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Diving into the Art World: Children's Art Themed Books

On April 30th, 2008 the Doyle New York an auction house is auctioning a children's book of Andy Warhol's from 1955 entitled, "25 Cats Named Sam and One Blue Pussy." The estimate for this book is \$30,000 - \$50,000¹; reading the advertisement for this auction in a newspaper a month ago inspired me to try and understand the affect of art/artist's on children's books. Initially, it seemed that there were going to be many examples similar to this children's book by Andy Warhol, but sadly many accomplished artists have never turned to the children's book world. Andy Warhol according to the artist, Leonard Kessler, interviewed by Susan Goldman Rubin for her book, "Andy Warhol: Pop Art Painter," was very good with children Kessler thought, "he would teach, work with young children." It seemed interesting to compare current art market placing higher and higher values on artist's works to the art used so beautifully within children's books. Lately, there is a trend for modern designers and artists to take on children's books, so perhaps in the future there will be a flux in the value of these books if they become successful artists in the art market.

Ultimately, I discovered that there were a large variety of art books: biographies, fictional works written by artists, art museum explorations, and general art history/study books. Beyond this, there are also two authors (including a team of authors) that generally write the art non-fiction books; also

¹ Doyle New York Auction: Books, Autographs, and Photographs Lot 460.

there is one publishing house that is focusing on publishing art books for children. For this essay, I will investigate the themes, writers and publishers, and also how art books in the end will interest and relate to children.

The main publisher for the non-fiction art books is Harry N. Abrams, Inc. of New York, New York. To understand why these books are being published and if they have success it seemed key to research the Harry N. Abrams company first. Harry N. Abrams Inc. “was the first company in the United States to specialize in the creation and distribution of art books” and primarily an adult publisher of, “visually stunning illustrated books on the subjects of art, photography, interior and garden design, architecture, entertainment, fashion, and general interest.”² They began publishing books for children under Abrams Books for Young Readers in 1999 and have had good success with that. The “Books for Young Readers” are generally art themed books but they have branched into doing other themes within non-fiction and fiction. Having such a respected and skilled publisher behind these books is key for contacting the artist’s or their estates for artwork permission and biographical information.

In the art world there also seem to be only a few authors that research and write on the subject these are the team of Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan and the aforementioned Susan Goldman Rubin. In their books, they all seem to do an extraordinary amount of research and work very hard on artist permissions for their artwork to be published. Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan both seem to have a passion for art, artists, and discovery. Jan Greenberg runs an art

² Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Website: http://www.hnabooks.com/page/company_history

gallery in St. Louis and Sandra Jordan is an artist herself as a photographer.³

Susan Goldman Rubin is a very accomplished author of books according to her website biography, “nonfiction, mainly about art, and is the author of more than 45 books for young people.” These authors are really working on opening children’s minds to art. As art programs are being cut from schools more and more it is crucial that these books have a place in the library system so art history is not forgotten.

The biggest theme of art books for children’s is artist biography books. These books generally touch upon the keystones of an author’s life and illustrate it throughout with artworks by the artist. Most of the books make an attempt to relate the artist with children, highlighting the artist’s childhood or calling the artist by their nickname or what their friends would call them. Examples of this can be seen in “Story Painter: The Life of Jacob Lawrence,” by John Duggleby where he refers to Jacob Lawrence as Jake throughout or in “Romare Bearden: Collage of Memories,” by Jan Greenberg where she calls Romare Bearden, “Romie” through the book. Making the artist’s lives relatable for children is a struggle, but in “Chuck Close: Up Close,” Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan really succeed in a very interesting biography of the prolific artist. For the less contemporary artists it seems that biographical information has been lost and the historical facts come through as being a bit dry. This is the case of Susan Goldman Rubin’s “Edward Hopper: Painter of Light and Shadow,” the book is very similar to a biography you may read in a museum; the misstep is that it does not relate the

³ Houghton Milton Reading: Meet Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan

text to the potential child reader well. Overall it seems that there is a gap in the publishing of artists' biographies from non-contemporary artists.

Furthermore, there does not seem to be a high interest in publishing biographies of artists that have led more tragic lives or the tragic parts are skipped. Although Keith Haring has written his own children's book there does not seem to be a biography of his life. There seems to be a surplus of biographies on African American artists but Jean-Michel Basquiat is not covered. To me it seems that this could be because Keith Haring was homosexual and died of AIDS and Basquiat killed himself at a young age. The editing of the artist's lives can be seen in Rubin's, "Andy Warhol: Pop Art Painter," the book ends with factual coverage of his life in 1964 which dismisses 24 years of the artist's life. Censoring in this way skips the drug-filled and homosexual life of Andy Warhol of the late 60s through the late 80s; his death is briefly mentioned in the last sentence. It is understandable that the book does not want to become itself a controversial book, but addressing these aspects of the artist's life if only briefly is necessary for young readers to fully understand their art and life.

More recently, there has been an interesting offshoot of the typical non-fiction biography of writing in a fictional story style, a non-fiction piece of an artist's life. A book because of this nature of playing with the non-fiction and making it more into a story is bound to be a little confusing for children factually. Books that make good attempts at this style are, "The Yellow House: Vincent van Gogh & Paul Gauguin Side by Side," by Susan Goldman Rubin, "Frida," by Jonah Winter, and "Diego," by Jeanette and Jonah Winter. The book "Frida"

actually is a built out of Jonah Winter's love of his mother's book, "Diego." They both play with a true story from both of the artists' lives as children to understand as to why they may have become such successful artists. Overall, these books are very successful for introducing a child to the world of art and biographies, but it could be interesting to see if these are placed in the collection typically in non-fiction or fiction because of their style.

