



A self-portrait by Adrian Guerra, from the Boston Arts Academy, is part of "Photosynthesis II" at the Griffin Museum. (The Boston Globe)

## Displaying flashes of creativity Museum readies second exhibit of student photos

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By Mark Feeney, Globe Staff | April 1, 2007

Which of these names doesn't belong: a) Sebastiao Salgado ; b) Henry Horenstein ; c) Martin Schoeller ; d) students from Boston Arts Academy and Winchester High School?

The first three are celebrated contemporary photographers, so the obvious answer is d).

In fact, all of them belong on the list, since all of them have had photographs shown in exhibitions at the Griffin Museum of Photography in Winchester.

Last year, the Griffin had 20 students from each school work on a joint project, "Photosynthesis," that involved their doing individual photographic projects, which were then critiqued by Alison Nordstrom, curator of photographs at George Eastman House, in Rochester, N.Y. The students also got to meet with Horenstein and photographer Deborah Willis as artistic mentors. Finally, the students' photographs were exhibited at the Griffin.

"Photosynthesis" proved such a success that "Photosynthesis II" opens at the Griffin April 24.

"We're honored to be able to host an exhibition on this level that pulls so many students together and to be able to launch a program that allows them to collaborate," says Blake Fitch, the museum's executive director. "It's great to be able to use our resources to bring them into contact with some of the finest photographers."

Nordstrom is again critiquing the students' photos, and this year's artistic mentors are Abelardo Morell and Lorie Novak.

"I thought it was pretty great," says Morell. "What I saw was this big effort to do something pretty sophisticated. It was definitely not a dumbing down. The kids seemed very engaged with my presentation, and they asked good questions -- a range from 'How much is that picture worth?' to 'How did you end up doing what you do?' There were really good questions about how you balance making art and making a living at it. It showed that some of them have ambitions to follow up on this."

Brett Howley, a Winchester High senior, praised both Morell's and Novak's presentations. "They showed us what real professionals can do," she said. "They pretty much started taking up photography the way we did, when young, and we could see how their inspirations came from everyday life, like ours."

The Griffin had traditionally done an annual show of work by Winchester High students. Not only is the school near the museum, it has a strong photography program. Some years as many as 150 students enroll in it.

The success of the partnership made the Griffin eager to do something more ambitious. "We really wanted to do a larger show that served a larger audience but still included Winchester High," recalls Fitch, "to make it bigger and better, bring in another school, outside artists."

Fitch and Paula Tognarelli, the Griffin's deputy director, approached Dave Ardito, director of visual arts at Winchester High, and Robert Gillis, who teaches photography there. They responded enthusiastically to the idea. Ardito was acquainted with a photography teacher at Boston Arts Academy, Guy Michel Telemaque, who was receptive to the two schools collaborating under the aegis of the Griffin.

The academy, Tognarelli notes, "is the only public high school for the visual and performing arts in Boston. It's a leader and innovator in urban public education and is used as a model for other schools nationally. . . . [T]he Boston Arts Academy and Winchester High augment each other quite nicely."

The next issue was funding. Although Nordstrom and the artistic mentors took only a modest honorarium, the overall cost would still be considerable. Getting the Boston students out to the Griffin for one of the two mentor presentations and for the show, and getting the Winchester students into Boston for the other presentation and Nordstrom's critique, meant hiring buses. Exhibition images had to be framed and matted, brochures and signage printed. Expenses amounted to \$10,000. Two Winchester-based foundations, the John and Mary Murphy Foundation and the Griffin Foundation (not related to the museum) underwrote the first show -- and are providing funding this year.

The one thing that was never in doubt was the receptiveness of the students. "It's been a great opportunity," says Telemaque. "When they realized they'd be exhibiting at a space where notable photographers have shown, they were really impressed. They realized how special this opportunity was. To have Alison Nordstrom look at your work, people would pay a lot to have her do that. And here she is doing it for them."

Hana Skirkey, who participated in "Photosynthesis" and is now a freshman at Massachusetts College of Art, also singles out the session with Nordstrom. "Meeting and talking with her was amazing, she has so much energy."

Nordstrom, for her part, credits the students with generating much of the energy. "One of the reasons I'm doing it again was because it was so much fun," she says. "I don't work with high school kids very much, and these two high schools, it was just fascinating. . . . In late adolescence, kids are trying to figure out who they are and project that into the world. Somehow having this cool, mechanical intermediary of the camera allows people to do that investigation and make those statements. The idea of making something, something real and tangible, is very important. Where photography differs from many of the other visual arts is its being so unavoidably linked to the big world. It allows them to be part of the world but in a safe way."

The particular appeal of photography to high school students is something Winchester High's Ardito has noticed, too.

"A lot of kids will not take art because they don't fancy themselves as artists," he says. "They don't see themselves as drawers or painters or sculptors. But they'll do photography and find they're artistic. It's sort of what the computer does for all of us. It gives the kids an interface with the world they don't otherwise have. Kids who never thought they were artists find they have a creative self. That's been so rewarding. 'Photosynthesis' has turned a lot of good student photographers into great [ones]. To see their work hanging in a museum, that's an opportunity a lot of professional photographers never get."

Howley is quite aware of that. "The idea of having our work shown at the Griffin is really cool," she says. "We go there all the time for field trips, and we see the work of all these famous photographers hanging there. So being able to show there ourselves is awesome."

Mark Feeney can be reached at [mfeeney@globe.com](mailto:mfeeney@globe.com). ■