

HEALING THROUGH ART IN DOWNTOWN KINGSTON

by Laura Maier



Roslyn 'Rozi' Chung

the inner-city people. I learned the whole idea of survival, of what it is to be without most of the time,” reflects Chung. This is why she decided to suspend her own art work and open up a studio not for herself, but for the people: “This has been the art work for me. I think sometimes you have to work in a different kind of way, where it is through the people that you’re gonna see the work.”

A low standard of living and a high crime rate forces the people in inner-city areas of Kingston to live under difficult circumstances. Given this harsh environment, the idea of healing is a main focus for Chung and Studio 174. This need for healing was sadly emphasized during the time of the Tivoli Gardens incursion in May 2010, when after days of shooting between members of the Shower Posse drug-cartel and the Jamaican military at least

73 civilians were dead, numerous homes burned and many left traumatized. “During the time of the Tivoli upheaval I really wanted to come down and do something. I then got in contact with Dr. Tammy Haynes,” remembers Chung. She and psychologist Dr. Tamika Haynes had met at the University Hospital of the West Indies in Kingston before, where eight years ago Chung started to explore a field very new to Jamaica: Art therapy. “I had such a wonderful life with my art, and I wanted to share the art making or anything to do with the arts with people in society that are suffering,” says Chung.



Participants of the Tivoli Resolution Project

At the hospital she soon began to see improvements in the wellbeing of the patients she was working with, patients who were mostly suffering from schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, autism, and chronic depressions. “Art therapy is a communicative device that uses the visual means as a way of language when you cannot verbally say anything,” describes Chung. “There’s a parallel of the external world and the internal world, and a language system that goes underneath within one’s self. The

art medium is the only tool I found so far that we can use to get that language out, because it is not using words.” Together with photographer Max Earle, Chung and Haynes founded the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) ‘Inscape Foundation’. The goal of the ‘Inscape Foundation’ is to conduct projects that can function as a response to trauma and crisis, and offer alternative mental health care.



Saturday workshop at Studio 174

Art therapy as a response to trauma and crisis

Just three months after the Tivoli incursion, the NGO started the ‘Tivoli Resolution Project’. Within the course of the project ten traumatized boys from Tivoli between the ages of 13 to 18 were offered a program of photographic therapy under the motto ‘The courage to look inward, the determination to move forward’. While experiencing great freedom and independence with their digital cameras during shooting, the boys met up with their mentors three times a week to collect and reflect on the pictures that were taken with regard to topics such as family, friends, self, community and environment. The project offered the boys a way to deal

with their past experiences and communicate about something they could not easily verbalise. The media also covered the boys and their work, which gave their families something to be proud of. Most importantly, “we also used photo therapy for the reason that we wanted the boys to tell *their* story about the incident, because the media had a great feel in how they were telling the story,” states Chung. The following exhibition, which displayed photographs taken by the boys, was shown not only in Kingston, but also New York City, where it was received very well.

The end of the project did not mean the end of the therapy, though. The boys asked for a continuation of the project, because they enjoyed their experiences during the course of the project so much. “That’s when I took over and I would come to Studio 174 and get into making mini exercises for them, because they were still experiencing education problems, sleepless nights and so forth,” says Chung, who is now offering free art classes and free art therapy sessions at Studio 174 to any



Rozi at the Saturday workshop

youths from surrounding inner-city communities. “There are cases where I see some serious things coming out of the artwork. That’s when Dr. Tammy Haynes comes in and offers counseling sessions,” describes Chung.

Healing through beautifying

To amplify the use of art as a healing tool and to increase physical and psychical well-being, Studio 174 started to beautify areas in Tivoli, hoping that other inner-city parts will follow in their footsteps. “Anything that brings beauty is a healing right away, because it’s something to refocus

your mind on out of an ugly situation, and to have you feel a sense of pride of an area that was just being devastated before,” states Chung. Together with members of ‘Manifesto JA’, a Jamaican NGO that seeks youth empowerment through the arts, Chung went to Tivoli Gardens to work on a peace garden with the whole community exactly one year after the massacre took place. Chung recalls the experience: “Along other paintings we did a huge heart, which is originally an Adinkra sign from West Africa. All the kids then printed their hands inside the heart. It’s not only that they enjoyed doing that, but it was also for them to show ‘I was there, I was a part of that project’. This project meant something to them.”



