

ACS Mellon Foundation Faculty Renewal Grant Final Report

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Institution: Birmingham-Southern College

Name of Project/Event: *Visibilities: The Art of Negotiating Identity*

Dates of Project: March-November 2009

Amount Awarded: \$5000.00

Project Goals, Execution, and Assessment

The project included two original goals: (1) the mounting of the first national, invitational art exhibition at Birmingham-Southern College's Durbin Gallery, meant to engage the complex issues surrounding identity in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer community; encourage dialogue regarding the constantly evolving definition and depiction of GLBTQ people; question the very validity of a unique identity in modern times; and examine the ways in which contemporary visual artists negotiate the varied and shifting currents of sexual identity, visibility, or invisibility in their work; and (2) the execution of a number of related programs, including panels and speakers from outside the College, to support students, faculty, and staff in engaging with the exhibition and the issues raised by it. None of the major goals were altered at any point during the project. The proposed panel discussion was changed to include BSC faculty (rather than exclusively outside experts) in the project and contain programming costs.

A detailed call for entries (see Appendix A) was posted nationally in December of 2008 in a number of prominent places, including the website of the College Art Association, and the newsletter of the Queer Art Caucus. The call was also posted on BSC's Durbin Art Gallery website, and was emailed to the chairs of art departments at all ASC member institutions. This call generated 36 entries from the US, Mexico, and Canada. From these submissions, 41 works by eight artists (hailing from Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Canada) were chosen for the exhibition. The works represented a range of media, including sculpture, photography, handmade books, and collage. A postcard (see Appendix B) featuring the Jess Dugan photograph *Juliee in Drag* was created as the primary means of announcing the exhibition; 1500 of these cards were mailed to local contacts, as well as to each ACS art department. Copies were also placed at local art galleries and other establishments, and were shared with ACS diversity officers at their annual meeting in late September of 2009. The exhibition opened in the Durbin Gallery on October 2 and ran until October 23. The opening reception drew approximately 375 people in a two-hour period, making this the best attended art exhibition opening in the history of the College.

Programming in support of the exhibition included one faculty panel discussion and three talks by outside speakers. On October 5, 2009, six BSC faculty from Art History, English,

Psychology, and Political Science convened as a panel ("Constructing Identity with Images: An Interdisciplinary Conversation") to examine a number of contemporary advertisements in regards to the visual construction of identity, as seen from their specific disciplinary viewpoints.

On October 8, 2009, Dr. David Areford, Associate Professor of Art History, University of Massachusetts Boston, provided an art historical and cultural context ("The Power of Queer Images: Making the Invisible Visible") for viewing images in the *Visibilities* exhibition. On October 22, 2009, Darren Lee Miller, Assistant Professor of Art, Allegheny College, spoke ("Under the Surface and Everywhere: Performative Strategies for Unearthing the Queer in the Vernacular") on his recent, including pieces featured in the *Visibilities* exhibition. On October 29, 2009, Christopher Lowther, Assistant Professor of Time-Based Media, University of Alabama Birmingham, discussed ("Out of the Myth") the homoerotic gaze in classic films and his own reworking of these classics.

After the exhibition had opened, students were requested to complete a brief evaluation form (for samples, see Appendix C), with questions regarding the choice of works, installation, and effective communication of issues. The results were generally positive, with the experiential nature of certain pieces (books that required the viewer to don archival gloves and then flip through) repeatedly mentioned as a unique and effective aspect of the exhibition. Based on the evaluations, the main issues of the exhibition were communicated well and often challenged preconceived notions regarding the LGBTQ community.

In retrospect, the most important "lessons learned" relate to the logistics of mounting a show that does not arrive and depart at the institution as a single package. This has usually been the case for outside exhibitions shown at the Durbin Gallery. There is much that cannot be anticipated when dealing with multiple artists and a variety of works to be shipped in and out from around the country. Only in hindsight did it become clear that communication with the College's shipping department was crucial to returning works. In many ways, the success of this exhibition, ground-breaking for the College, has laid the foundation for similar projects in the future. These endeavors will benefit from significant logistical discussions up-front, long before works arrive or depart.

