

A VOLUME IN
PROMOTING JUSTICE, DIVERSITY, AND
INCLUSIVITY THROUGH ARTS-BASED PRACTICES

Personal Truths

Youth Utilizing Artmaking to Promote
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging



Christa Boske

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Promoting Justice, Diversity, and Inclusivity
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Series Editor

Christa Boske
Kent State University

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*Personal Truths: Youth Utilizing Artmaking to Promote Diversity, Equity,
Inclusion, and Belonging (2025)*

by Christa Boske

*Children With Learning Differences Exploring Artmaking to Address
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DEDICATION

This poem is dedicated to all of the young people who afforded me the opportunity to work alongside them. To the public who attended their art exhibitions. To the teachers, school leaders, families, and community members who supported this important work. To those who supported me throughout this journey. I wrote this for you: To serve you... You are powerful. Injustices overcome. You have prevailed. Each of you inspire people to walk alongside you. To take action. To rise up. To be present. To emerge from darkness. And ... radiate into the heart, mind, and spirit of those who have the privilege to know you

To serve you...

You are powerful.

Injustices overcome.

You have prevailed.

Each of you inspire people to walk alongside you.

To take action.

To rise up.

To be present.

To emerge from darkness.

And...

Radiate into our hearts, minds, and spirits.

CONTENTS

1. Constructing Meaning	
<i>Christa Boske</i>	1
2. Peace	
<i>Ichgok</i>	15
3. Rainbow	
<i>Nerds</i>	25
4. Life's Journey	
<i>Ichgo</i>	33
5. Spirit	
<i>TJ</i>	41
6. Hiraeth	
<i>Q</i>	49
7. Family Love	
<i>J</i>	55
8. Darkness Falling	
<i>Kano</i>	63
9. All Equal	
<i>Nitro</i>	71
10. Alexithymia	
<i>TI</i>	81

viii CONTENTS

11. Spirituality <i>DL</i>	93
12. Trauma <i>T2</i>	103
13. Black Lives Matter Should Matter to Everyone <i>Moneyback King</i>	115
14. Conscious-Based Artmaking <i>Christa Boske</i>	127
About the Author	131

CHAPTER 1

CONSTRUCTING MEANING

Christa Boske

Artmaking provides spaces for learners to foster connections among mind, body, spirit, and lived experiences. I was invited to work alongside these learners, teachers, staff, and school leader to design spaces in which learners ask questions, engage in courageous dialogue, and connect with others. Youth expressed their frustration toward traditional rote memory; being isolated by their peers and community; and yearning for creativity and self-expression. This artmaking process seemed to provide spaces for self-expression and visualizing their understandings of justice (see Feinstein, 1985). They suggested artmaking offered alternative pathways to understanding complex content as well as spaces to look withing. These young artists discovered what mattered. They experienced this through self-reflection, research, and building community (see Serig, 2006). Together, youth concluded their artmaking constructed meaning and symbolic forms of their self-expression (see Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

One of the many challenges these authors faced centered on feeling alone, being excluded. They hoped their artmaking may bring awareness to “real” injustices, such as racism, poverty, mental health, abuse, and other injustices. Providing young artists with opportunities to engage in this transformational process often left them feeling authentically connected, empowered, and poised for action. This artmaking process did not dictate what to do; rather, artmaking made a significant difference in their sense of self connecting their senses, body, mind, and spirit. Their art was *felt*, and *lived*.

Personal Truths: Youth Utilizing Artmaking to Promote Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging, pp. 1–14

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These authors emphasized the extent this artmaking provided them with spiritual connections essential to understanding themselves and others. The process of thinking about justice, empowerment, and advocacy provided them with an inner peace and calmness while engaging in this significant work. Their first-tellings of injustice lived within their bodies and translated into their artmaking. For many of these artists, artmaking may become a lifelong process that not only permeates their minds, but also their bodies. For many of these authors, this artmaking was the first time they were provided with safe spaces to utilize expressive arts to illustrate their understandings, power, and sense of control. Throughout this process, an overall harmony emerged among these artists in their learning spaces. They engaged in meaningful discussions with their school community members as their artmaking moved and spoke to them. Artists recognized their artmaking increased their awareness of self, who they are, and what they believe (see Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

This was the first time these artists engaged in artmaking to develop their capacity to critically think about and grapple with social justice issues important to them. They researched significant topics ranging from diversity to power to privilege to responsible citizens to activism to challenging systemic issues influencing their communities. This artmaking provided spaces for artists to illustrate what it means to live their lives through powerful visualized and textualized processes. They came to understand there is not one “correct” response; rather, their first-tellings, ways of knowing and being, are what matter most throughout their artmaking.

