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The Genius Next Door Art Project

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# The Genius Next Door Art Project

Original Arts Research in the College Classroom

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*Abstract: The genius next door art project (genius project) sends undergraduate students of aesthetics into their home communities to find undiscovered and highly accomplished artists, to ascertain the social conditions that have encouraged the development of these artists, to reflect on the quality of the art, and to present the findings in an article written as a class project in collaboration with the instructor. This type of recuperative and reflective work brings more artists to the attention of more people, further democratizing art, and it helps students see firsthand the social forces encouraging or inhibiting the development of artistic genius. Hence, the genius project promotes original research and demonstrates collaborative pedagogical practice. The work of Linda Nochlin in art history provided the impetus for the conception of the genius project.*

Keywords: Beauty, Genius, Aesthetics, Philosophy, Engaged Teaching, Espinoza, Nochlin

## Introduction

**T**HE WORD “GENIUS” was originally a Latin word, which meant literally “that which is just born.”<sup>1</sup> From its inception to today, “genius” denotes for many people an “exceptional intellectual or creative power,”<sup>2</sup> with which one is born. Perhaps no one more than Immanuel Kant contributed to this widespread view of genius as an exceptional, innate, intellectual or creative ability. Though in the eighteenth century thinkers like William Sharpe (*Dissertation Upon Genius* in 1755) and Alexander Gerard (*Essay on Genius* published in 1774) produced philosophical treatises on genius, it was Kant in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), who presented the most impressive analysis of genius in relation to the creator of art. Kant said that genius was an “innate mental disposition.”<sup>3</sup> This

is not the place to discuss the intricacies of Kant’s view of genius but simply to point out the importance that his view exercised over the western history of ideas.

The thinker who most challenged this view of genius as innate was the twentieth century developmental psychologist Jean Piaget. In *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (1952), Piaget argued that intelligence developed over time through stages, beginning with the development of reflexes up to invention and language.<sup>4</sup> Intelligence was the dynamic activity of a child learning to interact with the environment in which he/she was immersed. In other words, Piaget did not agree that intelligence was innate, nor did he agree with Lewis Terman, a psychometrician working in the first half of the twentieth century, who quantified genius in terms of an IQ above 135 in children.<sup>5</sup> Today, noted researchers on

<sup>1</sup> John Scheid, “genius” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. by Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Online as *Oxford Reference Online* at <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html>> 2006.

<sup>2</sup> “genius noun” in *The Oxford Dictionary of English* (2nd edition revised), ed. by Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Online as *Oxford Reference Online* at <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html>> 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, tr. by J.H. Bernard (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 2000) 188. Kant devotes sections 46-50 to genius.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Piaget, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children*, tr. by Margaret Cook (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963). The book identifies six stages and devotes a major chapter to each one. The six stages include the reflexes, the primary circular reaction, the procedures that make interesting things last, new situations, the discovery of new means through active experimentation, and the invention of new means through mental combinations.

<sup>5</sup> See “genius n.” in *A Dictionary of Psychology* by Andrew M. Coleman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Online at <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html>> 2006.



the talented and gifted like D.K. Simonton<sup>6</sup> and Sally M. Reis<sup>7</sup> agree that high IQ alone does not predict genius. The talented and gifted develop their abilities over time through activities. Genius, in other words, combines intelligence and imagination applied in productive, new ways. Genius breaks new ground in science, the arts, and so on.

In the past decade, a new branch of science, cognitive neuroscience, has made significant strides in understanding how intelligence and genius work. Thinking and reasoning take place in the outermost part of the brain, the cerebral cortex, the part of the brain full of wrinkles and folds and divided into lobes such as the frontal lobe, parietal lobe, and so on. Neuroscientists have discovered that as the cerebral cortex gets more use it thickens.<sup>8</sup> In other words, a repeated activity like painting, as the theory goes, forces the brain to wire itself (to thicken) to handle the task better. Hence, genius develops as a person engages in an activity over and over, not mindless activity as a chimpanzee may perform in his cage but deliberate activity. There is still much to learn about genius, but the latest research suggests that genius is developed over time, step by step.