Impact of the Project on Campus and Beyond

Two students were directly involved in the exhibition's mounting and documentation: art studio major Katelyn Hancock transferred a large figure via paint and overhead projector onto the gallery wall to help complete installation of Cory Peek's works. An electronic record of the exhibition, in the form of a pdf document (see Appendix D) was created by art studio major Christian Strevy. It includes an explanation of the goals of the exhibition, as well as artist statements and two images from each artist represented in show.

Many more students were involved in an informal way as viewers of the exhibition. The opening on October 2, 2009, was approved for credit in BSC's Cultural and Intellectual Credit program (all students are required to accrue 40 credits to graduate) and we know from forms completed at that time that over 300 BSC students attended the opening. Thus a large percentage of the student population was engaged by the exhibition outside of class visits and assignments.

At least ten Birmingham-Southern College faculty members incorporated the *Visibilities* exhibition into their Fall 2009 courses in some way. Studio art faculty members required visual observation papers for their classes (Bud Spivey, AR 101, Basic Painting, and Pam Venz, AR 103, Basic Photography, respectively). Issues of sexuality, identity, and human nature were explored through exhibition visits and writing assignments in courses in Psychology (Dr.

Heather Meggers, PY 208, Human Sexual Behavior), English (Dr. John Tatter, EH 220, Literature and the Social Experience, with a focus on gender, race, and class), and Education (Dr. Kelly Russell, EPY 223, Human Growth and Development). The exhibition also acted as a good adjunct for a number of other classes, such as Dr. Peter Donahue's EH 394, Contemporary Drama class, which discussed *Madame Butterfly*, *Angels in America*, etc., and Dr. Barbara Domcekova's course, SN 333, Spanish Across the Curriculum, in examination of certain Pedro Almodóvar films.

In the broader sense, the exhibition helped to advance the College's stated dedication to service-based education in a liberal arts setting and its focus on human dignity and civil rights, especially pertinent given the school's historic location in Birmingham, Alabama. Further, the use of the show by a number of classes across campus, and the mounting of a production of "The Laramie Project" by the BSC Department of Theater concurrently with the exhibition, provided the campus and local community with an interdisciplinary context for consideration of a range of issues surrounding the LGBTQ community.

More specifically, the exhibition contributed to the College's commitment and leadership in issues related to diversity at all levels, especially that of the student population. Allies, BSC gay and straight student alliance, included the exhibition and its related programming as part of its annual commemoration of Gay History Month and Coming Out Day, and used the exhibition opening as an opportunity to engage with students from similar groups at other Alabama colleges. One highlight of the evening was the exhibition visit by and post-opening discussion between BSC Allies members and students and sponsoring faculty from the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. This event helped set the stage for a student leadership conference on LGBTQ issues, drawing students from colleges in Alabama and Mississippi and to be hosted by BSC in late February 2010.

We have attempted to involve ACS member institutions in the exhibition in a number of ways. The official call for entries was sent by email to the chair of each art department, and official invitations to the opening reception and related programming was also forwarded to each by regular mail. The electronic record of the exhibition was posted both on BSC's Durbin Gallery webpage and on the homepage of the Associated Colleges of the South, under the heading of "News from Member Institutions." The exhibition was reviewed (see Appendix E) by Alabama's largest local newspaper, the Birmingham News, thus reaching a broad audience beyond our campus community.

Financial Statement.

For a complete financial statement see Appendix F. The amount awarded was \$5000 and the total expenditures for the exhibition was \$4454.85. The remaining balance was used to purchase 17 books (see Appendix G for a full list) for the College's library. These texts are all related to the main theme of the exhibition, queer art and identity, some from a historical perspective and others considering a more contemporary context. Each will be useful for a range of classes related to sexuality and already being taught at the College, as well as to a new course on Queer Visual Culture, proposed as part of a Gender and Women's Studies minor.

Project Summary

The Durbin Gallery of Birmingham-Southern College successfully mounted its first national, invitational exhibition in October of 2009, with a focus on identity in the GLBTQ community and among artists in this same community. A range of exhibition-related

programming, involving speakers from off campus as well as BSC faculty, engaged students, faculty and staff in meaningful dialogue on important subjects related to the crafting of identity and diversity. The exhibition was used by a number of classes across numerous disciplines as an integral part of the syllabus, supporting the interdisciplinary mission of the College. The success of this event has set a precedent for future, significant exhibitions generated by Durbin Gallery, and also played a part in the College's increasing leadership role on diversity issues in our area.