Artwork at Studio 174

Studio 174 is not only a site for healing, but it also tries to open up new chapters people’s lives. Chung states, “I wanted the studio to be a space that deals with youths worrying about their identity, because I saw there was a great disorganized self with the identity in the inner-city. I also wanted the youths to learn a way that they can have their freedom, using this space instead of going out there, being angry and getting into violence. We use the art form as a way where all the violence and their anger can go on the paper.” Additionally, people from the surrounding

communities become exposed to art forms at the studio they would hardly get a chance to see otherwise.

Education through exposure

One of such events aimed to introduce new and different ways of thinking is the regularly held ‘Dubconscious’ session. Freshly squeezed juice, coconut water, and roast corn – “things of the culture” – are offered as alternatives to the widely available fast foods. As an alternative to the Dancehall that is usually heard in Kingston, Dub music is being played by

art activist DJ Afifa Sol. Dub, according to Chung, provides a more meditative experience than the wild Dancehall. More importantly, many young people from the inner-city do not know about Dub, and therefore 'Dubconscious' becomes a tool to teach them about the treasures of their own culture.

Chung also recognizes music – not only Dub, but also Jazz, Classical, Indian music and other alternative sounds – as an important tool for her work with the youths: “Music is a part of the Jamaican experience, a part of our culture, everything here has a vibration. I did not want to separate that, because I saw it as a part of the process. Sometimes I use music really just to calm the youths, because some of them are coming out of situations where their home environment is terrible. They don't listen enough to instrumentals, because of the dancehall thing, which is taking away the quiet time that they could experience. Here, they can listen to instruments and think about what the instruments are doing. It gets them to block out the stuff that is happening around them, at least for a time.”



Artwork at Studio 174

Another much talked about event held at Studio 174 was the exhibition 'Question me Black', which was looking at ideas behind Blackness, trying to investigate what Black means from Black people's perspectives. “It was really to get young people to question themselves. Did the labeling of Black imprison them? Did it cause them to be in a certain

way?," Chung says, describing the aims behind the exhibition. While paintings and drawings by students and artists made up most of the exhibition, Chung additionally gave an assignment for an installation that drew a lot of attention. "It was shortly after Haiti's earthquake and somehow rumors were going around in Jamaica that the earthquake happened because of all the voodoo Haitians were doing," she says. To break up these prejudices of Black culture, artists worked on a voodoo installation that led many viewers to question their assumptions. "It was a way to educate our people. It showed them how there are so many things that are so similar to our culture, and it is only language that separates us."

Bringing people together

Another aim for Chung and the studio is to bridge the gap between the division of uptown and downtown Kingston. "Generations of people have continued this nonsense. But when you get together, there is no division! There's no labeling, there's no discrimination, you work together as a unit," justifies Chung's goal. Having grown up in the United Kingdom, Chung has always been a mediator between Western and Caribbean culture. Having gained so much from being exposed to two different ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, Chung wants to encourage the exchange not only with people from within Jamaica, but also from outside the island. Therefore, the events taking place at Studio 174 are not only a way of getting people from uptown to come downtown, but also of bringing people from abroad in. Given that the events offer an excellent opportunity to mingle and exchange. It gives the youths some feeling of pride when they see that someone is interested in their area, in what they are doing, and also helps to remove the negative stigma from them.

While Chung has many wonderful ideas and plans for future events and workshops, a big problem has always been funding: "The arts in the Jamaican context can make a difference. We just need the right minded people who are not afraid and are willing to invest." The lack of financial support from private sectors as well as from the government is a pressing issue. "Additionally," Chung sighs, "the government needs to clean up downtown, get rid of the sewer smell, install more street lights, and proper places to throw garbage in." Once this happens her dreams of having an arts festival held downtown can hopefully become true. "I really would love to

see downtown beautiful, because there has been so much deaths, horrific stories and bloodshed. I want to just change all of that! And I think the arts can do a lot to contribute to that.”

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