

Arts in Mind

Artist Evan Bissell Leads, Creates and Inspires

By Suz Lipman

Artist and Mill Valley school graduate Evan Bissell is living his dream and sharing it with many others in the process. Bissell's art is often public and collaborative. His most recent project, "Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere*: Youth, Imagination, and Transformation," explores the power of art education through a series of 18 publicly installed, life-size, painted portraits of young poets who work with Youth Speaks, one of the country's leading literary arts organizations for teens. The portraits appear in various public places, such as a San Francisco BART station, along with words and phrases chosen by the poets, excerpts from interviews on the importance of art education, and an audio recording of each poet, that passers by can access for free by calling a phone number listed on the portrait.

"I like the connection that occurs when art is presented in public," Bissell said. "There is potential for the artist and for those witnessing the art to be part of the creative process. The art isn't hanging in a museum. It's more accessible." Bissell said his portraits have elicited a range of emotions from the poets, as well as from people who were surprised to see a larger-than-life painting as they emerged from a train.

"I'm excited about publicizing the impact of art education," Bissell said. "There is power in poetry and art. It has the ability to change people and societies."

"Poetry was important to me in school, and I had great teachers," Bissell said. He singled out Kathy Evans, who visited Tam Valley School as part of California Poets in the Schools corps, a program that Kiddo! routinely funds, and Augusto Andres, his World History teacher at Tamalpais High School who sponsored the school's Poetry Club and mentored Bissell.

"Poetry has always been an important source of self-awareness," Bissell said. "It helps me clarify my thoughts and transform various emotions, from angst and confusion to joy. It helps me express my thoughts to the community and to the world in a way that is effective."

Painting and other visual arts have also played a role in Bissell's creative life. He is currently in the process of creating paintings and mixed media work in his studio. He was an avid student of ceramics at Tam High and College of Marin. One of the earliest influences on his drawing and public art life may have been his participation in the Youth in Arts Italian Street Painting Festivals that occur each year in San Rafael. He began attending as a Mill Valley Middle School student, watching his mom Joni create with chalk, and ended up being part of the team that created an elaborate chalk likeness of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, which was the highlight of the Festival a few years ago.

More recently, Bissell has led collaborative art projects and murals for students around the Bay Area. At Leadership Preparatory Academy in Oakland, he led a team to create a mural about violence prevention and leadership. At Martin Luther King Jr. Academy in Marin City, Bissell's students created a community mural called "The Me I See" after performing interviews with local seniors at assisted-living centers. In addition, he did a project with students at Tam High about human rights and helped San Francisco students create drawings of black storytellers.

That the 25-year-old is a mentor to many is no accident. His biggest advice to other young artists is to seek out mentors. "I had great people who opened doors for me," he said, adding that one should seek mentors beyond the obvious places. "The Bay Area is very vibrant. There are a lot of people and organizations that can help pave your road," Bissell said. Two such groups he mentioned are Youth Speaks in San Francisco, and the Marin Youth Center in San Rafael. "Ask yourself what people or groups can help me? Step outside your boundaries. Take risks."

Bissell himself is continually taking artistic risks in the search for collaboration and expression. One of his next projects will be a public, interactive play about race, family and history, for which he is creating the sets. He is also working on a project about the impact of the prison system on families, and is interviewing teens who have family members in prison. "I try to find ideas that really resonate with me," Bissell said, "Each project can take more than a year, and it's important to feel strongly about them in order to stick with them."

More information about Evan Bissell's work can be found on his web site: <http://web.mac.com/evanbissell>. Suz Lipman is a writer and parent. "Arts in Mind" is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education.