The developmental view of intelligence and genius exerted enormous influence on many late twentieth century thinkers, including renowned art historian Linda Nochlin, who titled a 1971 groundbreaking article with the highly controversial question, "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" Nochlin claimed:

(A)rt is not a free, autonomous activity of a superendowed individual....(A)rt making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occurs in a social situation, is an integral element of the social structure, and is mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions.<sup>9</sup>

Nochlin not only accepted the developmental view of genius, but she added that artists and their art (and the genius attributed to them) must be understood within their multiple social contexts.

Nochlin's view of genius in art provided the impetus to create the genius next door art project (genius project), which sends students into their home communities to find undiscovered and highly accomplished artists and to ascertain the social conditions that have encouraged the development of these artists. This activity creates a unique pedagogical opportunity. Students can see firsthand the social forces encouraging or inhibiting the development of artistic genius. Moreover, the genius project benefits more than students. It also contributes to the art world in several ways. It brings more artists to the attention of more people, thereby adding to the democratic dimension of art, and it serves as an effective social institution to support the development of artists. Thus, the genius project engages in pedagogical practice and promotes original research.

The argument for the genius project is presented in four parts. First, the Linda Nochlin position on the development of artists is explored in more detail. In the second and third parts, the genius project is described, and the case study of Mexican artist Maria Fernanda Espinoza is presented. Finally, the argument concludes with a reflection on the genius project's weaknesses and strengths.

### Nochlin on the Development of Artists

Linda Nochlin argues that no great women artists have existed. She says, "The fact is that there *are* no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol."<sup>10</sup> It is not a question of doing the research of recovery to discover great women artists or to de-throne patriarchal standards of evaluation to let the great works of women rise to the top of the artistic canon of western art. The great women artists and their works are not there! So she asks the question, "Why are there no great women artists?"

The answer is twofold. First, Nochlin comments on the social expectations placed on women: "(T)he demands and expectations placed on...women—the amount of time necessarily devoted to social functions, the very kinds of activities demanded—simply

<sup>6</sup> Simonton has published more than 300 articles, book chapters, and books on the talented and gifted, and his conclusion is that high IQ accounts "for only 4-5 percent of the variance in measures of cultural eminence" (quoted in "Dean Keith Simonton," online at <<http://www.indiana.edu/~intell/simonton.shtml>> 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Reis, a past president of the National Association for Gifted Children, has published almost 200 articles, book chapters, and books on the talented and gifted. In her model for the "Realization of Talent in Women," for example, she argues that five factors contribute to the realization of talent: perceived social importance of talent manifestation, environmental factors, belief in self, personality traits, and intelligence. The latter includes creativity, interests, and problem-solving—all traits that are developed rather than innate. See online at <<http://www.neiu.edu/~ourgift/Archives/SallyReis/CreativityandWomenarticle2.htm>> 2006.

<sup>8</sup> See Neil R. Carlson, *Physiology of Behavior*, Seventh edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001) 30; "A neuron may receive information from dozens or even hundreds of other neurons, each of which can form a large number of synaptic connections with it." See also the study by P. Shaw and colleagues as presented by Richard Passingham in "Cognitive science: Brain development and IQ" in *Nature: International Weekly Journal of Science*, Vol. 440, Issue 7084 (3/30/2006): 619-620.

<sup>9</sup> Linda Nochlin, "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" in V. Gornick and B.K. Moran, editors, *Woman in Sexist Society* (New York: New American Library, 1971) 493.

<sup>10</sup> Nochlin 483.

made total devotion to professional art production out of the question and unthinkable.”<sup>11</sup> Whereas many women could and did devote sufficient time to become interesting artists (Nochlin calls them “respectable amateurs”), they could not, given their social responsibilities, commit themselves completely to their art to achieve greatness. The second barrier in front of women artists was more formidable. From the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century, women artists were excluded from many of the social institutions available to their male peers. For example, an aspiring woman artist was not allowed to draw from the live nude model. Nochlin says, “To be deprived of this ultimate stage of training meant...to be deprived of the possibility of creating major art works.”<sup>12</sup> Women were also excluded from the apprenticeship system and art competitions, both necessary institutions for the development of one’s talent. Given these daunting social obstacles, it follows, claims Nochlin, that women were not able to create outstanding works of art.

