

JOURNEYS | RECORRIDOS

LACMA EXHIBITION PROJECT AT CHARLES WHITE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
YEAR 2



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PREFACE

On December 12, 2008, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) inaugurated Year 2 of the exhibition program at Charles White Elementary School with the opening of *Journeys | Recorridos*. Like *SWAP*, our first exhibition at Charles White, *Journeys | Recorridos* was inspired by the community where students live and attend school.

This year's project grew out of an earlier commission with London-based artist Marysa Dowling to work with students from Charles White Elementary School, Berendo Middle School, and Irving Middle School to photograph their journeys through their schools and neighborhoods. Together, they explored ways to express themselves and their feelings of place; the resulting work and Dowling's photographs of the students and the people important to their lives became the basis for the exhibition at Charles White.

For *Journeys | Recorridos*, we added a new feature to the school's gallery space, a workshop, which became the site of after-school art programs for children, families, and members of the nearby community. Our goal was to provide a dynamic environment for visitors both to create art and reflect on art in the exhibition. This book chronicles those activities.

These school-based activities and the related exhibition were funded through *Art Programs with the Community: LACMA On-Site*, a multiyear partnership that provides art experiences for students and the community. Through an extraordinary endowment from former trustee Anna Bing Arnold, this program has helped the museum reach more than sixty thousand students, teachers, and members of the community annually since the program's inception in the fall of 2006.

JANE BURRELL

VICE PRESIDENT, EDUCATION AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS
LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART

STUDENTS OUR JOURNEYS, OUR STORIES

We often walk right past them, overlooking the people and places we see every day as we move from home to work or home to school. These familiar details became the focus of recent photographic projects by London-based artist Marysa Dowling. In London, Havana, Cape Town, and now Los Angeles, Dowling has asked residents to consider their daily journeys in a new way. “I want to explore how people communicate and engage with the city and the others around them,” said Dowling, “and most importantly, how they express themselves in front of, and communicate through, the camera.”

During the second year of *Art Programs with the Community: LACMA On-Site*, the museum commissioned Dowling to work with elementary and middle school students enrolled in District 4 of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). She led workshops at Charles White Elementary School, Berendo Middle School, and Washington Irving Middle School. The exhibition, *Journeys | Recorridos*, displayed in the art gallery at Charles White, consisted of photographs made by the students and by Dowling herself.

One room in the gallery featured works from Dowling’s series *A Collective Moment*. Young people from three different cities are shown daydreaming. “These images reflect on those moments in our lives we take to let our mind wander from daily routine,” said Dowling. “Daydreaming gives us space within a hectic life to process our thoughts and fears, turning them into something positive.”