The general public was asked on a voluntary basis to document their insights regarding the justice exhibition on anonymous comment cards. Here’s what the attendees had to say:

“Two things that stood out to me that people should learn: (1) Listen to children just like you do your peers. Age doesn’t matter; (2) Art is necessary everywhere for healing, self-expression, learning and communication.”

“Some of the most powerful stories I’ve ever read in a long time and experiences that you wish no one would want any child to go through. Yet, seeing the way in which these youth chose to express themselves gave me a ton of hope for their future and the future of society. It gave me a feeling that they digested, understood, and processed these things through and look forward to a fulfilling future using art and their voices.”

“This art exhibition is very impressive. The children showed how they think about the world and chose to be vulnerable. I hope lessons are learned by everyone who experiences their art.”

“I’m amazed at this art. I am amazed at how brave these artists were to share their powerful truths. It takes a lot of courage and personal growth to be able to be that expressive and open. Amazing! The advice they give was very insightful. As an edu-

cator, I agree that there should be more outlets like art for kids to explore themselves. Teachers, and people as a whole, need to be more patient with each other and understanding of everyone's unique life experiences. Thank you so much for sharing your art with the world."

"The art is moving, but once you read these stories, you see a person, a human being behind a behavior; an attitude and it's so important for us to see!"

"I am thankful for this program the youth participated in and to see how these young artists have been able to develop their art and tell their own stories because each and every person has an important story to tell, to share with the world. I am blown away learning about these young people's experiences and how they feel about their artwork. So much thought and effort went into every piece. I also appreciate the opportunity for them to give frank honest advice to teachers and schools. Fabulously done!"

"Art is expression and humans, especially youth, need to be heard and seen. Thank you for affording them with spaces to be heard and seen. These kids are amazing and strong!"

"I am feeling grateful for being able to attend this exhibition today as a 30 year old small business owner. As a female in the service industry as a cosmetologist, I think of my youth and how art and cosmetology, both were areas I felt I connected most and adults at that time discouraging my interest in pursuing art or cosmetology! I had a very troubled youth and art and beauty kept me stable and helped me to feel useful. I think that youth require artistic expression to grow and they can teach adults a lot. There were two pieces that anger was mentioned and sadly, I too felt a lot of that when I was younger and it has taken a lot of time to find a balance. These pieces spoke of that anger and sadness and it was a release for these youth, the feeling of being unloved or unloveable. My heart goes out to these young artists and I see the power in your messages-from one artist to another."

"This collection of art should be on permanent display in a gallery. It shows creativity, depth, power, awareness, and spirit of our youth. It gives us hope for the future of this younger generation."

"I came here not knowing what to expect. Wow! I loved all the paintings. This place is awesome. It was a friendly and cozy and pleasant atmosphere. I enjoyed talking to people about this work."

"Moving exhibition! Eye opening. Working through challenges through art. It was captivating and moved me."

"This is very powerful and disturbing at times because I had no idea youth thought about any of this or experienced things like racism. It was enlightening as well. Their stories are tragic, moving, and an expression of hope for our future."

"My breath has been taken away by everything I've seen today. I hope the artists continue to create no matter what!"

"I love the diverse display and the fact that I was able to learn about the artists. This doesn't happen at other exhibitions. We are normally limited to just knowing the name of the artist and the medium used. By scanning the QR codes I learned so much. I

4 C. BOSKE

also loved the food and drink and how the chef created food that represented what the artists were saying. Everyone was so friendly! I just loved it!"

"This experience has been great. I enjoyed learning about social justice."

"Thank you so much to each and everyone of you who participated in this exhibit. It was amazing and moving. It made me really think and realize I need to do something about these issues."

