

Taking Time by Ellie Cross

When I tell people I'm an artist they usually tell me they can't draw.

I'm not sure when art became conflated with realistically representing things by making marks on surfaces, but I bet it was before cameras and copy machines.

I carved this rickshaw for my friend to print onto fabric so she could have a rickshaw skirt. The lack of perfection is part of the art.

However, transferring information from your eyes through your hands is a fascinating activity, and has much more to do with seeing than drawing. Actually seeing is pretty intense.

It starts when we're young: the shortcuts. It's so much easier to just draw flowers as a lump of ovals around a circle than to actually stick your face in one and see all the unexpected lines and layers of colour.

Georgia O'Keeffe has already famously lamented all this. I shared her quote with my students (ages 3-8), and we busted out some magnifying glasses, flowers, and chalk pastels to practice seeing. (Seeing through the eyes of kids is the closest I've ever been to pure magic. It's like spending time with unicorns. I am beyond grateful to have this work.)

"Nobody sees a flower

- really -

it is so small it takes time -

we haven't time -

and to see takes time,

like to have a friend takes time."

In fact most superb things take time. Like caring for all the new plants that came into my home recently, I'm looking after them for a dear friend who's leaving the city. A whole elevator full of new friends.

Luckily some of my human friends have invented some pretty creative watering techniques.

The water gun is part of the recent Holi festivities which also include a lot of powdered colour. It's my favourite holiday anywhere in the world.

After the lighthearted trauma of having pink hair for weeks after last Holi, this year a wig provided additional protection.

Still, Bean wasn't impressed with all the mess.

For a former street cat, he's really into cleanliness. He loves laundry time...

...almost as much as shower time. He got so frustrated at being excluded from my showers that he took the time to redesign my shower curtain. He likes to sit with his tail sticking through the hole and resting in the water.

He has also taken time to make his first cat friend, but their friendship consists mostly of biting each other's faces.

I've taken the time to learn some new things. First, ceramics, which resulted in this crazy jug vase,

which doubles as a water dish.

Secondly, I've continued learning the concertina.

My friend and I have been incredibly lucky to work with the National Streets for Performing Arts, an inspiring organization dedicated to promoting public art in India.

As a result, they pay us to play to rather large crowds in railway stations. It's all pretty thrilling, as I have a significant fear of public singing combined with only having

played my instrument since January.

As a teacher, my job is to coach kids to do things they cannot yet do independently, or to push them past their established comfort zone to do something new. If not, they aren't learning.

This is what we expect from kids everyday, a massive slew of challenges, from developing fine motor abilities to soaking in cultural norms.

One of the privileges of being an adult is that I can avoid activities that make me feel like a clumsy toddler all over again. It definitely saves me from making foolish mistakes in public, but I've been robbing myself of the opportunity to learn.

And oh, my word, learning takes time.

Take it from Ira Glass:

"Nobody tells this to people who are beginners, I wish someone told me. All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But there is this gap. For the first couple years you make stuff, it's just not that good. It's trying to be good, it has potential, but it's not. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is why your work disappoints you. A lot of people never get past this phase, they quit. Most people I know who do interesting, creative work went through years of this. We know our work doesn't have this special thing that we want it to have. We all go through this. And if you are just starting out or you are still in this phase, you

gotta know its normal and the most important thing you can do is do a lot of work...It is only by going through a volume of work that you will close that gap, and your work will be as good as your ambitions. And I took longer to figure out how to do this than anyone I've ever met. It's gonna take awhile. It's normal to take awhile. You've just gotta fight your way through."

We've been fighting our way through at a local Kids' Home. It's meant to be a temporary care situation for boys found in child labor busts, sleeping on the streets, etc, but the physical building was an adult prison until the 80's when they made it a kid's home without changing anything. The combination of the nasty energy that seeped into the space from its prison days and the humidity and mold is causing our colourful murals to peel right off the walls.

The optimistic take on this is that it keeps making space for fresh new additions to the existing murals.

But it's also a depressingly apt illustration of how hopelessly futile it feels to keep going into that home sometimes, where 200-500 boys are kept locked in this one long room all day long except for a few hours when they're allowed outside to play. They are each dealing a wide variety of different situations, from blindness to abuse to open sores to autism. There are only 1-2 adults supervising throughout the day, and they aren't social workers, just underpaid guys who use sticks to force the kids into order because they don't know how else to control the situation.

Different NGO's come throughout the week, but no one comes on Sundays.

So, we try to bring some light and joy in to the space, painting murals with the kids, showing movies, playing games, music etc. And they teach us! They are able to make the most incredible things from the paper, cameras and flowers and guns and noise makers.

The joy that they find in the simplicity of creating with newspaper is incredibly inspiring and humbly beautiful and spending time with those kids breaks my heart open every time.

We try to leave a residue of hope on the walls, so when new boys come they can see something other than prison walls.

A few weeks ago, a brilliant guy who started the Red Swing Project came to the home and offered to hang swings inside for the kids. The older boys were all for it but the littlest ones refused. They said it would cause too much fighting among them and boys might get hurt. Having an 8 year-old turn down a swing is alarmingly unnatural.

But we've organized it so that while we're there we can manage the lines of boys who wait for 30-45 minutes for just 2 minutes on the swing. The noises they make! Of joy, of fear, of pure kid ecstasy.

All it takes is a board and a rope.

And some time.