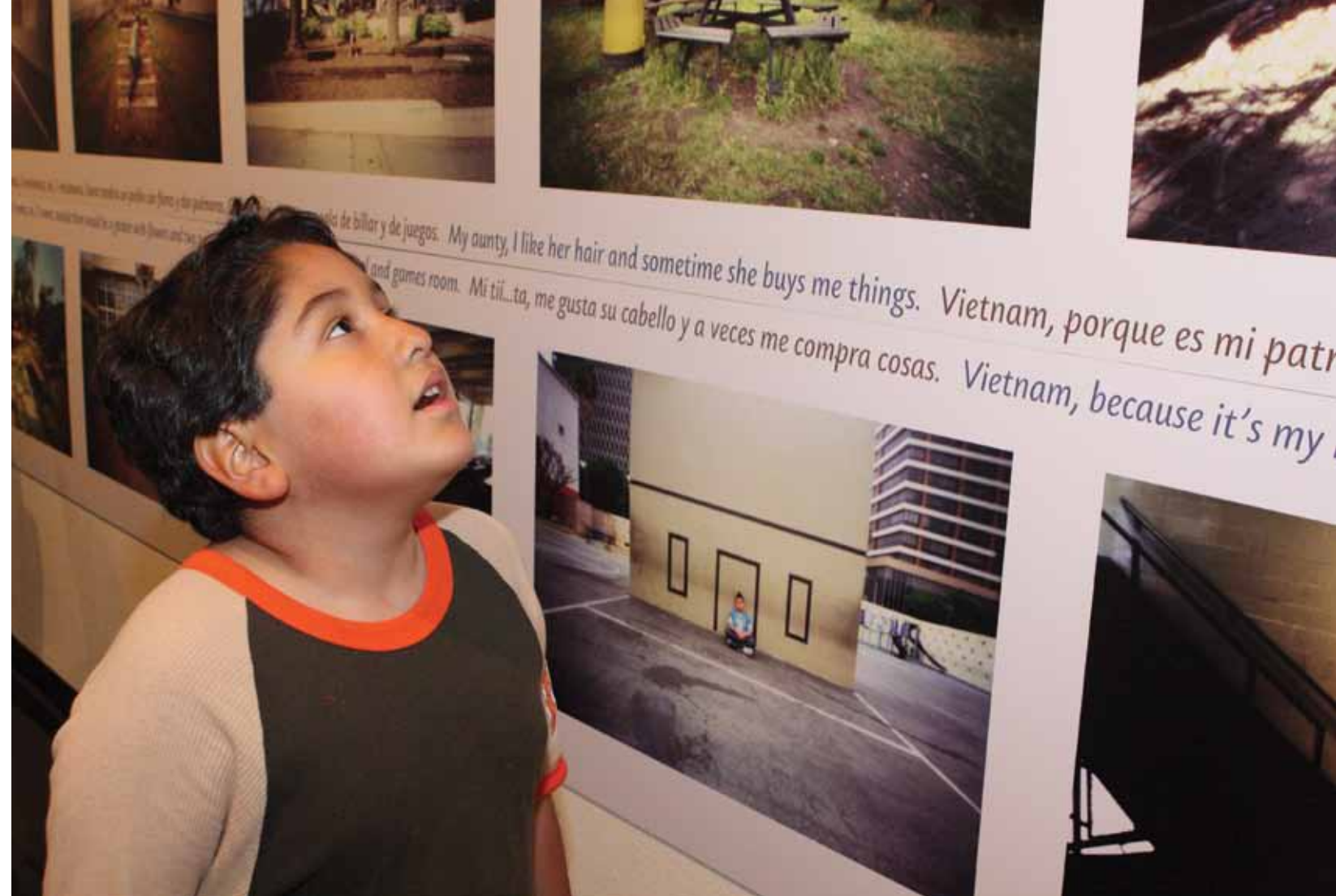
I wanna become a doctor, I just like doing stuff that I have to investigate and see what I have to do. Yo quiero ser doctor, me gusta hacer cosas que tengo que investigar y ver lo que tengo que hacer.



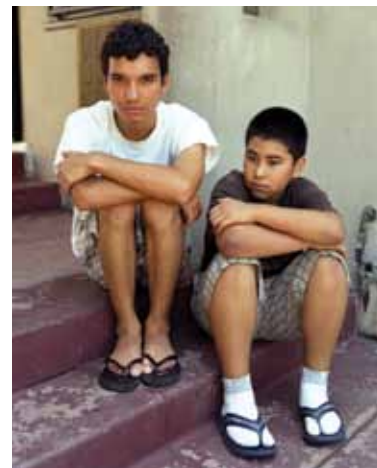
I would go back to my country, I would love to help my friends and family because they don't have a lot of money, all they do is go to farm and plant some food to eat. Quisiera regresar a mi país, me encantaría ayudar a mis amigos y familias que no tienen mucho dinero, lo único que hacen es trabajar en el campo y plantar algunas cosas para comer.



Just share it all, I don't see the point in money. Sólo compártelo todo, no le veo ningún sentido al dinero.



In a second exhibition area, student photography was displayed near selections from two ongoing series developed by Dowling. One was entitled *Movements* and focused on people's relationship to place. The other, *The Movement of an Object*, explored the expressive use of a single object—a blue plastic bag—in portraits. All the photographs in this section were created in Los Angeles, a process that began months before the exhibition opened, when Dowling first visited the LAUSD schools.