In her article, Nochlin develops a traditional causal argument (if X, then Y). She identifies two complementary causes. First, western social institutions imposed many obligations on women that prevented them from working seriously on their art. Second, the group of women who wanted to paint did not have access to the social institutions necessary for the development of their art. These two causes combined to produce Y, the lack of great women artists. As a statement of sociological reality dealing with a grouping of people (western women), Nochlin’s argument is true. However, as a statement of an existential reality for each woman, the statement is not true, since not every woman has experienced the causal conditions identified by Nochlin, a fact acknowledged by Nochlin herself at the end of the article.

Nochlin asks, “But what of the small band of heroic women, who...have achieved pre-eminence?”<sup>13</sup> She lists in this category women like Sabina von Steinbach, the thirteenth century legendary sculptor, Rosa Bonheur, the most renowned animal painter of the nineteenth century, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, both impressionist painters, and many others. These women, claims Nochlin, “were either the daughters of artist fathers, or...had a close personal connection with a stronger or more dominant male artistic personality.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Steinbach and Bonheur had artist fathers, whereas Morisot was a close friend of Edouard Manet (she later married his

brother) and Cassatt was a close friend of Edgar Degas. The male connection for these women provided access to expertise and many social institutions necessary to develop their art. Consequently, the Nochlin argument does not apply to them. Whether their art is good, pre-eminent, or great is not only a prickly topic for another essay due to the socially determined nature of the evaluation but also not relevant to the genius project. These women produced art works of exceptional quality, demonstrating creativity and sophisticated skill, all characteristics of genius.

Nochlin formulated her argument to explain the dearth of women of genius in the western art world. However, wherever the causal conditions of her argument exist, the effect—no art of genius—will follow. In other words, the Nochlin argument applies to men as well as women. For example, how many male slaves produced art works of exceptional quality during the years of the Roman Empire? Could not the same question be asked for the Middle Ages onward of aristocratic men?<sup>15</sup> To be sure, the social institutions affecting male slaves, aristocratic men, and women are not identical, but the thrust of Nochlin’s causal argument remains unchanged: social institutions must support and encourage artists of both genders as they develop their talent step by step over a lifetime.

## Genius Project

The genius project takes Nochlin’s argument about the development of artistic talent seriously by sending students into their communities to find undiscovered and highly accomplished artists, to ascertain the social conditions that have encouraged the development of these artists, to reflect on the quality of the art, and to present the findings in an article written as a class project in collaboration with the instructor. This part develops four points: it addresses a major assumption of the genius project (that art geniuses can be found all around us); it articulates the process to determine the criteria for good art; it describes the genius project in more detail; and it presents thumbnail sketches of three geniuses selected for study over the past two years.

## Art Geniuses All Around Us

Virtually all of us engage in aesthetic activities daily. We design our living spaces with an eye toward

<sup>11</sup> Nochlin 492-493.

<sup>12</sup> Nochlin 494.

<sup>13</sup> Nochlin 501.

<sup>14</sup> Nochlin 501.

<sup>15</sup> Nochlin argues that Edgar Degas came from the lower nobility (“more like the *haute bourgeoisie*”) and only Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec “could be said to have come from the loftier reaches of the upper classes” (492). The aristocracy, says Nochlin, “has rarely contributed anything but a few amateurish efforts on the actual creation of art itself” (492).

personal aesthetic appeal. Though genes control the general growth and look of our bodies, we work hard to make our bodies appear more pleasing by styling our hair, coloring our faces with make-up, adorning our bodies with stylish clothing, and accenting exposed skin with jewelry, whether it be draped on (a watch or necklace) or pierced through (a gold dolphin pendant J-hooked to a gold ring pierced through the navel, for example). At mealtime, we arrange food on our plates to please the eye before consuming it to please the palate. We talk constantly of the aesthetic appeal of cars, photographs, songs, films, weather, grass, skies, babies, snowfalls, movie stars, moons, mountains, and so on. Indeed, we can all draw on an extensive memory bank of aesthetic experiences—we possess an expertise of experience—even if we cannot formulate the universal characteristics of the experience, that is, even if we do not possess an expertise in the philosophy of aesthetics.

