

**What's Left** presents thirteen woodcut prints inspired by interviews that I conducted with my students at a public high school in Greater New Orleans between 2017 and 2018. Each interview occurred across a white folding table covered in brown paper in my art room, number 402. The room has cinder block walls painted an institutional non-color, a mix of grey, tan, and green. In-progress paintings and drawings cover every available surface: they are scattered on table tops, attached with magnets to large metal doors, and crumpled in the oversized trash can at the front of the room.

The interviews took place at my invitation at lunchtime or after school and usually lasted between twenty and fifty minutes. Most students accepted the invitation; one declined. In some cases, a student and I talked alone. Other times, students were joined by another teacher, brought friends to listen in, or were interviewed in pairs. Often, there were snacks: cupcakes with icing that turned our tongues green, chicken fingers and fries still vaguely warm, or at the very least, candy from my emergency sugar supply, a shoe box locked in the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet.

I began these conversations hoping for a chance to slow down and to listen. I wanted to bridge the gap between the lessons I taught each day and what I desperately, adamantly believed that art education could be. How could I show my students that art was more than step-by-step perspective drawings, more than red plus yellow equals orange? I'd received a Master's in Art Education in Boston before becoming a teacher in 2014 and had been taught that lessons should be open ended, exciting, and personal. I'd read books on postmodern, multicultural arts education and written a curriculum that I was sure would feel relevant, even groundbreaking to my students.

On the first day of school, it took forty minutes to quiet one class for long enough to read my ten classroom rules from the syllabus. In my next class, I taught almost an entire lesson before a student raised his hand to say that all thirty of his classmates were beginner English Language Learners who didn't understand my instructions. The groundbreaking curriculum I'd prepared, each page lovingly protected in a plastic sleeve, never left the bottom drawer of my desk. Instead, I taught students how to draw and shade a cube using pencil. I taught the words for "pencil" and "ruler" in English. My students were curious and honest, hardworking and resilient, but I didn't have the experience, information, and resources I needed to make the lessons relevant in the ways I'd planned.

I slowly gained experience and skills as a teacher, and by my third year, I was finally able to communicate to a rowdy class and to plan straightforward yet interesting assignments. My students learned drawing and painting skills, and each artwork completed felt like a small victory. Still, in the blur of nearly two hundred students each week, more than thirty students per class, I didn't feel like I was learning enough about my students through their art or challenging them to learn about themselves. I wanted to know more about the young people that I shared my days with.

And so I began inviting students to collaborate on this project. Each of the thirteen students who participated had immigrated to the United States between the ages of five and fifteen. They came from Honduras, Guatemala, Colombia, Cuba, France, China, India, Iran, and Egypt. At some point within each informal, meandering interview, I asked the students to describe something memorable that they'd left behind when they came to the United States. Each described an object, but also the history and circumstances surrounding it. One student told me about Jumbo, the stuffed dinosaur she'd received as a ninth birthday gift from her mom. As she doodled an image of Jumbo in her binder, the student explained how the toy had eased her insomnia in the years that followed. Another student spoke in vivid detail about his experience growing up in Honduras surrounded by rivers, mountains, and most of all, orange trees. He described watching his pet toucan fly among the trees that filled his yard and eating fresh picked fruit each day. Each young person shared with me a small piece of their history: the people, places, and things they missed so deeply.

The stories of these objects, left but not forgotten in bedrooms and back yards across the world, are the source material for *What's Left*. In the months that followed the interviews, I created woodblock prints based on the descriptions within each student's story, distorted by memory and imagination, both theirs and mine. These images were originally printed by me as gifts for each student. Here, they are accompanied by small pieces of text transcribed from audio recordings I made of the interviews.

This book was possible thanks to the generosity of my students. I am forever grateful to the thirteen young people who participated in this project and gave permission for their stories to be reimagined and presented here. Facilitating these interviews was one of my favorite experiences in room 402. Despite my lack of preparation for the job, the school's lack of resources, and the system's lack of funding, this project has given me enthusiasm and hope. I've seen how creative projects can build community, share stories, and foster self expression in the classroom.