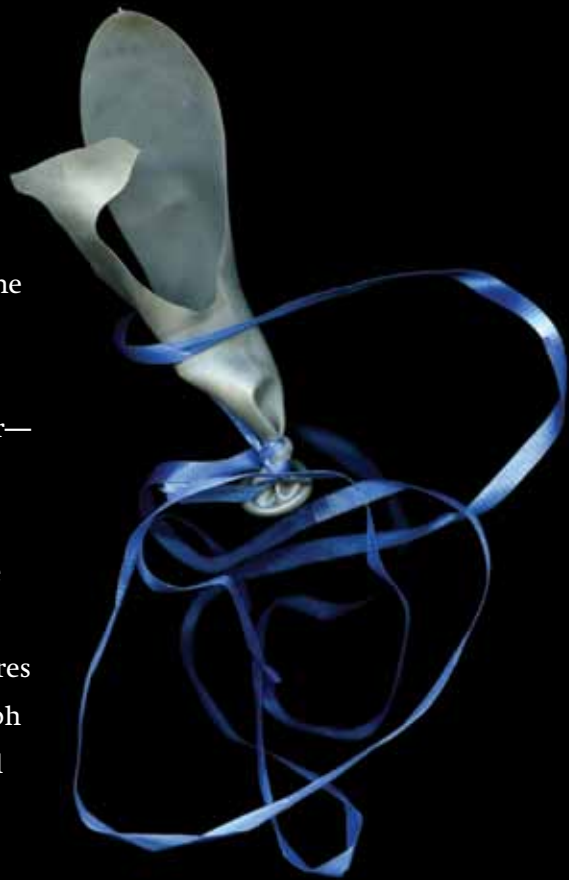
Charles White teachers Kristin Fredricks and Paul Lowe remembered when Dowling introduced herself to their fourth-grade students. She presented her work in a slide show, explaining how she wanted to be an artist when she was their age. When she told the students she wanted to learn about their daily journeys, the kids were captivated. “They were meeting a real artist,” recalled Fredricks, “and she was validating their everyday experiences. She was documenting journeys of kids in Los Angeles, and those [journeys] were important and those were art. I think that validation was really exciting to them.”

“And her British accent was intriguing, too!” said Paul Lowe. “They emulated her, but at the same time they were learning what it was to find their own voice. She gave them some guidelines, but she let them explore.”



One week, Dowling asked the students to bring objects to school that they found on their daily journeys. She did the same during her time in Los Angeles. Dowling collected all these objects and later took them back to London, where she scanned them against a black background. These digital images—some of rocks, leaves, an old shoe, and street litter—became dramatic evidence of the beauty found along the paths we walk every day.

After collecting objects, Dowling then led the students around the school campus. Working in groups of four, each group with a digital camera, the students took turns taking pictures of each other and pictures of their school. These skills of framing an image and taking a photograph prepared the students for what Fredricks called their “art trip,” a formal field trip into the neighborhood around the school.



“I took a picture of a melted ice cream on the sidewalk.”

“I remember Marysa commenting that it was interesting how the kids were able to focus in on small things and right to the beauty,” said Fredricks. “It was neat. They weren’t taking just big panoramic city shots.”



“Some places were clean and some were dirty.”





These personal connections with the familiar places and faces of their neighborhood heightened the children’s interest in the exhibition and related activities. When they went as a class into the gallery, they easily fell into conversations or comfortably wrote stories inspired by the imagery. And they began to imagine themselves as artists, capable of capturing pictures of what they know.

Fredricks noticed this transformation in her students. “As a kid, I think you think of art in school and art in a museum as so different. Drawing a picture on your own versus seeing a picture in a museum, they’re not in any way connected. But all of a sudden, with this project, that art world opened up to the kids. They were participating in it. They felt empowered.”



Dowling worked with a small group of students from Charles White and the two middle schools in a separate, more focused project called *The Movement of an Object*. Six students from the schools and second-grade teacher Leo Villarreal from Charles White received the following set of instructions from Dowling for that project.

1. Decide on a journey that you take frequently. This could be your journey to school, a trip to a sports field, or going to visit a friend or family member.
2. Choose five people you meet on your journey to photograph, perhaps a bus driver, a shop owner, or family member.
3. The people you choose must live in Los Angeles.
4. Pose with the object (a blue plastic bag) to have your photograph taken. We will make sure that your body, the object, and the surrounding environment are included within the frame of the photograph.



Dowling based her Los Angeles project on a similar activity she developed in London in 2007, which traced the movement of an ordinary object across that great city. She chose a blue plastic bag, which are as common there as plastic grocery bags are in the United States.

“I use the object as a way for people to express themselves,” Dowling said, “bringing performative aspects to the portraits.” Choice is central to her artistic process: Dowling lets her participants choose how to use the blue bag and how they want to be photographed. The resulting Los Angeles images ranged from playful to introspective, set in the small, familiar rooms of home or, in one dramatic case, the backseat of a police car.

Teacher Leo Villarreal decided to focus on his own educational journey, hoping to inspire his young students with the path he took from elementary to high school and on to college. In one image, he sits outside a classroom on his elementary school campus. How did he feel about the





Journeys project? “I felt honored and proud, being able to share my story, having it captured in these pictures.”

After Dowling completed her work with students, LACMA mounted an exhibition of the photographs. *Journeys | Recorridos* opened in the gallery at Charles White on December 12, 2008. The exhibition opening marked the end of the first phase of the project and initiated the second, consisting of informal and formal interactions with the works on view. On their own, students came to the gallery during recess or after school to look at the photographs. With their teachers and classmates, they came during the school day to talk about and sometimes write about what they saw in the images. And some, the participants in the after-school program, came on a regular basis to the gallery to make art related to the exhibition.



