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A Portrait of Portsmouth: Expressing Cultural Identity through Art

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feature article

A Portrait of Portsmouth: Expressing Cultural Identity through Art

—Kristina Griffin, *Inquiry* Editor (Edited by Jessie Robie)

Oftentimes students see summer as an opportunity to escape their home turf and explore different cultures. Rather than venture to some far corner of the world, K. Lee Mock, a senior fine arts major at the University of New Hampshire, took advantage of a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) and did just the opposite. She spent the summer of 2007 looking at what shapes local culture in her native city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, documenting her work through oil paintings, watercolors, charcoal sketches, and polymer prints.

The Past as Inspiration

K. Lee's family has a long and rich history in the Portsmouth area. Her grandfather, Randy Dow, grew up in Salisbury, Massachusetts. K. Lee's grandmother, Eleanor Mitchell, and her mother, Judith Dow, grew up in Portsmouth. K. Lee grew up close to the downtown area and spent much of her time with her grandparents, who were a driving inspiration in her life and became the motivation for her project. The stories they shared with her throughout the years sparked K. Lee's interest in researching past and present Portsmouth.

K. Lee focused on discovering what Portsmouth residents care about in terms of social activities and public spaces, and how one is tied to one's community through these characteristics. She centered her research on the city's traditions from the 1930s, when her grandparents were young adults, to find out if any of these traditions are still relevant in Portsmouth today.

In order to compare Portsmouth's past and present culture, K. Lee examined old newspaper clippings and photographs. Discussions with her grandparents throughout her life provided the foundation for her research, and conversations with her grandfather during the research period were also a great source of information. She explored the links between her family's private life and their traditions with those of others in the Portsmouth area, finding that people as individuals shape the direction of their community.

Family photograph of K. Lee's grandmother, Eleanor Mitchell Dow, taken at her family's summer rental in Hampton Beach, 1932.



Fieldwork: The Paintings

K. Lee spent her summer in the heart of Portsmouth—on the grass of Prescott Park, on the banks of the Piscataqua River, and at the tables of Breaking New Grounds, a coffee shop and café where locals are known to congregate all times of the year. Drawing on her observations, she employed some unique techniques to create her art. For the ink sketches, she used waterproof ink from a dropper to create the lines of the painting and then used watercolors over the ink. To create polymer prints, K. Lee photocopied family snapshots backwards onto paper, painted them with layers of polymer, and then soaked off the paper, leaving a translucent copy of the original.



In her research, K. Lee explored how old traditions of social convergence are still upheld in today's Portsmouth. In the past, gardens acted as social hubs, and K. Lee found that gardens still dot the city and remain well-recognized meeting places. The other focal point of her research was conversation, which she found often took place in the presence of coffee. Whether served in her grandmother's kitchen to family friends or from the counter of such coffee houses as Breaking New Grounds, coffee has brought people together in Portsmouth for decades.

K. Lee Mock, New Castle Beach, 2007, polymer print, 10" x 10"

During the course of her historical research, K. Lee discovered that at the turn of the century, the Red Light District of Portsmouth was located on the banks of the Piscataqua River, on the land that is today Prescott Park. The Prescott sisters of Portsmouth led improvements to the area, putting money into the project so the former Red Light District could become a public park with gardens for the enjoyment of the citizens. In newspaper clippings from the 1930s, K. Lee found announcements in the society pages for "Garden Parties," which were formal, mostly private parties for wealthy individuals held in the public gardens.

Though formal garden parties are not often thrown today, K. Lee found that gardens still play a large role in today's social scene. Portsmouth has a garden of some sort on almost every street, including the flower bed at Market Square, which is one of the most common meeting places in the city. Prescott Park is still on the Portsmouth list of "places to be," as it hosts an array of summer concerts and plays and is a popular place to have a picnic or stroll through the gardens. K. Lee discovered that gardens are one common thread running from the city's past to its present, and these gardens still act as a catalyst for social interaction among those living in the community and those visiting. Some of these observations were expressed in her painting entitled *Prescott Park Gardens*.



K. Lee Mock, Prescott Park Gardens, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 20"



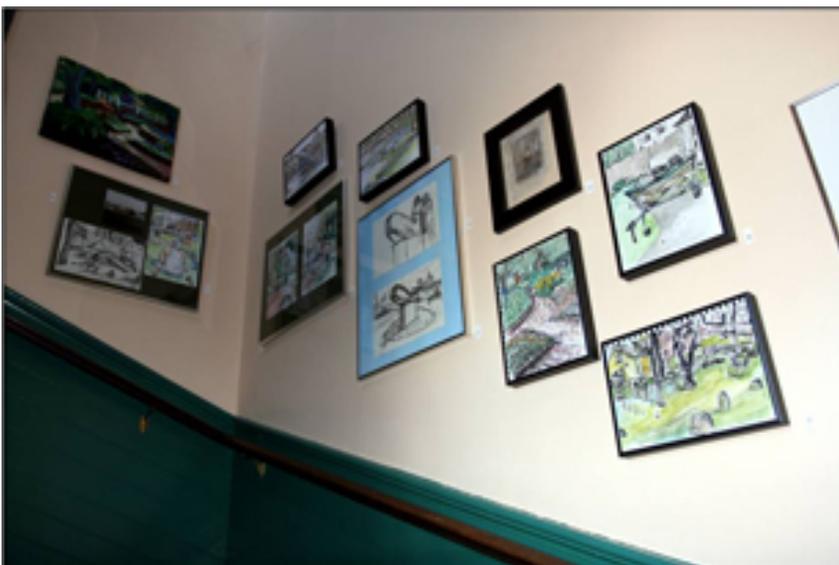
While observing the action at Breaking New Grounds, K. Lee found the metal bistro tables constantly filled with people coming and going to meet and chat with friends—the same activities that took place in her grandparents’ time. In today’s world, the people of Portsmouth still identify with good conversation around coffee, but in a more public setting than the neighbor’s kitchen. Many of K. Lee’s paintings were created in her grandparents’ house with heavy emphasis on the kitchen.

