

IRIS, ALVA, SEAN, LEO...
**THE PROSPECT ARCHIVE AND THE SUMMER INSTITUTE ON DESCRIPTIVE
PROCESS**

By Joan Bradbury

At the heart of the Prospect Institute on Descriptive Process, also known as Institute I, is the study of an Archive child. Three rich half days we spend immersed with Iris, or Alva, or Leo, or Sean, or another Archive child. Why?

I first encountered the Prospect Archive of Children's Work when I attended Summer Institute I myself in 1985. I spent a good part of a week with my group immersed with Iris' archive. Some of her pictures still haunt me and I can remember wisps of her poetry. I can remember laughing with others in the group as we went in to the market at the end of the week to buy a bottle of wine and the bottle right in front of us had a picture of an iris on it; a movie in Williamstown somehow also featured irises. This was the silly side of what I was experiencing on a deep level - the connection of all parts of my life - my teaching work and my family, my values and beliefs, and the way I was actually spending my time during these weeks. I was getting to know a child I had not taught, by looking at her work and the notes and records the school had kept.

Prospect School had collected children's work. Teachers and parents at the school understood it was a window into each child's passions and ways of seeing and thinking about the world. Simple. A straightforward valuing and honoring of the work on its own terms. And then the people at Prospect had organized this work with care, and gotten funding for a reference edition of the Archive with slides of visual work and typed versions of selections of writing. A simple idea, carried through with love, meticulous care, and some vision of the value such a collection could hold for others beyond the school as well. For most children the works numbered in the thousands and spanned eight or nine years in the school. And then there were the school records for each child as well. A few sentences written by the teacher each week, two parent reports each year, often an observation or two over the years and usually a descriptive review. All typed, real name replaced by documentary name, running about one hundred pages per child.

The child's work was valued; the teachers' work was valued. That first summer when I immersed myself in Iris' work and life in the school, studying with others, it was a revelation. It was my first experience using the process for describing work, and I began to realize how much I could come to know a child in this way. It was not through the imposition of a rubric, or goals and objectives, that I came to know the child; it was rather through close looking and describing the work with other group members. It was letting the work speak for itself. And the more we looked and described together, the more we saw and the more questions we had. The more we thought we learned, the

more the sense of mystery and what is unknowable grew as well. This is why Iris (iris) was everywhere in our lives that week.

In 1999 I returned to the Prospect Archive as a participant in the Institute on Descriptive Inquiry, often called Institute Two. By then I had been part of the institute a number of years, and this particular year folks had decided to return to the Archives for our spanning study that always opens the two-week institute. It was Alva's work and life in school I immersed myself in that year. One of the pieces we looked at closely that summer was a picture we described as a screen, or panels, or towels hanging. I still have notes from this description on my computer:

hard to know where to start. it can be read and seen in a multiplicity of ways. vertical bands or columns of color bounded by bands of blue and green, and vertical blue lines

There is variety and experimentation, a reworking of forms, colors, mediums, how media are applied.

this has crayon, watercolor (or marker with water on it?), colored pencil, marker. These are layered (within and across mediums), sometimes merging. The dark blue vertical lines are the most repeated boundaries. The bottoms of these sections tilt slightly, and tops and bottoms of came bands are tilted in parallel, creating impression of screen.

There is variety everywhere - the flowers, the color, the boundaries, the application. Some panels and flowers are more realistically rendered, some impressionistically.

There is an incredible complexity of pattern, so much it kind of disappears or is gone.

The sense of illusion, of mirrors in the middle pink part - three fold variety or house of mirrors.

There are unifying elements: Things come in groups, have "friends" - groups of flowers, stars, panels. The horizontal band unifies right 4 panels. Some aspects are like photorealism, others impressionistic. There is a reworking in different ways.

There is so much texture.

We are curious about how it was created. Were all the materials right there? Did she get up? Did it take more than one time? We think the crayon on top and bottom and flowers came first. Next the vertical blue lines?

Implied question to viewer: How do you want to see the flowers? This way? or against this background?

As we returned to look at collection again:

outlining and coloring in

overlap

repetition of forms within pieces and across: hills, bands or panels, leaf shape

vertical lines and panels

repeating motifs: hills, sun, stars, animals

playing with scale

I know this piece. I can picture it still. And the few words we had to say about the larger collection and Alva as an artist still ring true...

My first year as one of the leaders of Summer Institute 1 was 2001. I was working with Rhoda Kanevsky and Taeko Onishi and a group of about twenty participants. I was excited to return to the Archive for a child study at the heart of this institute, though certainly worried in some way about “doing it justice”, staying close to the work. I think I wondered if I could help lead a group so that we could see it fresh, uncover the work anew. Taeko and I, with our group, immersed ourselves again in Alva’s work and life in school. To prepare for leading the institute, I remember reading the collection of Alva’s writing (Ellen Schwartz had put it together two years before) and Alva’s school records before I came to Vermont. Immersion seemed the best way to get ready, and it turned out I had no time once the Institute began, so it was fortunate.