Mr. Villarreal brought his second graders every Thursday for a writing exercise. They made connections with what they knew from the neighborhood, Maggie's Donuts, for instance, and the ice cream truck. Mr. Villarreal asked his students to pick a favorite work on view and develop a story. Many liked a photograph taken by a fourth grader, showing a woman in a parked car, a baby on her lap. "As writers," Mr. Villarreal said, "they started developing characters. 'What should we call the baby? What's the baby doing? Is the baby driving?'"

Just as he encouraged his students to make meaning from the images, Mr. Villarreal did the same. Looking at the girl in the police car, he spoke of the police presence in the community. "As sad as it may seem that it's a police car, it's what the kids see. This is the reality of where we live." But he quickly added that he recognized the confidence of the girl, asking permission of the officers to pose in their car.



Dowling hopes the student participants and people visiting the exhibition will draw their own conclusions. "I want the viewer to create their own narrative," she said, "to make connections between the things they know, have experienced, and can see in the image." This is her invitation to recognize the stories contained within the daily journeys we all make.

Journeys can begin with questions. Visitors at the entrance to *Journeys | Recorridos* were met with these.

How do you experience life in Los Angeles?

What trips do you make on a regular basis?

Who do you see and talk with on these journeys?

How do you share your ideas with others?

ARTIST *COMMUNICATING THROUGH THE CAMERA*

Elizabeth Gerber, LACMA's manager of School and Teacher Programs, interviewed artist Marysa Dowling when the exhibition *Journeys | Recorridos* opened.

GERBER: What were your goals for the *Journeys* project?

DOWLING: The pieces in *Journeys* are all portraiture projects with several intentions: to look at how people live and move around the city they live in; to explore how people communicate; how they engage with the city and the others around them; how they use and see everyday objects; and most importantly, how people express themselves in front of, and communicate through, the camera.



The overall title of the project is *Journeys*, but there are several pieces of interconnected work within it. The main pieces are entitled *Movements* and *The Movement of an Object*, with another called *A Collective Moment*. Variations of these last two have also taken place in London, Havana, and Cape Town.

GERBER: Your artistic process often involves many decisions by the individuals you are working with and photographing. Could you describe your process for this project?

DOWLING: I wanted to create a piece of work that let, to a certain degree, other people's choices shape how the project would evolve and who would be involved. Their explorations and journeys would lead mine. So for the main pieces I came up with a set of rules—or rather instructions—for each person to follow, as well as for myself.





GERBER: Why did you propose this theme of journeys for this project in Los Angeles?

DOWLING: It seemed obvious to me to use this theme as a way to explore a city that doesn't immediately unfold itself. L.A. has such a particular way of being viewed by those who have never been here and has an odd familiarity to the rest of the world. Having an overarching theme that I could explore in various ways is something I often do. I also like to work on similar projects in different cities simultaneously.

Living in London, I suppose, makes me a "city" person myself, which sparks an ongoing interest to see how people in another cities live, how they communicate and can know each other in such a vast place. So much serendipity is involved in people meeting. Realizing how many people live totally different lives within the city seems obvious, but once you really start to see and hear about it, it's quite overwhelming. It's also amazing the connections that start to unfold.

GERBER: *Why the blue plastic bag?*

DOWLING: I began using this object in London, when The Photographers' Gallery in London commissioned the project entitled *The Movement of an Object*. It had a similar theme of uncovering how people are connected within a city. I thought for quite a while about the object. I knew it had to be a common, ordinary, and ubiquitous object, something people use and engaged with all the time but do so without really thinking about it. It's also important that the object can be changed, adapted, or even destroyed by the sitter as a way of enabling them to express themselves. So a plastic bag came to mind, and the blue plastic bag is the most common unbranded type you will find. These bags are absolutely everywhere in London and a lot of other places I've noticed since.

I use the object as a way for people to express themselves, bringing

performative aspects to the portraits. Everyone has something creative inside of them; the choices people make and how they choose to represent themselves, this urge to express ourselves in front of the camera is what fascinates me.

GERBER: *What was surprising about Los Angeles?*

DOWLING: I was slightly familiar with the city as I have family who live here. But they live a little east of the city, so I usually spend time where they live when I come to see them. I'd not spent too much time in the city until I began the project. It's a fascinating place, so big and unruly in the way it spreads and tangles. I've heard people who have visited for only a couple of days say that you can't find anything easily, that there's no center or a place to start your exploration of the city. But I really like that, it makes it challenging and diverse, you just have to work a bit harder.