"The art exhibit made me feel emotional, relatable, heard, understood, uncomfortable, sad ... and so many thoughts. When reading these abstracts, I found myself looking within and reflecting on my youth and what I had to deal with. Many of the stories were triggering and I started to think about how I still haven't fully healed. But now that I am in my 30s, I am ready to address these issues and heal these wounds. I appreciate the courage of these young artists and how they chose to display their art and share their messages with the world. This is a part of the process and it will continue to encourage them to use their voices, to realize they matter, and to speak up and do something about these injustices."

"All of the work was incredibly moving and gave me such insights into the lives of these artists. Their usage of shapes, lines, and color gave these pieces power. I really enjoyed being able to read about their creative processes and learn more about the techniques they all used to give their work their final form. Their stories are so important and foundational to this work. I look forward to attending more exhibitions and seeing their names in future galleries."

"It was powerful to see the combination of the great art and the words of the young artists who created it. So powerful!"

"The art exhibition is amazing. This expression of internal feelings and thoughts in the form of art provides an excellent way for young people to rehearse and share what is inside their hearts, but also displays talents they will continue to develop, explore, and nurture. Thank you for your dedication and belief in these young people and giving them spaces to share their voices."

"Reality in motion! This exhibit touched my spirit and I appreciate how this was an outlet for the youth and how they addressed justice issues."

"This exhibition is extremely important work! Not only can these stories be identifiable in that pieces remind you of your own life or the life of others you know and care about, but also, it gives you a voice to people who not only need to be heard, but know they matter! Their stories and art matter! Touching! Very supportive!"

"Very powerful! Very insightful! My heart goes out to these artists! I am impressed with the creativity demonstrated throughout this exhibition. These are stories EVERY educator should read/(need to) hear."

"Much gratitude for these beautiful expressions. The talent and depth of these works is breathtaking."

"I'm impressed with the level of thought and emotion in each piece. The process in which youth have gone through to express themselves and what matters to them is

simply amazing. What a valuable experience for them and those who attended this exhibition.”

“Very impressive and impactful! I am coming back!”

“Some of these pieces were sad, but they were fascinating. My heart is proud for these young artists.”

“This exhibit is so powerful and should be required for EVERY educator to experience. I feel so honored to have been able to experience this exhibition, read the stories, view the art, and their wonderful voices.”

“Reading this as a Black teacher, I could definitely relate. These are stories I’ve heard in my family and amongst my friends 10 years ago. I’m frustrated that this didn’t end with my generation. We deal with so much. You’ve dealt with so much, but still we fight every day to live. Just know that you are strong, young artists. I know every road is long. Take it day by day. But more importantly, thank you. Your art inspired me. Honestly, y’all had a grown man crying!! I need to live this work as you are living it.”

“Absolutely moving. The depth of thought that went into these pieces is stunning. Thank you for being open and vulnerable and teaching us why this matters. Thank you for sharing your experiences and why we need to pay closer attention to these injustices. You are all so bright and your art and stories are so important to hear. Keep sharing. Keep making art. Keep living this work.”

“As a Black man, the piece “Life and Death” is personal. It’s like looking in a mirror. It speaks of the unique struggle of the Black man. This was amazing.”

“Each piece of the art I saw today moved me. Your stories are real and were felt by each person who was told your story. Keep speaking, creating, and moving forward. You will continue to do great things and change the world one step at a time.”

“There is so much thought and planning that went into this exhibition. The art work was amazing. The stories were captivating. Each work of art is stunning and you can tell the artists put lots of care into making them.”

“After seeing and reading about your lives, so beautifully shared with your art, I felt like a big part of me has been reborn, reawakened to all that life has given to you at such an early age. This year, I promise all of you that I will learn life anew, that I will listen, that I will help make a positive difference in the lives of my students. I am a teacher. I am responsible for transforming myself. Thank you for this opportunity to learn from you and to be inspired by you.”

“This exhibit truly was so powerful. Personally, I have not gone through many of these experiences or thought about these injustices, but I felt your work and your words. I felt your emotions. Thank you for sharing these personal parts of you through your art and words! It makes me want to use art to work through my own challenges. Thank you!”

“The students’ artwork and emotional writings were very powerful. Many of the stories told can be related to students I work with. I look forward to trying this out and hope you will work with our students.”