Within biography there are also books by author's that seem to be more for self-promotion. These books are written while the author is alive either by the author or by a journalist, and are more focused on art description and analysis. Examples of this are: "Just Like Me: Stories and Self-Portraits by Fourteen Artists," edited by Harriet Rohmer, "Roy Lichtenstein: The Artist at Work," by Lou Ann Walker, and "Talking to Faith Ringgold," by Faith Ringgold et al. In these books each artist describes their methods and reasons for getting into art and how they eventually became an artist. Children probably respond to these books well because the tone is more active and can learn how turn their classroom doodles into a career.

Non-fiction art books cover much more than just artist's biographies, they also study general art history, museums, and art analysis. For general art history a comprehensive book is, "Cave Paintings to Picasso: The Inside Scoop on 50 Art Masterpieces," by Henry Sayre. Sayre's book makes the all of the art facts very graspable and relatable. The design tactics are similar to Nic Bishop's books on animal science, using large font sizes to draw attention to the most important facts and smaller sizes for the details. For an idea of how to interpret

art, Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan have put out a series of “Eye” books, such as “The Painter’s Eye: Learning to Look at Contemporary American Art.” These books interview the artists that have made the art to get an idea of what they were thinking when they created the masterpieces that are in museums. These books give children more to say about a painting than it’s good or bad, the book provides great art analysis tools.

Some non-fiction art books take you into the world of the art museum, two of these books are: Jon Scieszka’s “Seen Art?” and Joy Richardson’s “Inside the Museum: A Children’s Guide to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” Scieszka’s book looks at the art of Museum of Modern Art relating to a boy’s struggle to find his friend named Art and the confusion between those two. On the other side the Joy Richardson book is a very quick fact guide to all aspects of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, both make the museum experience seem like more fun for children that may be bored by the art/artifacts within a museum.

Most children are most comfortable with reading fiction and picture books, so often great artwork is used in children’s books but the artist’s do not get the greatest recognition for all of their work. Some commercially successful artists have written their own fiction stories for children. Romare Bearden retold a story from his youth to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. who adapted Bearden’s telling of this story into the book “Li’l Dan The Drummer Boy: A Civil War Story.” It seems as if the publishing world is really seeking for fiction works similar to this, because of the artist association plus the use of fictional content. Another example is the adaptation of Alexander Calder’s performance of his Circus into a book form in,

“Roarr: Calder’s Circus,” by Maira Kalman. Also, Faith Ringgold has become quite popular as a children’s book author now, especially with her work, “Tar Beach,” but additionally she is a very successful artist as well. Her books are usually successful because of her excelled art career and also talents as a writer. If more artist’s were to write and illustrate children’s books, children overall would have more appreciation for art and creating it themselves.

Playing and even poking fun at the art world is something that Scieszka goes for in “Seen Art?” The art market and museums are seen by children as being perhaps a bit too uptight so it is important to bring them to a level that children can understand and appreciate. A book that also succeeds in mocking the art world a bit is Jon Agee’s “The Incredible Painting of Felix Clousseau.” This is a work of fiction that tells of Clousseau’s rise and fall of success in the art because his paintings actually come to life. Using this method really makes art seem more accessible and will perk an interest with children.

The books for children about artists and art do have some gaps in their content but overall are really interesting. As discussed earlier, most children do not have any exposure to art history or art because of budget cuts in school systems. Children no matter what will continue to doodle in their notebooks and dream of worlds outside of this one. Art is a gateway for children to have their fantasies come to life on paper. Many of the popular artists today started out just this way and if more children knew about them, there would be more respect for art and artists today.

Activities for Children's Art Books

- Ask the children pick a favorite artist and have the child try to recreate one of the artist's artworks

- Ask the children draw a self-portrait of themselves and then tell why they drew themselves the way they did.

- Let the children pick a favorite artwork out of one of the artist's biography books and then write a poem relating to that artwork.

- Have a dress-up day where the children can come dressed up as their favorite artist based on one of the artist's paintings or the artist themselves.

- In the style of "Diego" or "Frida" ask the children to write a short story about the artist's based on their life.

- Bring in a camera to the library and let children take photographs as a photographer might, develop the photos and ask the children to analyze them.

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Additional Resources

- Books, Autographs, and Photographs Auction. Doyle New York. 26 Apr 2008.
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- Company History. Harry N. Abrams Inc. 26 April 2008.
[http://www.hnabooks.com/page/company_history].
- Houghton Mifflin Reading: Jan Greenberg and Sandra Jordan. Education Place – Houghton Mifflin. 26 Apr 2008.
[http://www.eduplace.com/kids/hmr/mtai/greenberg_jordan.html]
- Jan Greenberg's Webpage. 26 Apr 2008.
[<http://mowrites4kids.drury.edu/authors/greenberg/>].
- Susan Goldberg Rubin. 26 Apr 2008. [<http://www.susangoldmanrubin.com/index2.html>].