One thing the project has done is reinforced my thoughts about how complex and problematic cities are and but also how wonderful, strange, and engaging they are. People live with similar concerns in cities everywhere.

GERBER: You worked with children of different ages, inviting them to explore a daily journey following the same set of instructions. How would you describe the work created by the fourth graders at Charles White? And their process?

DOWLING: They were really open to the ideas and excited to show me around their school and local area. We looked at my work as well as images from LACMA's collection to start things off. Discussing as well as making photographs was quite new to them. Looking at images of other children and young people from London and Cuba I'd photographed hooked them

in to begin discussing what a photograph can convey—messages and interpretations of images, particularly portraiture—they all had quite clear ideas about what they were looking at. We worked together making different photographs, some on a local journey they led me on as a group. They also collected objects on their way to and from school.

With all of the students, I made portraits of them around the school, in a place of their choosing. This gave me more chance to work together one to one and talk about the work we were making. They would often ask me about where and how I lived, how does London compare to L.A.? Their perception of London was often based on TV or film as ours often is of L.A. The most interesting thing for me was their desire to tell me about where they live, to take me places and show me the objects they collected and the photographs they made.



GERBER: What stood out in the work created by the students from Berendo and Washington Irving Middle Schools?

DOWLING: With Irving Middle School I worked mainly with a group of girls at their after-school program. They wanted to stay within the school and explore it as they had a strong connection to some of the places they spent time, and several of them were leaving to go to high school very soon. We made photographs using disposable cameras both in the school and on their regular journeys. We collected objects, made drawings and rubbings around the school, while I made Polaroids of the group and the surrounding area as well as portraits of them in places of their choice around the school.

At Berendo we had a good editing session to narrow down the images with the teacher and students. This is always a really interesting



and telling part of the process for me. I get to see what they have to say about the project, about where they live and the details of the images but also what they have taken from the project. Editing can be such a hard part of the process, but it's essential and pulls things together. Having a group make these decisions always brings up some really lively discussion, and people have to share their ideas and vision. It was also a good point to continue the discussion about what makes a good and effective photograph, and to talk about details in the images that people hadn't noticed before. As everything is new to me, I notice different things. This helps the conversation to evolve in a different direction.

GERBER: The galleries include an area for people to add something to the exhibition. What would you hope people might think about when adding to the space?

DOWLING: I hope people will begin to build up a picture, a feeling of who lives in the areas that the project led me to, how they live, and the ways they communicate and engage with each other and the spaces they inhabit—finding something new through the small details in an image, while simultaneously finding recognition of something similar to their own lives.

I'd like people to bring their own stories, the small details about how they live, making connections by adding photographs, words, or drawings. Elizabeth, what do you hope people will bring to the exhibition? Take from the exhibition?

GERBER: Like you, I hope that with careful looking at the artwork, visitors will see something new in this city or consider different ways they can look at their own neighborhoods or familiar journeys. I want them to



leave the exhibition with a new interest in seeing artwork and in learning how some of the young people in Los Angeles view their schools and neighborhoods. And I'd like to think that the broad role LACMA, and museums generally, can have in this city will be refreshed and reinforced. I too hope that the collective portrait presented in the exhibition continues to grow over time.

DOWLING: Why are these types of projects important to LACMA?

GERBER: The museum supports an incredible amount of work with students and teachers; a project such as this one encourages art making and discussions with students and teachers—as well as their families, friends, and neighbors—outside of a traditional classroom setting. By basing projects in different neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles, the museum can explore the interests and concerns of these various



neighborhoods and work with individuals who might not have previously visited LACMA. Ultimately, projects that create new and dynamic works of art, build community, engage with audiences, and educate (in the broadest possible sense) are critical to furthering LACMA's mission.

DOWLING: Why is it important to commission artists?

GERBER: From my perspective, the museum has the opportunity to foster the creative process and to share it more broadly with others through these types of commissions.

When it comes to commissioning artists to work with students, there is a range of important benefits. In addition to the creation of new work, the time and energy that you shared with the participants can have a large impact. So often we hear from teachers and principals about the importance of artists as role models for their students. With this project,

you introduced David Hockney's *Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio* as an artwork for students to view and discuss before considering their own journeys throughout Los Angeles. At LACMA we often try to view our encyclopedic collection through a contemporary lens, and artists are very good partners in this endeavor.

There's always a risk when new work is created, but in my opinion, that risk is an interesting and important element as well.

DOWLING: In what ways could this project connect with other cities?