“This exhibit gave me more will power and need to things which highlight mental health to the parents. I speak to youth about healthy natural stress reduction techniques like focusing on positive thoughts through meditation, deep breathing, building positive relationships with the Creator, but adults need to learn this too, the sober way of health and how to spread love and peace. These art pieces and writings gave me stronger will power to spread the mental health to more youth, and the adults who often don’t have it together in their mind, heart, or spirit. I’m sending you all love who made this art.”

“Such things should never happen to children. These injustices should never be in the face of youth. Many are seeking love, the basic foundation of society: security, safety, love, acceptance ... I feel that some of these youth need adults to protect them, to care, to love them, and to listen. These artists make it clear. We can no longer dismiss them or what matters to them. Thank you for sharing your art and stories with me.”

“Artworks 1 and 2 were absolutely powerful! How transparent and courage to share their art and stories. I enjoyed reading these stories and value this experience. I am proud of all of you.”

“These pieces of art were much deeper than I ever imagined. That’s on me. I guess I don’t often think young people think about these issues.”

“The emotions and thought that went into this work is unbelievable. I am moved and very impressed with this work at this exhibition.”

“This was extremely powerful and emotional for me. I was blown away by the insight and wisdom from such young people. This experience will stay with me as we continue to educate and allow students to fully express themselves about critical issues that affect them in their lives. Thank you for doing this work with young people and thank you for this experience.”

“Very powerful works and words!” So great to see young people engaging in self-expression in its purest form. Keep changing the world! You changed me!”

“The piece Hiraeth moved me. Thoughts of a sacred home, safe from colonization. The warm safety of the African sun. This work speaks of that great place. Bravo!”

“It’s really beautiful and inspiring to see their hearts and voices and perspectives tonight. It takes courage to share your story and it was a powerful experience to view each art work.”

“Being able to transmute your experiences into art is so incredible. These stories are so deeply impactful in someone’s life. It is so wonderful to see what this ability to express oneself has done for these young artists. It transformed them. They know they matter. How powerful for them!”

“My Thoughts: I thought these people are really good wrighters and artests. They are better than me and that’s cool that there better and what you experience is always

better for the future! I was reading more about the art and I have more to say. Art is a thing that you can do if your angry or sad and you can get it out! I love art too and sometimes I do are when I want to get things out. It works. This was great.”
—11 year old

“When i see the Art my heart feel uncomfortable And it is Like something pushing my heart. I Liked all of this art.” —8 year old

Art became a means to look deeper within, understand oneself, and share their truth with others. Their artmaking provided diverse ways to communicate their lived experiences. It was an imaginative tool utilized to showcase how these young people navigated changing conditions and solved problems in order to assert oneself in meaningful ways. Their truth emerged (see Smoke, 1982). Together, they recognized themselves as *catalysts* seeking, promoting, and making meaningful change (see Boske, 2019).

Most expressed the need for viewers to feel their artmaking and *to be moved* to do something about these injustices. They were often transported to new spaces with an increased awareness of the unfamiliar. This artmaking emerged as a transformative experience, one in which they hoped would be afforded to all learners around the world. They concluded one of their responsibilities as young artists was to bring forth an emotional and physical response to their artmaking. Together, youth wanted their art to mitigate a strong sense of unity versus numbing, which they often experienced within their communities. These artists wanted their artmaking to motivate and inspire viewers to transform their thinking about injustices to addressing/interrupting these systemic oppressive practices by “doing.”

Engaging in artmaking was not a solitary event. Artists worked together and shared spaces. They came together as a community to see the world in new ways (see Boske, 2014). They critically thought about the myriad of justice-oriented issues facing their communities and decided that sharing these understandings was worthwhile and pertinent to the process. Their capacity to accept and embrace one another was essential. Their sense of community became a source of inspiration, admiration, and cultivation. Together, they transcended narrowly defined ways of being, worldviews, and divisiveness within real world justice issues. As they moved forward through their artmaking, “rules” were challenged; they drew attention to the need for cultural adaption and considerations; and concluded “us vs. them” was not conducive to understanding the power of “we.” As they reflected on their artmaking, these artists concluded their artmaking had the capacity to transform oneself, their communities, and ultimately, the possibility of meaningful world-wide change (see Boske, 2019). (See Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1*Art Exhibition Opening to the General Public*