K.Lee Mock, The Coffee Shop, Girls in Conversation, 2007, ink and gouache, 12" x 14"

An Exhibit Is Created

The collection of K. Lee’s works was on display at the Children’s Museum in Portsmouth from September 19 to October 31, 2007, in an exhibit entitled *Roots*. While K. Lee’s research informed her work as an artist, creating a coherent body of work for a solo exhibit helped K. Lee develop skills as a gallery coordinator. K. Lee brought with her a year’s experience as a fellow at the Art Gallery at UNH under the supervision of Vicki Wright. Her fellowship at the Art Gallery helped K. Lee with the technical aspects of creating an exhibit, such as matting, framing, and producing text labels. Vicki Wright, director of the art gallery, was also K. Lee’s faculty mentor for her SURF project, and noted how enthusiastic K. Lee was from the very beginning of her research about sharing this body of work with the Portsmouth community.

In setting up her exhibit, K. Lee remembered her target audience of children but sought to engage the parents and grandparents who would be accompanying their children to the museum. She also took into consideration that the viewer might not be from Portsmouth, and she did not want her work’s message of cultural identity to be lost on them. With these things in mind, K. Lee created a thought-provoking exhibit about identity and one’s relationship to one’s culture, applicable to Portsmouth residents and visitors alike.



In planning her exhibit, K. Lee carefully considered the gallery space in the museum: two opposing staircases. She wanted to take advantage of the physical space of her exhibit to exemplify the similarities and differences in her artistic works. “Thematically I divided my work to compare public and private life along with past and present, keeping in mind ‘people, places, and things,’” she says. “Originally it was my intent to show a chronological progression going up each stairwell, with public life on one side, and private or home life on the other.”

A portion of K.Lee's display at the Children's Museum, featuring some of her ink and water color drawings. Photograph by Mark Poormon.

Straying from her original plan once all the pieces were together, K. Lee ended up placing her best pieces in prime locations, where people would see them first, and creating groupings that had interesting variety. One such group contained views of Prescott Park while another focused on coffee in her grandmother's kitchen and at Breaking New Grounds. The polymer prints were placed throughout the exhibit to maintain a sense of balance and continuity.

Reaction

One of K. Lee's greatest moments while conducting her research occurred in late August at Prescott Park during the music and dance festival, coincidentally titled "Rhythm and Roots."

Throughout the performances, K. Lee painted and sketched people attending the show, many of whom spoke with her about her work and told her of their affection for the Portsmouth community. While she was drawing, a group of children sat around watching her. This day of observing and conversing with locals on the

waterfront showed K. Lee that people's interactions with each other and the landscape had become the main subject of her work. As much as Portsmouth's landscape has changed throughout the years, the connections between people and places are what create community and a sense of belonging. "Without those connections, my work would feel meaningless," says K. Lee.



K. Lee Mock in her studio at UNH.

According to Vicki Wright, K. Lee's research was an "excellent opportunity to explore the ways artists can use exhibitions of their work to effectively communicate with the community in which they live." After seeing K. Lee's finished exhibit, Tess Feltes, coordinator of the Children's Museum in Portsmouth, remarked, "It cannot be left unsaid that K. Lee's tribute to her grandparents was touching and very powerful. I am certain that it not only emotionally connected with viewers, but might have inspired others to dig into those old boxes of photos, looking for key moments that connect the past with our current lives." Quite impressively, K. Lee's exhibit received publicity in the *Boston Globe*, providing her with an opportunity to network with the local art community. Through her exhibit, K. Lee connected with viewers on an emotional and personal level, accomplishing what she set out to do.

After Roots

This research opportunity allowed K. Lee to accomplish many personal goals, including creating a successful solo show, gaining press coverage, selling over a dozen paintings, and paying tribute to her grandmother who passed away in February 2006. In preparation for graduation in May 2008, K. Lee is working on her senior thesis. Painting indoors, with a chair and plant-covered table in front of windows as her focus, she is using acrylics with a pallet knife to capture the effects of light throughout the day. She is "not so much interested in the tangible objects themselves." Rather, she says, "I use them as a vehicle to locate a cohesive image. I'm looking at how time affects the space, thus I create an atmosphere with color around and through the forms. I look at how the outside natural light affects the interior space, and how an interior light reflects on a window—each yields a very different feeling."

With the success of her SURF project under her belt, K. Lee has been propelled into the modern world of art. This semester she is an intern at the Seacoast Science Center in Rye, New Hampshire, where she is helping organize a week-long summer program for children on art and nature. K. Lee's internship is allowing her to pursue exactly what interests her: bringing the arts and personal experience together in an educational facility outside of the public school system.

Author Bio

*From teaching dance in Bedford, New Hampshire, to studying abroad in Greece, **Kristina Griffin**, a junior from Merrimack, has certainly made the most of her time at UNH. Also a member of the honors program, she returned to Inquiry for a second year because she enjoys “seeing a piece of writing develop over time.” As a health management and policy major with a business minor, Kristina plans to work in hospital administration after graduation and hopes to one day pursue a master’s degree. In addition to her academic pursuits, Kristina is a member of Alpha Phi Omega, a co-ed community service fraternity; she also loves kayaking and other outdoor activities.*

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