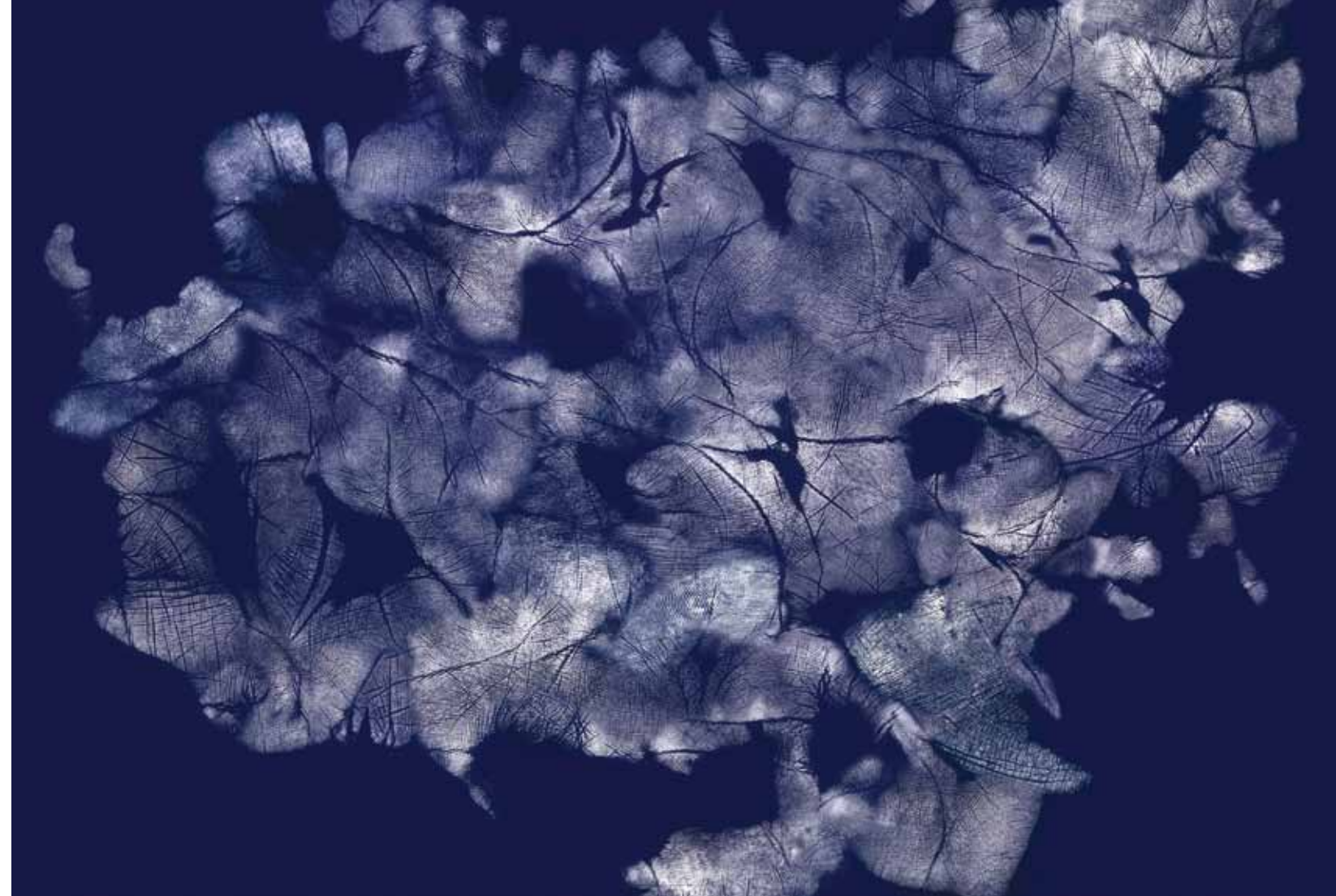
GERBER: We live in an increasingly global world, where images and information can travel at an incredibly rapid rate. At the same time, localities matter—and they matter a lot. In my mind, a project like this does an excellent job of highlighting the similarities and differences of cities and the people who live in them.

Marysa Dowling was born in 1975 in London, England. She studied at the University of Brighton, England, where she earned her B.A. in Editorial Photography in 1998 and her M.A. in Design by Independent Project in 2005. Her photographic projects have been widely exhibited in the United Kingdom and abroad. Each of Dowling's projects becomes a multilayered study, often happening in several countries, during which she builds links and connections across communities, societies, and cultures over time. As an artist-educator, she has worked with people of all ages in schools and various community organizations.