Together, they provide readers with opportunities to reveal injustices often ignored by their schools and communities. Their artmaking created spaces to engage in meaningful dialogue regarding how they understood the influence of their lived experiences, their bodies, minds, thoughts, and responses to injustices. Artists recognized their artmaking as a collaborative to educate others, but more importantly, promoting cohesion and self-empowerment. For the first time, artists openly discussed, explored, and translated their first-tellings into artmaking. They dialogued about artmaking materials, composition, arrangement, and messaging. These artists carefully selected, processed, organized, and designed their artmaking to ensure their ideas were communicated through their artmaking (see Figure 1.2).

Authors began this process by documenting their ideas. The content of their first-tellings played a vital role with each artwork, which is critical to understanding their why society should pay close attention to these injustices. Their artmaking reflected their perceptions and responses to their lived experiences. In addition to the content, these artists also learned about the significance aesthetics plays to the look and feel of their artmaking. These artists came to understand aesthetics as a space to create their own knowledge, which moved beyond individual perceptions, and reflected on injustices facing their communities. Their artmaking reflects imagery that depicts their lived realities, values, and imaginative possibilities (see Figure 1.3).

Engaging in this innovative process that exemplified the need for self-expression played a significant role in their understanding of self. In other words, these artists utilized this experience as a means of making some-

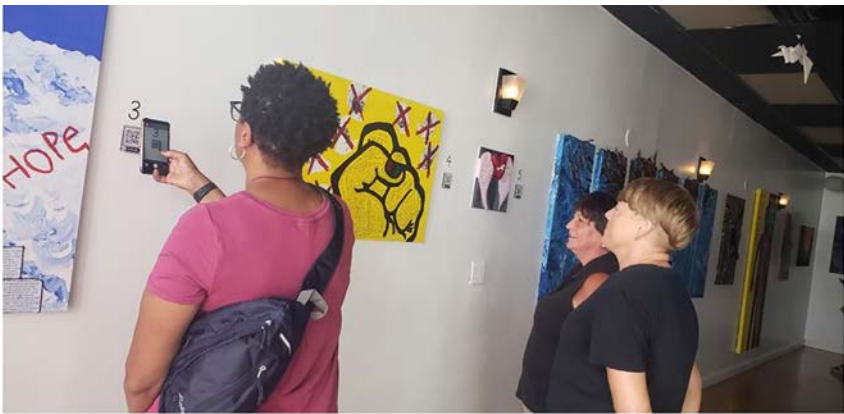
Figure 1.2

General Public Discussing the Impact of the Art



Figure 1.3

Attendees Reading the Art Abstracts Using QR Codes



thing new or evolving: their own transformation. These artists expressed the desire for additional opportunities to engage in making their own art versus scripted lessons and predetermined outcomes (see Figure 1.4).

Chapters in Review

All artists chose to use pseudonyms for each of their chapters. In Chapter 2, Ichgo shares her chapter “Peace” emphasizing how she makes

Figure 1.4*Community Member Attending an Opening*

connections with nature, animals, and her family to navigate injustices she endures. Ichgo identifies the significance of her artmaking and the symbolism behind her artmaking. Nerds, the author of “Rainbow” in Chapter 3, explains how he navigated identifying as trans. He further explains how his artmaking directly aligns with his experiences in K–12 schools and what supports are needed. “Life’s Journey,” Chapter 4, which is the Ichgo’s second contribution to this book and art exhibition, examines how her lived experiences shaped how she understands injustice. Ichgo utilized pathways and spaces to illustrate “forks in the road” and the extent her choices influenced her lived experiences. In Chapter 5, “Spirit,” TJ guides the reader through her journey, illustrating the extent this artmaking provided her with sacred spaces to deepen her understanding of the injustices she lived. TJ’s first-tellings provide us with the power love plays in developing a strong sense of self. The author Q, in Chapter 6, introduces the term “hiraeth” to her readers, which is the focus and title of this chapter. Q emphasizes as a young Black woman her yearning and longing for culturally responsive practices and policies in schools. This author stresses this sense of homesickness and distinct feeling of being lost in school due to the lack of authentic Black history, teachers, and respect for her community. In Chapter 7, J titled her chapter “Family Love.” J clearly identifies injustices often faced by children who become part of the larger system after experiencing abuse. This author emphasizes the need for all children to have loving families. In J’s artmaking, she creates her ideal family consisting of two parents and siblings. Kano, in Chapter 8 titled “Darkness Falling,” utilizes his passion for comic book and video game characters to illustrate