The genius next door rises from the ranks of students and their friends, families, and neighbors, who have chosen to specialize in the performance of one art activity like painting or cooking, devoting most of their days to the activity and becoming highly skilled and creative at it. Sometimes, these specialists earn a living from their activities, selling their paintings or “chef-ing” at restaurants; other times, they create their art for small, familiar circles of people like their families, friends, and church congregations. In both cases, however, the activities display craft and originality. These artists are the geniuses next door, since they are extraordinarily skilled, imaginative, and literally all around us. In all cases, these geniuses have received the support of family and community to develop their artistic talents, exactly as Linda Nochlin describes in her article.

### Criteria for Good Art

The process to select criteria for the evaluation of art starts with the untangling of beauty and art from one another. In other words, art, even the art of genius, need not be beautiful. This conceptual separation of art and beauty dates back to World War I and the impetus it gave to Dadaism, a movement loosely embracing artists and writers who felt a sense of rage against the leaders and social order that had engulfed the world in the maelstrom of war. Max

Ernst, an artist who knew the war firsthand (he was an artilleryman), said:

To us, Dada was above all a moral reaction. Our rage aimed at total subversion. A horrible futile war had robbed us of five years of our experience. We had experienced the collapse into ridicule and shame of everything represented to us as just, true, and beautiful. My works of that period were not meant to attract, but to make people scream.<sup>16</sup>

World War I and Dadaism, then, inserted a wedge between art and beauty, and aesthetics superstar Arthur C. Danto considers the separation of the two “one of the great conceptual clarifications of twentieth-century philosophy of art.”<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, what became clearer for art in one way—that art can be good without being beautiful—became confusing in another way—what makes good art? is beautiful art still good art? how does one recognize good art? Thus, the genius project begins with a host of questions.

Students cannot know *a priori* good art from mediocre or even poor art. They need to select their artists, to bring representative art objects to class, and to agree on possible criteria to judge the quality of the art before them. The genius project involves the entire class in selecting one genius for the semester and in agreeing on the criteria to determine the quality of the art. This philosophy of evaluation is called “relativism” by noted aesthetician George Dickie,<sup>18</sup> and it is similar to a view of critical evaluation put forward by Bernard Heyl in the 1940s.<sup>19</sup> The criteria often depend on the art form and, within the art form, the genre of the art. Some pop art, for example, may be judged by criteria related to accuracy of representation and poignancy of social commentary. Some abstract art may be judged by the imaginative and effective use of color and perspective. The way the art pleases the perceiver often enters the discussion (this is taste according to David Hume<sup>20</sup> and Immanuel Kant<sup>21</sup>), as do three criteria made famous by possibly the world’s most influential aesthetician of the twentieth century, Monroe C. Beardsley. He says, “The classification of Objective Reasons (for good art)...can be subsumed under three General Canons: the Canon of Unity, the Canon of Complexity, the Canon of Intensity.”<sup>22</sup> The point of this portion of the genius project is to put appro-

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Arthur C. Danto, “The abuse of beauty” in *Daedalus*, Vol. 131, Issue 4 (Fall 2002): 46.

<sup>17</sup> Danto 49.

<sup>18</sup> George Dickie, *Introduction to Aesthetics: An Analytic Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 137-140.

<sup>19</sup> See Bernard Heyl, *New Bearings in Esthetics and Art Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943).

<sup>20</sup> See David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. by Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985) 226-249. The title of his essay is “Of the Standard of Taste.”

<sup>21</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, tr. by J.H. Bernard (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 2000) 91.

<sup>22</sup> Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Second edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981) 466.

priate readings on evaluation of art in front of students, to let them select criteria most appropriate to the art brought to class, and finally to vote on the art and genius that will constitute the semester's work.

### ***Immediate Tasks of the Genius Project***

The initial task of the genius project is to gather the "data" and to make it available to everyone in class. Some students interview the genius and then transcribe the interview, others take digital images of the art or, if it is music, they record several performances and burn them on CDs, and still others load the interview and images (or music) on a class web site so that all students have access to the interview and the art throughout the semester.