"My practice is concerned with human behavior and interaction. I work closely with my subjects to explore the ways in which we represent ourselves."—Marysa Dowling

MUSEUM EDUCATORS *GAINING TRACTION: LACMA ON-SITE*

Photographs of familiar neighborhood places and school friends filled two rooms of the Charles White gallery. But in the first room, the actual presence of children animated the space. Low, child-sized tables covered with art supplies attracted their attention. Rails installed along the wall invited them to display what they had made. Photographs of classmates and older students at the middle schools, the ones who participated in the *Journeys* project, inspired the children. And the display of a large “blueprint,” actually a composite of handprints of the *Journeys* participants, encouraged the children to make art and think about the art that was displayed in the gallery.

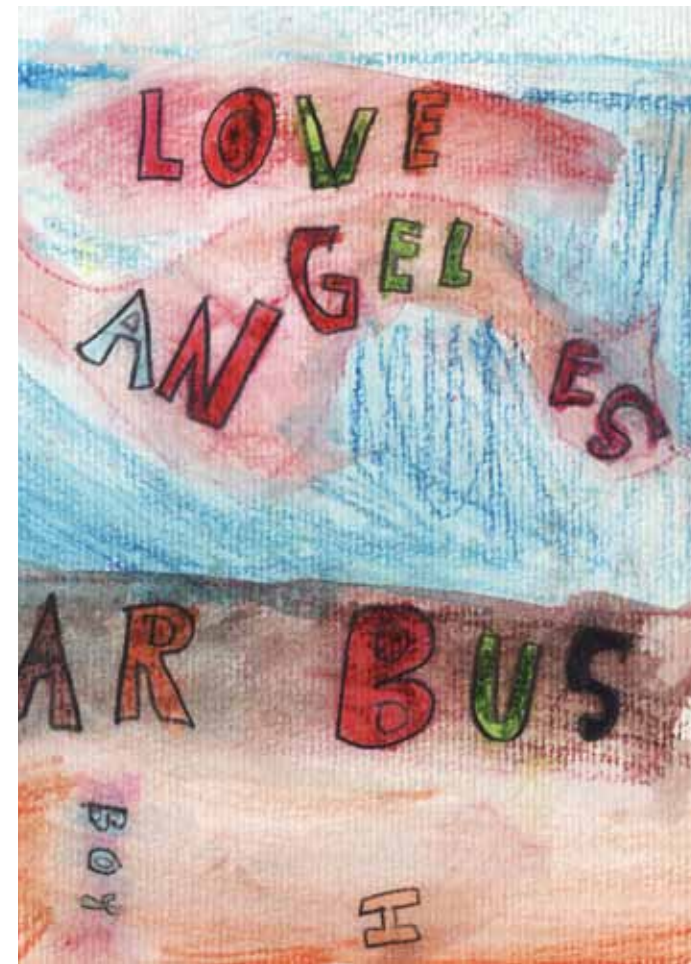


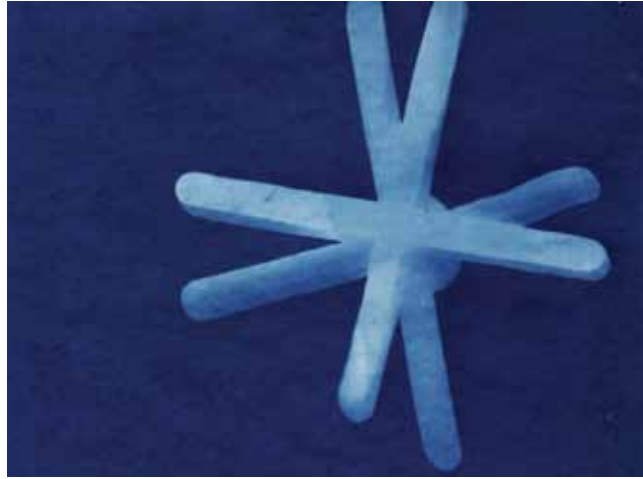
The dedication of one gallery room to these various purposes was a new addition to LACMA's exhibition program at Charles White. "It created a space and time for students to engage with the exhibition in multiple ways and consider multiple art forms and have conversations that could take place over multiple days," said Elizabeth Gerber, LACMA's manager of School and Teacher Programs. "So it created a deeper, more sustained level of engagement. In a way, that was the primary goal of this first gallery space, to allow traction to take place."

LACMA kept the gallery open after school, allowing children and community members to take advantage of the opportunities to make art and look at the exhibition. During the summer, Friday workshops featured special projects using materials and techniques that were new to many of the participants.



