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Diversity and Inclusion Statement

Life is richer because we are human yet different. The word “university” itself reflects this. “Uni-“ reminds us that we are one school, one group of people. And “-versity” teaches us that we are diverse, different. The principles of design, unity and variety, aren’t only for art but for life: too much sameness, too much unity, and we are bored. Too much variety, and there is chaos. We need both. Within my art and teaching practices, it is crucial to incorporate the work and voices of a wide variety of people.

Currently I am a member of COOP Gallery in Nashville, TN. Our members are diverse and include artists from diverse ethnicities, sexual identities, and ages. This mix of artists is inspiring; we are working together to ensure that Nashville is a richer art community. With our exhibition schedule and film festival, we present not only diverse artists, but diverse artworks — art that needs to be experienced and often is not welcomed within commercial galleries. Our film festival and NADB artist lecture series include a variety of artists, giving them the opportunity to share their work and experiences with a broader audience.

While working on the Gallery Committee at Turnip Green Creative Reuse, we tirelessly worked to ensure that the exhibition schedule included artists of color, genders, and backgrounds. The art exhibited in our galleries incorporates reuse and recycled materials, and often features work of emerging artists and people who began creating work within our workshops. Exhibitions include work from those who obtain art supplies from Turnip Green’s reuse store (the store is pay what you want) including low-income artists from the neighborhood, students from local schools, emerging artists who used our reuse store as a resource to be able to afford good supplies. Artists received 70% of the fees from art sold in the gallery, a rate that helps support them in continuing to make art.

At Western Kentucky University (WKU), I worked within the galleries as the sabbatical replacement for the Gallery Director. I worked to support all students as they installed their senior exhibitions in the Fall and Spring, working the students to ensure there was equality and visual interest in the exhibition installation. I worked with them, as well as professional artists exhibiting within the galleries, to present work, create labels, write press releases, generate contracts, and take exhibition photography. When scheduling exhibitions, we worked to ensure a variety of artists from various backgrounds and practices showed their work, lectured within the department, and visited classes.

Currently I am completing work as an Artist Mentor for the Frist Art Museum and Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS), funded by a Professional Development for Arts Education (PDAE) grant from the Department of Education. For the grant, I work with teachers from MNPS Title I Elementary Schools, working to write Arts Infused lessons which incorporate art and books from diverse backgrounds. We work with the teachers to ensure the art and literacy examples reflect the student population of the school, incorporating different ethnicities — focusing on the backgrounds of the students in class. The artists and authors are like them! Arts Infusion fosters critical thinking, unique art creation, and strong writing skills. It raises student scores and fosters better outcomes for all students, including low-income students and those who are academically behind. During the second year of the grant, students go on a field trip to the Frist. I work with the teachers to write lessons in support of the field trip, inspiring students to create art based upon what they saw and experienced at the Frist Art Museum. During the pandemic, we shifted the field trips to online field trips. The teachers and I wrote art lessons for students who were at school and for those working at home virtually. The lessons are equitable and accessible to both types of students. The grant was also instrumental in creating art kits that went home in the fall of 2020 — all students had art supplies to create art from home.

Working as a Photo Researcher and Intellectual Property Lead for Literature at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt trained me to collect measurable data to ensure that anthologies are diverse. We analyze image and author contributions, counting people based upon gender, ethnicities, and disabilities. The U.S. Census is the basis of the counts; the aim was for the content of the books to reflect US demographics (balance of genders; ethnicities: 60% White, 19% Hispanic, 12% Black, 6% Asian, 3% Other; showing people with disabilities with respect). We were also trained not to reinforce stereotypes, such as showing images of Asian violinists and mathematicians, Black basketball players, and Caucasian doctors.

On a personal note, over a decade ago I moved to the south from Chicago to work with my nephews. I had been trained in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) for working with children with autism when one of my closest friend's sons was diagnosed with autism. ABA's strategies work with most children, but the therapy is very effective for those with autism spectrum diagnoses. I worked with my nephews as one of their therapists for 7.5 years. I witnessed the kindness of people who treated my nephews as people; I also saw them discriminated against by those who don't understand how their minds work and believed they are unable to learn. From working with and experiencing life with my nephews, I have learned how wonderful people with disabilities are: they are not stupid, but require extra support and care in order to flourish. They have so much to offer; it is well worth extra consideration and support for them.

My artwork fosters relationships between people who may or may not otherwise meet, allowing them to spend time making memories and building friendships in specific places of one's life. It strives to be physical manifestation of the cherished yet unseen parts of our relationships: hopes, dreams, wishes, loss, and love.

Currently my work focuses on clouds, as a metaphor of the storms and hopes of life. The sky is a physical space we all share, even during social distancing. My installations feature places based upon landscapes: rivers, caves, geodes, stars, and the moon. My work examines the joy of unexpected yet beautiful spaces and places that may be discovered as one explores the land and structures within it. These spaces are comprised of rich, luscious, inviting materials, such as fabric, glitter, and twinkle lights. The inviting environments allow the viewers to explore the land and get to know one another in a deeper, more profound way. They provide a space for renewal and hope for persevering.

My artwork embraces radical optimism (everyone can find joy and hope) and indiscriminant hospitality (all are welcome to create and experience joy through sharing). Hopefully viewers will realize that people are like landscapes: we make assumptions about initial appearances, but through knowledge and experience, pleasant surprises abound as we gain a deeper knowledge of each other while in the land and through art.