The major task, of course, is to write the article. Once again, students divide the tasks among themselves. Some students focus on the introduction, which places the art of the genius within an artistic and historical context. Other students compose a biography of the genius, paying close attention to the social institutions that have nurtured the genius. The remaining students analyze the art according to the criteria for good art formulated by the class. At the conclusion of the semester, the instructor initiates his own research and then rewrites the article. In this way, one lead writer and many contributing writers produce each article.

### ***Three Geniuses Next Door***

In a catholic church in Debno, Poland (a village about 90 miles east of Krakow), a priest and a parishioner stop praying as they stare in admiration at the splendor of the hand-embroidered cloth covering the altar. The creator of the altar cloth is Helena Weglowska (1933-). On most nights in her home, Weglowska is working with needle and thread on her next masterpiece, drawing inspiration from her family and admiring community. She attended trade school in her mid-teens to become a seamstress, and it was at the school that she saw a friend with an embroidered collar and knew she wanted to learn the art. But her children had to marry and leave home before she could develop her embroidery skills. An altar cloth she made for Easter Sunday caught the attention of students in the class. The edges of the white, natural cotton cloth show a repeating pattern of a grape leaf with five lobes and a cluster of ripe grapes whose weight is bending a branch down. The pattern is interrupted at the center of the altar edge by angels in full flight rising toward a bright sun, symbol of the resurrected Jesus Christ.

A native of Ann Arbor, Michigan, Thomas Lindquist (1985-) spent much of his childhood playing soccer and basketball, but at age ten he took time out from sports to learn to play the piano and, later, guitar and saxophone. His interest in painting did not start until he was a senior in high school, when he took an art class (in order to bypass a speech class) and fell in love with painting. Lindquist comes from a family of artists—his mother and sister are accomplished musicians, so his family nurtured his early interest in art. Today, Lindquist is studying studio art and psychology at Loyola University Chicago. His painting genre is abstract expressionism, and students were impressed with *Extraction*, a highly gestural and emotional work inspired by life-changing experiences. Its composition and color scheme are simple, a serpentine black line covered in part with red blotches, but the raw power suggested by the thick black lines and the force with which the red blotches were thrown on the canvas show the powerful forces underlying life-changes. Students also noticed that the painting resembled an image of a 3,000 year old god from the American southwest, Kokopelli, a long, curvy, humpbacked figure playing a musical instrument like a flute.

Mangal Gadkari (1954-) immigrated to the United States in the 1970s to pursue the "American dream" in business. Instead, she fell in love with jewelry design. After working long hours at a day job, she stayed up nights making jewelry. She sold her work at flea markets, and, gradually, word of her genius spread to her community. Gadkari designs complex South Asian and Western pieces, often stringing together semi-precious stones, Austrain crystals, and freshwater pearls. The piece that attracted the students was the *Lapis Necklace*, made from the vivid blue, semi-precious lapis stone. The lapis beads—perfectly matched in size and color—are smooth in texture, and they contrast with the large striated lapis pendant that pulls the interest of the necklace to the center. Thin gold accents every six beads add a delicate complexity to the piece. The matched color and subtle details of the piece mask its complexity but not its excellence.

The next part is a case study of the most recent genius next door.

### ***Case Study: Maria Fernanda Espinoza***<sup>23</sup>

The first writing task of the genius project is to place the art of the genius in an artistic and historical context. Espinoza is a Mexican painter.

<sup>23</sup> The contributing writers to the Espinoza article were: J. Bocchicchio, C. Coakley, D. Covey, D. DeLong, J. Diaz, T. Fleege, A. Gornik, J. Guitron, L. Guzman, P. Kogan, A. Macarayo, E. Pinacate, T. Roberts, C. Rogers, A. Stout, M. Velasquez.

### ***Excerpt from Introduction***

Maria Fernanda Espinoza is 22 years old, much too young to have known firsthand the watershed impact of the 1910 Mexican Revolution in her country. She also could not have known firsthand the post-war struggle by intellectuals and politicians to forge a national Mexican culture from the regional fragments created by socio-cultural and ethnic inequalities, or the role played in this struggle by two Marxist artists, muralist Diego Rivera (1886-1957) and painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). However, it is not always necessary to participate in the historical events to be influenced by them. Espinoza herself says, "I lived every day in this (Mexican) culture, and it goes deep in my soul." Her soul reflects the influences of Mexico's turbulent history and especially of the country's most famous artists, Rivera and Kahlo.