This summer I again helped lead Summer Institute I, this time with Taeko Onishi, Cecilia Espinosa and Azi Elowitz. The schedule (rightly) remains much the same, with the Archive work at the heart. Again, the group I was working with spent our time with Alva, though the summer before our group had looked at Leo’s work. We began our work with the Archive on Monday afternoon (there were ten of us looking at Alva’s work and eleven looking at Leo’s) by going through the eighty some slides we had chosen that spanned the nine years Alva spent in the school. We went through with enough time to see each picture, but not to dwell on it, then offered our “first impressions” from the collection of visual work: *stripes, natural world (flowers, sun, hills, animals), color, stories in the pictures, textures, pictures as gifts to others, mix of concrete and abstract, repeating forms that change shape slightly and direction, deliberate and bold, balance, joy and sadness, complex.*

Then we began our description of the picture we chose to look at closely, an early piece with a house and flower, about the same height, and two human figures, one on either side of the house, much smaller. *We noted the warmth and softness of the pastels, the variety of color, the overlapping colors and shapes, it seems cheerful, it is heavily outlined and colored in, the strong relationship between the house and the flower, leaning in. Is the flower in front of the house, is that why it’s so big? Is she making a statement about its importance? There is certainly activity suggested by the human figures on either side, the smoke in the chimney, and the windows with curtains. But what is going on, or what has or will?* We didn’t have time to return to the collection as a whole and reflect back, or to raise questions about process. We put that on the agenda for first thing Tuesday morning.

Here were some of the comments the next morning: *“We are seeing a growing mind.” “The process of describing slowed us down. It grounded us.” “The process made me exhausted, overwhelmed, and exhilarated. The questions scare me. How does this fit into life?” “It’s exhilarating. Going around hearing each person deepened what I saw.” “That window... it is*

imprinted in my mind.” “I’m still caught up with the little human figures in the picture. I am thinking of the child. It is sacred work.” “I love the idea of thinking and looking at the whole collection. What does this child know about the world?”

We went on to look at the writing in much the same way. People had read the collection of writing the night before. We did a reflection on the word “dialogue” since so many of Alva’s written pieces included dialogue, talked of first impressions from the collection we’d read, and then described closely one piece of writing, a humorous fairy tale about bears in the forest who fell in love and were married. Just a taste of where we closed (there is no such thing as being finished!): *Alva has “got it” as a writer - she introduces the characters (bears with human characteristics), she sets the scene, changes the scene and wraps it up. It’s a tight story. Nothing could be removed. There is humor in the “maybe/maybe not”. She is there all the time - as the storyteller and as witness to the wedding. She knows bears, she knows the culture (weddings), she knows writing. It is a mix of fantasy and reality, with vivid images and plenty of dialogue to keep us as audience right there. It is clear and succinct yet there is ambiguity and craftiness.*

On Wednesday morning we spent time sharing what we’d noticed and begun to learn from the school records, about Alva and about the school and teachers. Each of us had looked at roughly a third of the record, spanning three years. We had the “early folks” report first, with a summary following, then the middle ages, and then the folks who read the last part of the narrative records. These records provide a different window than the work, but no less rich. Here we can see Alva’s strengths in the group, and her recurring struggles as well. *We get glimpses of friendships and her emerging strong interest and talent in drama and plays, things by their very nature not represented in the written and visual work. We discover her deep involvement with all kinds of handwork, spanning the years, and see here as well her deep involvement and interest in animals and the natural world. We can see some continuing tensions around the pace of school and her own pace. We can see some of the standards she holds for herself, and her strong sense of responsibility in the group. We are not surprised by the importance of relationships to her, but get more of a sense of what it takes, working these relationships through hard times; when things aren’t going the way she wishes they would, or when she bursts out roughly at a classmate. But we also got to notice things about the school and the records themselves: There were lots of materials, an incredible variety of activities, children had so many choices, they could work over time and return to things, they had time to work things out, and work them out again, and again. The records were honest, and those few sentences each week accumulated a remarkably full picture. We wondered how Alva learned to read, and how math was taught. Always, in digging in, we learn more and wonder more. There is so much more in these records...*

But then we closed our Archive study the way we began, looking at the visual work again, going through the slides. Only this time, both groups were together, those who'd spent three days with Alva like me, and those who'd spent three days with Leo. To the work of the child we'd been living with we could bring so much more knowledge, and so many more questions than we had the first time through, and to the other child's work, we could see others nodding in recognition and remembering and perhaps gaining new insight, but to us - a whole new person to get to know... and no time this year to do it.

By describing, I hope I've given some sense of why it makes sense that the Archive work is at the heart of the Prospect Summer Institute I on Descriptive Process. It does, of course provide an opportunity for using the process for describing work, visual and written. Reflections are part of our study as well. We are looking closely, taking time, with the work of one child. The work itself spans many years, and was collected in the school, saved, organized, made into a reference edition, over even more years. And here we are, twenty or thirty years later, coming to this work. The school is closed. The child is grown up. Whether we are seeing it for the first time, or the fourth or twentieth time, we come to it fresh with a new group. There is always more to see and know and question. There is a relationship to create, with the work, with the child, with one another. There is, in this collaborative looking and describing, new knowledge created and new work, as fresh and powerful as the child's work. This is always true, but takes on added importance in these times.

In these times, is there a way to see and know a child on his or her own terms? Can we share a moment, or a passion about history or question about how the world came to be? Do we, or children, have time to dwell with something or each other, and return another time? Can we follow a diversionary path with an individual child or a group to explore a shared interest, have a critical conversation about justice, invent a game, or just watch and listen closely, with wonder, and open to surprises? There is not much in today's climate that would lead us to think such things are important. Our work with the Archive can ground us, remind us of what is at the heart of teaching and learning so we find the cracks and widen them.

Joan Bradbury has spent many years teaching children, the last twenty five in third grade at the Francis Parker School, an old progressive independent school in Chicago. She has also had an abiding interest in descriptive inquiry work with teachers, nurtured at Prospect, which has informed work at her school and in the larger community, including their four-year-old teachers' study group that meets monthly and includes teachers from public and independent schools in the city and suburbs. She is newly retired from full-time teaching, excited by the opportunity and time to explore new possibilities, get a good night's rest, and read between September and June!