STUART DAVIS, PREMIERE, 1957





May Jong, the gallery coordinator, led a team of facilitators in developing projects. Because *Journeys* focused on photography, LACMA educators, in planning for the activities that would take place in this gallery space, asked themselves, how can you make a photograph without a darkroom or without a computer and printer? How can you create an image of where you live?

The gallery facilitators used sun prints to create the experience of darkroom photography—of watching an image emerge. The children had the option of using objects they collected, like leaves and rocks, or objects provided in the gallery, including paper clips, Popsicle sticks, or reproductions of LACMA artwork. They layered objects on specially treated paper and set the project in the sun. Later, after rinsing the paper, the image of the objects appeared in white against a blue background.



“On some days the sun wasn’t so bright,” Jong said, “so they had to wait several minutes for the image to appear. But they would be patient because it was kind of like magic to them!”

Other projects called attention to the theme of the exhibition, to what we experience every day in a city. Students considered sounds. They sat quietly before reporting on what they heard outside. “I heard a fire truck! I heard a bus!” Then they looked at the exhibition photographs and imagined sounds. “This one’s quiet,” one student decided. “I hear the water,” offered another. Instructors introduced how words can represent the city. Using a work from LACMA’s collection as inspiration, Stuart Davis’s *Premiere* (1957), students made collages that substituted words for their pictures of Los Angeles.

Charles White students who have visited LACMA on field trips know one of the most famous pictures of Los Angeles. David Hockney’s



painting *Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio* (1980) is a huge, colorful work detailing Hockney's drive through Los Angeles on his way to work. One after-school project involved a similar experience. Students walked outside the school and drew pictures of what they saw. Later, each student cut out the drawing and pasted it on a huge roll of paper in the gallery. Together, they created a two-dimensional picture of Los Angeles.

"The kids really enjoyed this project and came up with a new idea," Jong said, "to build a 3-D city." And they did. Working in teams, they created an ever-expanding display of freeways, mountains, and the beach using construction paper and other materials. Like L.A. itself, the display began to sprawl out of control, and so the students dismantled it.

While Charles White students formed the majority of gallery workshop participants, members of other after-school programs also attended. And programs were not limited to the after-school hours.

During the day, LACMA educators were on hand to lead pre-arranged field trips made by other schools. During one of those visits, middle school students engaged in discussions and then used viewfinders to explore the photographs. This tool helped them focus on details and then create a story from these points of personal interest.

Having an art workshop at school made the process of creating art and the practice of discussing art commonplace to the students. "We wanted them to think of LACMA as their museum. The gallery became their place," said Jong. "They knew every nook and cranny of it. It was a safe place. They could come here and make art. There were people who respected them and talked to them like adults."

The Charles White exhibition and workshop programs created multiple ways of learning and making personal connections for members of the school community. For teachers, prior experiences with LACMA's



professional development programs allowed them to make connections between the museum’s permanent collection and the classroom curriculum. For students, meeting and working with artists gave them greater ownership of their own ideas and artwork. Some now imagine a future infused with art. Students, their families, and teachers all recognized the power of creating art about their experiences and their community.

Multiple museum programs, offered over many years, each building on the last, have created a recognition of and momentum for art education in the schools. Students at Charles White may not understand this phenomenon, but they are its beneficiaries. LACMA is their museum. Art is part of the shared experience at their school.

“Kids in the after-school program started coming into class and saying, ‘Can we go over to the gallery?’ or ‘Can I tell you about a project I did there?’ So their interest became an engine for us, as teachers, to use the gallery more often.”

Paul Lowe, fourth-grade teacher,
Charles White Elementary
School

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Marysa Dowling for her energy and dedication to this multifaceted project and the students and teachers of Charles White Elementary School, Berendo Middle School, and Washington Irving Middle School for their enthusiastic participation in creating these artworks and the *Journeys* exhibition. We would also like to thank LACMA's leadership for their support of this and other community-based programs. The following staff members made the installation a reality: architects Victoria Behner and Eileen Dikdan; graphic designer Amy McFarland; manager of construction Bill Stahl; and electrician Roosevelt Simpson. Without our partnership with LAUSD District 4, this project would never have been possible. District Superintendent Richard Alonzo's vision for

the arts was invaluable, as was the unwavering cooperation from LaMoin Garrard, arts coordinator for District 4, and the administration and staff at Charles White Elementary School.

We are also grateful to May Jong and the LACMA gallery facilitators who welcomed visitors and led art-making activities daily, to Susan Hoffmann for documenting the project in this publication, to Chris Keledjian for his thoughtful editing, and to LACMA's Education Department for creating connections to ongoing education programs.