Rivera's murals are monumental in size and in the number of people (sometimes in the hundreds) that populate them. In the "History of Mexico" series (1929-1935) decorating the staircase of the National Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City, for example, over 400 figures portray Mexico's history: the right wall illustrates the indigenous past, the central wall the 400-year period covering the Spanish conquest to the Mexican Revolution, and finally the left wall the early twentieth century and an anticipated socialist future. Though the murals depict much pain and suffering, Rivera concludes the series with human beings triumphant in socialism. Human beings can rise beyond their difficulties to live their dreams. Perhaps no mural better captures the fire in each person's soul to transcend life's struggles than "Subterranean Forces" (1926) on the east wall of the chapel on the Autonomous University of Chapingo campus in central Mexico. Painted in shades of fiery red, the mural shows three people rising from tunnels in the earth and preparing, presumably, to surface and to change the world. No force can hold these people back; indeed, no force can stop the march of Mexican history toward socialism, the land of milk and honey.

Frida Kahlo, on the other hand, paints from feelings of pain (she is known as the queen of pain). Her spine was shattered and a handrail pierced her pelvis in a bus accident when she was 18; at 22, she married Rivera, a compulsive adulterer, and later she had numerous affairs of her own, with men and women. Kahlo translated this raw material of personal experiences into paintings, many of them self-portraits, which are dream-like and emotionally intense. For

example, in "Self-Portrait with Monkeys" (1943), she depicts herself with four monkeys, two of them with their arms and tails wrapped around her. Rivera had once given her a monkey as a substitute for the child she could never bear, due to her injuries from the bus accident. But the monkeys do not overwhelm the painting. Her gaze does: it is proud and stoic, defying the cruelties of life. A second example is "Diego on my Mind" (1943). Kahlo is wearing a floral crown on an elaborate wedding headdress similar to the one worn by women of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. In the middle of her forehead is a small portrait of Rivera. A blissful nuptial scene? Hardly. Tendrils from the floral crown surround Kahlo's face and spread like a spider's web throughout the painting. Is Rivera the spider trapping Kahlo, or has Kahlo paralyzed Rivera with her venomous sting?

The hopeful spirit in Rivera's murals and the emotional intensity and dream-like quality of Kahlo's paintings provide the influences shaping the creative spirit of Espinoza's art.

While some students work on the introduction, other students create a biography from the detailed interview.

### ***Excerpt from Biography***

Maria Fernanda Espinoza has been a resident of the United States since 2004, but her roots are firmly planted in her native state of Sonora, Mexico (south of Arizona). Born in 1984, she is the oldest of three girls. A self-taught artist, she began drawing over a decade ago and was guided by an uncle trained in painting. When Espinoza's parents, both professors at the prestigious Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, decided to pursue graduate study in ethics at Loyola University Chicago, they encouraged their daughter to come with them to develop her art and English. In Chicago Espinoza attended an aesthetics course, and the experience led her to the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois Chicago campus.

Espinoza created nine paintings in the aesthetics course, and the students praised them for their subtle colors and abstract shapes that highlighted various dancer themes. This case study focuses on three of the pieces. The first painting, *Fight*, depicts the internal struggle a dancer experiences between dreams of being a full time professional and the reality of having to earn money in the business world to pay for food and rent.





