

PERFORMANCE REVIEW

“Outside In

Homeless youth offer a different view “

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“The road ahead is long

Weary I am with Struggle

Burdened I am with Trouble

Blessed I am with Strength

Go On I must to the Very End

And Follow that for which I tend

Although I am damaged with sorrow and toil and the Road ahead is long

The Road Ahead Sings a Different Song.”

— Stephanie

When I draw, I try to transform my emotions into images. When I was homeless, I relied a lot on writing to shine light on my situation.

—Cody

Through art I can educate the public about how hope can be found in the midst of despair; to help them realize, that homelessness is not something that happens to anonymous people, but real, live human beings.

—Alcony Bell

These are the words of 16-, 17-, and 18-year-old artists who are showing their work in the exhibition "Blessed I Am with Strength" at the Triangle Art Gallery, an art exhibition created by youth at Seattle's downtown YMCA. The gallery has track lighting and subtle beige walls: a professional air, with neatly typed labels, artists' statements, and a well-designed invitation. The young people whose art is shown are "in transition," from the streets back into homes.

With a humble disposable camera, Cody photographed Pioneer Square's Occidental Park and its inhabitants, capturing the landscape of downtown homelessness. At the center of these photographs is a self-portrait drawing of the artist on which he has written, "Ill from loneliness and starved for belonging / Stuck in the middle of infinite emptiness / I reach my hand up to those who will grab it."

Alcony Bell has photographs and paintings. One three-part series, "This is where they sleep," includes a photograph of a dumpster, a few pieces of cardboard on the ground, and a sign saying, "Help Starving Broke No Joke, Any Donation will help, Thank you, God Bless."

Paired with these gritty images is another group called "Quiet": photos of rocks, shore, and sea, suggesting a theme of hope beyond the grim reality of life in the street. Bell has also made abstract paintings and watercolors, blue, yellow, red and green. They offer transportation away from the bottom, into a brighter world.

The third artist, Stephanie Gates, showed carefully detailed oil paintings and black and white drawings. Her first oil painting is called "Make Your Way Home." It shows a young person praying in front of a landscape of what appear to be glowing trucks. In "I Will Be," a sad young man sits near a nighttime window. "What I Will Be" is a happy young woman with a rising sun.

"Make Your Way Home" was stolen from the exhibition, a devastating experience for the young artist. After television coverage of the incident, it turned up behind one of the YMCA's vending machines. It is hard to know why it was stolen or returned. Did it speak so powerfully to someone that they wanted to look at it all the time? Hopefully that was the reason.

The exhibition was curated by Dana Morgan, who was herself a participant in a YMCA youth development program. She is now an art student at Cornish College of the Arts and has returned to help with the gallery program. She had a single painting, with a prickly surface of acrylic paste and epoxy resin suggesting the hostile street environment. It was dedicated to her friend Nicholas "Rooster" Helhowski, a dedicated advocate of the rights of street youth who was murdered in 2002 in what seems to have been a random act of street violence.

The largest work in the show is a collaborative collage organized with Dana's technical assistance. It is filled with many separate images, painted, collaged, and drawn, as well as a lot of writing:

"Kids are homeless because they have no options."

"Give me shelter from the storm."

"Just need someone to listen?"

It will be auctioned off, with the proceeds (at the request of the artists) going to Teen Feed, the University Street Ministries' nightly meal for homeless youth in the U-District. In the gallery itself 70 percent of sales goes to the artists, 30 percent goes to costs, but even some of these artists have chosen to contribute part of that to Teen Feed

Shauna Hill, the dynamic head of the YMCA youth development program, spent three months facilitating the creation of "Blessed I Am with Strength." She works with University District Youth Center (UDYC) and other sources to find homeless youths of high school age currently enrolled in a GED program. At bimonthly meetings, the young people discussed life in the street and the possibilities of "hope, survival, and strength." The participants became close friends as they met and discussed their experiences, and happily all are now in stable housing.

The gallery gets grants from United Way and YMCA Partners with Youth. Any profits fund school enrichment, and supplemental funds go to transitional housing projects. Wizards of the Coast, a local business, funded the remodel of the gallery, and Seattle Art Supply donated the art supplies. Last year a grant from King County brought visiting curators who provided professional advice. The Triangle Gallery trains youth to create a show, as well as to create art; it teaches them skills that they can use, such as framing, marketing, designing and collaborating. There is also an alumni program to follow up on the skills.

Civic Endurance

In the video and photographic project "Civic Endurance," we get a rare opportunity to hear from Capitol Hill homeless youth about the hard realities of their lives. The project is collaboration between Peace for the Streets by Kids from the Streets (PSKS) and two New York City artists, Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry. It was catalyzed and funded by the Arts Up! Program of the Mayor's Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs and the City of Seattle Department of Neighborhoods. Arts Up! pairs artists with community groups. Rather than create their own art, the young people at PSKS chose artists with a documentary approach in film, making their life experiences useful in educating others.

McCallum and Tarry met with the youth at PSKS, and together they decided on what to do. Since two deaths occurred as they were beginning to work (one of them Helhowski's, to whom Morgan dedicated her work), they decided that the video project would pay homage to the people that they had lost in their lives.

Each youth (there were a total of 24) stood for an entire hour on the same spot. In itself this remarkable act of perseverance said a lot about their deep feelings and strength. The video portraits were shot in one continuous take over a period of 26 hours. The footage was then compressed, so that each segment of 60 minutes became 4 minutes. The result is that the standing youth are the anchor in a frenetic society that swirls around them at high speed and ignores them. This ironic reversal is a powerful and effective image. The homeless are the strong center of this world, and the supposedly more fortunate people who are driving cars and shopping rush around in a meaningless blur.

Each person (they do not give their names on the video, but there are photographic portraits that identify them) speaks about what was most on their minds — the loss of loved ones, how they came to be homeless, the boredom of life in the streets, their love

for their mother, the relentless grip of drugs and addiction, the physical effects of heroin and its devastating aftermath.

It is a powerful picture of life on the street. One young man offers the advice, "Be really careful about who you trust." He describes the nightmares of foster homes where parents locked him in a room, or a stepfather who was abusive, instead of a home where "someone is there." He poignantly spoke of the only foster home he cared about, living with a man who died six months later. Another said that he spent his days "walking in circles all day, thinking of something to do."

The family spirit of PSKS was evident at the preliminary screenings (the project is still in progress) at 911 Media Arts, Jack Straw, and the Capitol Hill Arts Center. Eleven of the 24 young people who participated attended the screenings and spoke openly about their opinions of the video and what it was like working with the artists. They were eager that the final project be shown at schools and other places in order to educate young people and the general public about the realities of life on the street. It was also clear that the artists were not interested in exploiting the project for their own financial gain. They want to donate 30 percent of the profit from any sales to a special fund for arts-related education and scholarships.

PSKS is a remarkable program that provides all sorts of services for homeless youth such as RISK, Reinventing Innovative Steps to Knowledge, and LEAP, Lasting Employment Advancement Program. They are working to create a link between the community and the street, to help young people gain self esteem and start moving their lives in a new direction of self-sufficiency.

Both the YMCA Triangle Art Gallery as well as the rest of its youth development program and PSKS are programs that make a few dollars go a long way in helping teens and young people. In these days of greedy tax cutting and disrespect for public service, it is inspired programs like these that are doing the hard work that builds a better future for these young people.

See the artwork at the Triangle Art Gallery at the downtown YMCA, 900 Fourth Avenue, (206)382-7899, 8 am - 9 p.m., through August 31. The Civic Endurance film is scheduled to be released this September; for more information call PSKS at (206)726-8500.