injustices facing children who live with domestic violence. He emphasizes the need many children feel to protect those they love and how often they feel helpless. Kano created his own video character and embedded his first poem about his lived experiences in his artmaking. In Chapter 9, Nitro shares information regarding racism and divisive practices implemented to perpetuate separateness among people. His chapter, titled “All Equal” provides readers with a deep understanding of his reflective process as he navigates White supremacy throughout his artmaking. T1, who authors “Alexithymia,” Chapter 10, created several panels in her artmaking to immerse viewers in an emotional state. She created an ocean and feelings of drowning. T1 titled her art “Alexithymia” to illustrate the challenges of navigating and identifying her emotions. She contends this artmaking served as a release to the injustices she faces. In Chapter 11, DL in “Spirituality,” the author created her artmaking to illustrate how she utilizes her higher power to bring light to the darkness she lives. The injustices DL faces will not overcome her spirit. “Trauma” is the title of Chapter 12 and authored by T2. This author engaged in artmaking for the first time and discusses how she embedded herself in her artmaking as a means to reflect, process, and foster courageous conversations.

Moneyback King, the author of Chapter 13 titled “Black Lives Matter Should Matter to Everyone,” created his first painting/drawing utilizing his raps, research, and first-tellings. As a young biracial artist, he emphasizes how his lived experiences and those of his community must be recognized and celebrated. In Chapter 14, I draw conclusions from the authors’ artmaking. I emphasize the need to provide learners with spaces to give themselves permission to be creative, utilize artmaking to understand both micro/macro systems, and centering ourselves through authentic justice-oriented artmaking (see Figure 1.5).

Artists suggest this artmaking process often helped them focus their attention, when oftentimes, they struggled with centering themselves. Their authentic engagement seemed to increase their cognitive capacity as well as improve their capacity to connect with others. Their artmaking was a creative offering to deepen their understanding of justice, their capacity to contribute to something larger than themselves, and develop a stronger sense of self. Their lived experiences seemed directly correlated with the justice issues they believed were most relevant to making meaningful change in their communities. Ultimately, their imaginary possibilities often drove their creativity, innovation, and commitment to this work (see Figure 1.6).

These artists are convinced this artmaking process brought them together in new ways to share and discuss what matters most to them. As they encountered their artmaking as individuals and as a vital member of a group, they expanded on their notions of “we.” Together, they began to

Figure 1.5

Family Discussing the Public Art During the Exhibition



Figure 1.6

Meaningful Conversations About the Artmaking



understand their new ways of knowing contained real world consequences. For example, they examined voting rights as well as voter suppression deepening their understanding of White-washing history. These discussions brought them together to share and discuss their lived experiences. As they engaged in this artmaking, they became more understanding of others as well as the role artmaking plays to encourage inclusive practices and embracing differences (see Figure 1.7).

Figure 1.7

DJ Playing Music While Attendees from the General Public Dialogue About the Artmaking at the Exhibition



As artists engaged in this artmaking, they expanded their understandings from “me” to “we.” Throughout this process, artists invited others into conversations about poverty, marginalization, segregation, global warming, the need for clean water, racism, mental health, and other social/political/ecological issues (see Figure 1.8).

Figure 1.8

Attendees Discussing the Artmaking



The power to create, freedom to express oneself, and space to contribute to something larger than oneself seemed to ignite their sense of wonderment. These new understandings afforded artists opportunities to shift perspectives of self and others. As they engaged in this work, these artists concluded their art and thoughts had the capacity to transform injustice into experiences for meaningful change. Their artmaking uplifted their spirits, sense of self, and increased awareness of their power to make meaningful change. In other words, they realized they mattered. Artists recognized their artmaking encouraged them to think and move beyond their perceived limitations.

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