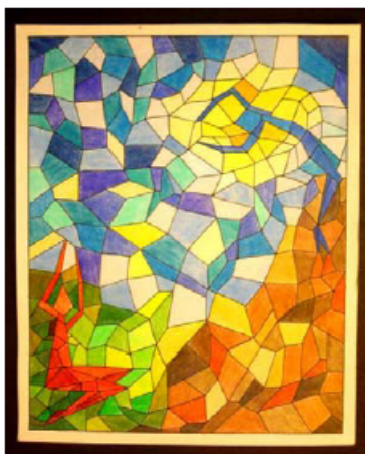
*Fight* Pastels on Paper 10" x 13" 2004

### **Excerpt from Fight Analysis**

The viewer's attention is drawn to a struggle between a red figure on the left and blue figure on the right....The sleek and slender figures are featureless and sexless. Only color and posture distinguish them from each other. The colors, red-orange and blue, are complementary colors, suggesting a contrast that supports a struggle of some kind. And the colors clearly favor the figure on the left....Red-orange is a hot color, making the figure and background jump out at

the viewer. There is even a faint yellow-red halo surrounding the figure. On the right side, the cool blue is making the figure disappear off the paper. Finally, the pastels were rubbed softly with something like tissue paper, creating a fog over the painting and uniting its two halves.

Espinoza's second piece, *Jump for a Dream*, reminds everyone to take time to dream and then to jump hard and high for the dream of a lifetime, exactly what dancers must do to launch themselves into professional careers.



*Jump for a Dream* Color Pencils on Paper 10" x 13" 2004

### **Excerpt from Jump for a Dream Analysis**

Everything in the painting seems to be moving: blocks, colors, and especially figures. The blocks' irregular shapes and placement in arc formations create the impression of movement, as if the blocks were flowing through the painting and bringing the colors along with them. This movement adds a surreal or dream-

like touch to the piece, providing a perfect backdrop for the two action-figures, the red figure in the bottom left with legs bent, ready to jump, and the blue figure in the top right floating in the dream....The red figure is on fire with a dream, and the blue figure is energized as it passes through the hot reds and oranges to achieve its dream.

Espinoza's third piece, *Dancer*, depicts a person in the "heat" of a dance.



*Dancer Water Colors on Paper 10" x 13" 2004*

### **Excerpt from Dancer Analysis**

The black lines, their economy and placement in four arcs, create the illusion of a dancer in the midst of a one-legged back-bend with the left hand shaking a yellow-tailed pom pom. The abstract figure, however, does not attempt to portray a textbook back-bend, where the dancer plants both feet on the ground, and then bends backwards until both hands touch the ground. This dancer is extending the left leg high in the air and with the left hand is waving a pom pom. The lines and colors combine to capture the dancer's passion and intensity, the simple curved lines suggesting the movement and the colors adding the intensity.

Starting at the painting's hottest point, the dancer's heart, hot red meets melted gold. This dancer's heart is on fire, and the heat is spreading from the heart to the limbs and beyond. To maintain the heat motif throughout most of the painting, Espinoza has colored the upper left corner yellow to represent the sun's hot high noon rays shooting down on the dancer and mixing, as it were, with red throughout the painting to intensify the heat.

After the analyses, the article ends with a conclusion.

### **Excerpt from Conclusion**

Espinoza may have painted visions of a dancer, but she has succeeded in visualizing much more. She captured the two selves in all human beings: the self planted in reality that struggles to pay the bills and the self that dreams of flying to new realities. The images of the two selves also reveal profound Mexican cultural influences, the intense dreamlike quality of Frida Kahlo's

self-portraits and the hopeful message of Diego Rivera's murals. Sometimes, artists travel far from home only to discover that they never really left home.

### **Conclusion: Weaknesses and Strengths of the Genius Project**

Projects always start with sky-high hopes, but then reality brings them back to earth.

The genius project has at least four weaknesses. First, the dominant art form tends to be painting. Though the students completed work in two other art forms (altar cloth design and jewelry design), they selected six painters as the genius next door. Why are the students not selecting geniuses in dance, music, theatre, sculpture, architecture, poetry, cinematography, photography, poetry, story telling, and so on? Are social institutions shaping students' minds to identify art with painting? Is the instructor favoring painting? Are the students appreciating fiction and poetry as art or merely as homework? They listen to music constantly, so why are they not choosing musicians as geniuses? Is music an art form significantly easier to appreciate than to analyze? These questions need to be explored to place the genius project in a more critical context. Second, the students do not resolve their issues with the myriad and sometimes conflicting views of art evaluation. In almost every case, students select the genius because the art attracts them. In other words, students find the art good, though, in discussing criteria for the art's quality, the differing views of evaluation get buried under the popular vote for the criteria to judge the art. The vote ends discussion, even if questions on evaluation remain. Third, the practical and demanding writing tasks tend to obscure the initial distinctions between good art and beautiful art. It is possible under relativism to agree that an art piece is good because it is beautiful, but then what is

beauty? Many students put forward idiosyncratic views of beauty—it is art that “makes me cry,” or art “that is awesome.” The genius project, as currently conceived, does not help students resolve these important theoretical issues in aesthetics. Fourth, there is no mechanism in place to follow the development of the artist’s career after the article is completed.

