


# Art Heals



Students in recovery at the University of Oregon have found a therapeutic way to express their stories through art in a unique program offered by the campus museum.

By PATTI ZIELINSKI



For Rick Bartow, creating life-affirming works of art was interwoven with his life in recovery. A year before the Native American artist's death in 2016, the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon in Eugene curated "Things You Know but Cannot Explain," a major retrospective exhibition now on a national tour.

This homage to a revered Oregon artist — and former alcoholic — opened the doors to a new audience: university students in recovery, who viewed Bartow's works as cathartic, empathetic and reassuring.

"Bartow presented images of the struggle with the inner demon he dealt with on a daily basis. The students could relate," says Lisa Abia-Smith, the museum's director of education.

Abia-Smith, whose role is to create engagement with the museum's objects among specific audiences, understands the healing power of creating art from her years working with marginalized audiences. "Being creative sparks something in people," she says. "It allows them to tell their own stories — like Rick Bartow did."

Seeking opportunities to bring together well being and art, she founded the Art Heals program in 2013 with a grant from the Oregon Arts

Commission. She began her outreach with hospitals, holding workshops for children with disabilities, people with traumatic brain injuries and patients in an oncology center.

Seeing how the art program benefited people with physical ailments, Abia-Smith considered how it could help university students who were concerned with mental health, such as those in recovery from substance use disorders and those who had experienced trauma.

When she approached Al Siebel, director of the Collegiate Recovery Center, about hosting an Art Heals workshop for students in recovery in spring 2016, he was immediately on board.



*From Nothing Coyote  
Creates Himself, 2004  
Wood, metal,  
41 x 84 x 16 inches  
Courtesy of the artist  
and Froelick Gallery,  
Portland, OR  
© Rick Bartow*

Bartow 72



From time to time, Siebel had taken students to the museum and witnessed how encounters with art resonated long after the group left. "The museum is a beautiful building in the middle of campus, but many of our students have never been inside it. When I take students there for the first time, I like watching their reaction – they're really surprised," he says. "There's an initial hesitancy about going in but once they take a tour, most come out saying how great it was."

Siebel is always looking for ways to utilize the resources at the university as wellness opportunities at the CRC, exposing students to new experiences.

*Crow's Creation V, 1992*

*Pastel, graphite on paper, 40 x 26 inches*

*Private Collection*

© Rick Bartow

For example, he recently took students to the craft center on campus where they created and painted their own pottery mugs. "These excursions are a great way for the students to disconnect and regroup. It gives them an opportunity to slow down and take a breath," he says. "So, when I presented

## ART PROMPTS

Following are some of the prompts that the museum staff offers to spark ideas with participants in the Art Heals program:

- 1) Last night I had the strangest dream.
- 2) Who were you before your diagnosis and who are you now?
- 3) Draw your mind, body and spirit.
- 4) What do you see when you look in the mirror?
- 5) Draw an illustrated timeline of your illness and recovery.  
(This was the one most students used as inspiration for their works.)

the idea of a workshop where they create art at the museum, all the students were interested.”

### HOW ART HEALS

To date, there have been six Art Heals workshops: three focusing on addiction and three mixed-group sessions that also included students suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and sexual trauma.

The workshops, which last just under three hours, are held in a 1,500-square-foot studio in the museum. For the first half-hour, participants explore the artworks in the galleries to gain inspiration. Then, they return to the studio to create art, facilitated by prompts given by the museum education staff, such as “This is what my life was like before I had my illness; this is my life now.”

“When you tell participants that they are going to create works of art, there’s usually some trepidation — they say, ‘I’m not an artist. I’m not sure of

myself.’ — but once they start working, the room gets very quiet. When the time is up, they don’t want to leave,” Abia-Smith says. “Even if they have never been exposed to art before, they learn how cathartic it can be. It gives them a place removed from stress to be contemplative. Often, they have no idea that it could do that.”

The pieces created in the workshops are varied: mandalas, collages, sculpture and colored pencil and pastel drawings. The educators also use multi-sensory elements, such as vials of lavender or other scents that might conjure a thought or memory.

“Art is a language for expressing your own experience. The museum contains a wealth of images that present the self and identity — rich narratives that the students can draw from,” Abia-Smith says.

In the workshops, students create three pieces — one that they take home that day and two that the

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Collegiate Recovery Center

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museum keeps for a few months to exhibit — and leave with a sketchbook, art supplies and prompts to allow them to continue using art as a way to process situations in their life. “We want to give these students an opportunity to use a new tool,” she says. “The more information that we can provide as to how they can leave the museum with that experience the better.”

The resulting artworks are powerful and provocative.

“One student who had been struggling with addiction for six years created a self-portrait through a cityscape,” Abia-Smith says. “He was in a place in his life where he felt out of control, and he portrayed himself through buildings that were upside down, bars and dark figures. He placed a marker to delineate where he transitioned into recovery. Beyond that, you saw how the colors and the architecture changed, how the architecture of the buildings changed.”

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*Deer Spirit for Frank LaPena, 1999*

*Acrylic on panel, 24 x 24 inches*

*Private Collection*

© Rick Bartow



*Counting the Hours, 2005*

*Pastel, graphite on paper, 40 x 26 inches*

*Courtesy of the artist and Froelick Gallery,  
Portland, OR*

© Rick Bartow



*Bear Medicine, 2014*

*Acrylic, graphite on canvas, 60 x 72 inches*

*Courtesy of the artist and Froelick Gallery,  
Portland, OR*

© Rick Bartow

Abia-Smith does not know the histories of the students in her workshops — only that they are in some phase of recovery. Sometimes, an art therapist joins the group to assist with prompts or to lead conversation. “We want to respect where they are coming from,” she says. “We don’t require that the students share anything outside of their comfort zone. If they want to, it’s fine, but it’s not imperative.”

Siebel, who is also in long-term recovery, joined the workshops. “There’s a mindfulness aspect to the sessions. You are given a few hours where you’re not worried about academics or your concerns. You are just creating,” he says.

The museum showcased the works last year in a three-month exhibition titled “Art Heals,” which was housed in the education galleries on the first floor. The show included 50 works of art from the collective populations the program served. Although the CRC students’ works were identified as created by members of the collegiate recovery program, students could elect to use their whole name, part of their name or remain anonymous.

Showing the works completes the cycle and serves an educational mission. “That’s our goal. The museum wants to be a conduit for students to live better lives. How many students who saw that exhibition were struggling with their own recovery or considering it? They might learn that this is a resource for them,” says Abia-Smith, who knows of at least one student with alcoholic parents who sought help after seeing the exhibition.



“Art gives these students a way to tell people who they are through non-verbal cues. It makes the invisible visible,” she says. “It gives them a sense of pride in who they are. A student once told me, “My work might not look like Picasso, but I feel like Picasso.”

Lisa Abia-Smith

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