbooks and general socialization in and out of the family. We are taught not to believe our own eyes and we learn to look at our environments, families, and selves through the eyes of the dominant culture, which is usually ignorant of our realities and prefers flattened monophobic portable versions. (Lippard, 2000, p. 37)

**Artists’ Reflections**

The artists were asked to reflect on the meanings or significance of their experiences related to ethnicity and feminism. Only the aspects of reflection that directly relate to the focus of this article have been included. Pindell (personal communication, January 23, 2000) felt that as an African American

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\(^4\) The controversial mascot was retired in February 2007.
in this country, it is necessary to be centered to avoid being unnerved by the propaganda of the culture in power; being a black woman artist has helped contribute to her personal solid center. She shared that being an artist also gives her an outlet to address some of her anger about issues, and the artistic process means that she can share her creative experiences with others.

Teters (personal communication, January 21, 2000) shared that as a Native woman/artist/educator, she inadvertently took vows of poverty. Nonetheless, it has been fulfilling to be recognized for her contributions as an artist and activist within her lifetime. Art has become her most powerful tool in making a difference by addressing various issues in her activism as a Native woman and artist. How she has presented herself as an artist, activist, and speaker has been critical to her in that she feels Native young people have very few role models in general, and even fewer female role models. Teters has felt an incredible responsibility to always conduct herself in a professional manner and a positive way because of her position as a role model.

Implications

The artwork of Martha Jackson-Jarvis, Annie Nash, Howardena Pindell, and Charlene Teters has accumulated a visual record of their experiences; a record that reflects the idea that art addresses various aspects of human experiences (Ament, 1998). This has not suggested that we define these artists as a uniformed group wiping away the differences of their herstories (Meskimmon, 2003).

Collectively, and according to their own reporting, ethnicity has had a stronger impact than feminism in these artists’ work. I have found that the stronger emphasis on ethnicity may possibly have resulted from the national discourse on race and ethnicity at the time of my research being more vigorous than that concerning gender. This emphasis also has suggested that, at times, women artists of color were pulled more in the direction of issues related to racism rather than sexism. As a result of my conversation with the artists, two themes or ideas have emerged from their narratives on the topic of their art making: empowerment through the use of art and art as an educational tool. These themes have been associated with the areas of teaching and art production as well as related to Hicks’ (1990) feminist approach to art education.

Hicks (1990) argued that empowerment is a process that changes the social and political relationships between individuals, communities, and networks within which social and political power circulate. She maintained that educators must be self-conscious about the type of society for which we educate students and has suggested three goals for art education based on a feminist conception of empowerment. I have suggested how the field of art education can use the artists’ stories to incorporate Hicks’ goals of art education into our discipline. The three goals were introduced earlier in the article. The two goals that I have found particularly pertinent to artmaking and experience are an education to context and education to a community of difference. Artists’ quotes have been used to punctuate these two goals.

An Education to Context

This goal focuses on the background nature of artwork. Empowerment involves learning to evaluate the contextual background of art production. It is
suggested that diversity can be implemented by including nontraditional, cross-cultural, or controversial art. Pindell's (personal communication, November 21, 1999) artistic response to a personal experience exemplifies this goal:

I was on a panel and talked about curatorial choice relative to racism, and they were taping the panel. As soon as I started talking, these white women got up as a group. They started arguing with me and walked out. That tape was played on television, and soon after that, someone came to school and threw a lot of black paint at my door. Someone put a razor blade in my nameplate. My books were stolen out of my office. I photographed the black paint against my door and on the floor, and used it in a painting. What I try to do is incorporate things like that in the work so I don't forget about it and other people learn from it.

Process and context factor in the production of this artwork. Pindell uses her work to communicate and address a political issue through a nontraditional and controversial art form. Teachers can discuss her approach to emphasize how process works in developing a work of art, and the significance process plays in communicating a message relevant to personal experience. This also serves as an example of how knowledge of personal context and societal context contributes to critically understanding art.

An Education to a Community of Difference

The suggested purpose of this goal is not to empower students through membership in the mainstream, but to instill ideals and abilities that are needed to understand, criticize, and oppose oppressive mainstream traditions.

After the experience at the University of Illinois, I became very politicized. It was my survival skills in some ways … because I dare open my mouth. In those first installations, I took the ultimate good white man, Lincoln and put him on black velvet. I could say I am honoring you guys, but they would know better. On the same day that Lincoln signed the Proclamation of Emancipation, he also signed an order to hang 38 Dakotas. I am using information from historical texts to expose the attitude of Lincoln. He is an example of the heroes we are supposed to have as our role models, but he is not our role model, not our hero, as well as the other white men who are put forward by history and by pop culture. (C. Teters, personal communication, September 11, 1999)

Teters' personal experiences contribute to art that challenges an oppressive exploitive practice of mainstream society and which led her to a personal sense of empowerment. This illustrates how the freedom to question contributes to the shaping of her identity through redefinition and increased self-esteem. Respectful teaching and learning environments are necessary that will allow students similar freedom to be themselves, encouraging the opportunity for open and diverse expressions to aspects of an egocentric and ethnocentric culture that presently remains in American society.

Concluding Thoughts

The stories these artists shared with me are from several years ago, but their experiences are just as valid as those male artists we continue to incorporate in art curriculum, such as van Gogh, Gauguin, and Picasso. I suggest that the experiences of these women artists of color contribute to strengthening the field of
Studies in Art Education

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Art education by (a) helping us reshape the material we present to students, (b) continuing to challenge monolithic white and patriarchal modes of authority, and (c) presenting role models for others who challenge the status quo.

The teaching of cultural diversity can be enhanced and improved upon by applying the personal experiences of these participants in combination with Hicks’ (1990) goals of feminist art education. Stories of the artists demonstrate the importance of creating an appreciation and recognition of the significance of diversity and the multiple perspectives on shared history. In sharing such artists’ experiences, teachers increase students’ and their own awareness of how a social movement or philosophy, such as feminism and/or ethnic background, impacts artmaking. These artists’ experiences also reveal how a culture in power can create an oppressive environment for persons of different cultural backgrounds, and equally important, how to resist and challenge it. I leave you with a statement by Lucy Lippard (1990/2000):

“One’s own lived experience, respectfully related to that of others, remains the best foundation for social vision of which art is a significant part. Personal associations, education, political and environmental context, class and ethnic backgrounds, value systems and market values all exert their pressures on the interaction between eye, mind, and image. (p. 7)

References


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