On the other hand, the genius project has succeeded on many fronts. First, student debate on art evaluation and beauty reflects the current state of affairs in aesthetics. The prestigious *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* states, “Contemporary aesthetics is a rich and challenging part of philosophy, marked by a high level of disagreement even about what its basic problems are.”<sup>24</sup> For more than 2,000 years, the paramount problem in aesthetics was beauty, but not any more. Today, most aestheticians are reluctant to ask, “Is the painting beautiful?” Instead, they query, “Does the painting have aesthetic value?”<sup>25</sup> This uncertainty in aesthetics motivates some students to study multiple philosophies of art evaluation and beauty and to work hard to defend their own views, once they adopt a position. A second strength is that the genius project brings more artists to the attention of more people, further democratizing art. The 40 students bring to class art from around the world, thereby introducing classmates and the instructor to artists and art pieces they would never have encountered on their own. The early classes, when students are arguing for the adoption of their

genius, are often the most lively and exciting classes of the semester. Additionally, the selected genius—after completion of the article—is presented to a worldwide audience. Third, the genius project provides one more social institution to encourage artists to keep developing their craft and creativity. Many of the geniuses selected for the class project create their art for local display only, for example, Weglowska embroiders altar cloths for her local church. They are often stunned that people outside their communities find value in the art pieces. Moreover, because the recognition is institutionalized, it can be a transformative experience in the life of an artist. The selection of Espinoza as the genius next door encouraged her to trust in her talent and to apply to the University of Illinois Chicago School of Architecture. Finally, students see firsthand the social forces encouraging or inhibiting the development of artistic genius. After Espinoza had explained to the class how her parents had managed their finances so that she could explore her artistic talent full time, another student wondered out loud if the bitter divorce of his parents had perhaps crippled his mother’s painting talent. The firsthand experience of social institutions affecting artists yields insights difficult to acquire by other means. In the end, this strength of the genius project may be the most profound one.

The genius project reminds all of us that communities are open books which have much to teach us.

## About the Author

*Dr. Dan Vaillancourt*

Dr. Vaillancourt has served as chairman of humanities and graduate school dean, but he considers aesthetics his expertise and passion. He completed formal training in the field by majoring at the undergraduate level in philosophy and French literature and by specializing at the doctoral level in phenomenology and existentialism, with extensive study in the intersection of philosophy and literature. He won a French government scholarship, Fulbright grant, two Lilly grants, post-doctoral NEH grant, another NEH grant to serve as a Project Director, Title III grant, and 11 teacher of the year awards/commendations. He has created and taught six undergraduate and graduate courses in aesthetics, ranging from Philosophical Themes in Nobel Prize literature to Philosophy and Theatre, and, of course, Aesthetics. His publications include two books, dozens of articles, and three translations. He also edited a national magazine, *Life Beat*, for four years. Currently, he is writing for his website ([www.kathyanddan.org](http://www.kathyanddan.org)) and completing two books, a philosophical novel (*Aania*) and *Genius Next Door Beauty Series*. He dances and plays the tenor recorder. Like Dostoevsky, he believes beauty changes the world.

<sup>24</sup> See the website: [http://www.stjuliens.com/tok/amhome/Sources%20&%20Ideas%20on%20Aesthetics%20\(hot%20links\).htm](http://www.stjuliens.com/tok/amhome/Sources%20&%20Ideas%20on%20Aesthetics%20(hot%20links).htm) 2006.

<sup>25</sup> For example, the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* claims that “all in all, it may be safer to talk about ‘aesthetic value’ in a more general way....”



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