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By Katie Wittenauer, MA ’09

Students in MSU’s Residential College in the Arts and Humanities and the College of Engineering engage in a creative, arts project for Peckham, Inc.

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When you walk onto the manufacturing floor at Peckham, Inc.’s Lansing facility, you’re greeted by a mosaic of vibrant self-portraits and striking black and white photographs. They represent the client artists and students who created the art project. This collection of drawings and paintings covers a wall that measures 200 by 40 feet.

For the past three years, MSU’s Residential College in the Arts and Humanities (RCAH) and the College of Engineering have been working with Peckham, Inc. to design and install Art@Work, one of the largest public arts projects in the region. It is unique in its history, size, and composition, and not only reflects the individual artists, but also inspires creativity and dialogue across the diverse cultures and backgrounds of the Peckham, Inc. community.

“Art@Work is a unique opportunity for RCAH students because it represents the value of reciprocity that guides our civic engagement curriculum,” says Stephen Esquith, dean of the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities. “Through their work at Peckham, students learn how valuable it is for people’s stories to be visible on an everyday basis in the workplace. Peckham and their partners come to appreciate how much can be gained through collaborative work.”

Peckham, Inc. is a private, non-profit vocational rehabilitation organization with their primary administrative offices, manufacturing space and farm facility located in northwest Lansing. From apparel for government contracts and well-known brands like New Balance and Patagonia to locally grown produce, the range of Peckham’s production is far-reaching. In fact, your favorite fleece zip-up may have been stitched right in Lansing. As an organization, Peckham, Inc. provides job training and employment opportunities for its “clients”—including refugees from around the world and people with significant disabilities and vocational barriers.

In addition to opportunities for language and technology skill development for individuals with a wide range of abilities and cultural backgrounds, one option available to Peckham, Inc.’s clients is Art from the Heart, a program that was created to provide a supportive environment and access to art-making experiences in Peckham’s studio classroom space. Through supportive classroom instruction, exhibitions, and the sale of client artwork, Art from the Heart builds awareness of the creative abilities within the client community.

In 2010, Sue McGuire, former Peckham art program developer and, at the time, coordinator of the Art from the Heart program, met with Guillermo Delgado, a Chicago-based community artist...
and RCAH faculty member, and Vincent Delgado, academic specialist for civic engagement in the RCAH. Together, they discussed the idea of using a massive wall at the manufacturing facility to display a dynamically changing collection of artwork co-created by RCAH students and Peckham clients.

Soon after this conversation, Dean Esquith visited the installation site with Sue McGuire, Guillermo Delgado, and Vincent Delgado to discuss the potential project, now called Art@Work. “In this project, the quality of the work and the quality of the workplace go hand in hand,” notes Esquith.

Considering Peckham’s emphasis on diversity, and therapeutic and creative self-expression through art and RCAH’s focus on civic engagement, community, and experiential learning in the arts and humanities, the two realized this collaboration would be an excellent opportunity to create a visual representation reflecting innovation and inclusiveness.

Guillermo Delgado partnered with McGuire to develop and coordinate a model for the creation of the artwork. Since the beginning stages of the collaboration, Guillermo Delgado and more than 100 students from the RCAH’s civic engagement courses have been collaborating with client artists from a wide range of abilities and cultural backgrounds in a series of art-making dialogues. Numerous semesters of this co-generative work resulted in the creation of individual pieces of artwork that tell the stories of Peckham, Inc.’s clients and the RCAH students.

McGuire emphasizes the significance of dialogue and understanding in community contexts. “The human connection in terms of what is shared in creating the art is something that I have not experienced before,” she says. “To see the sharing of not only the stories, but the history, the cultures, the traditions with a total stranger—that’s unprecedented.”

Jessica Johnson, ’11, made weekly visits to Peckham’s art studio as one of the RCAH students in Delgado’s class. Johnson worked and shared experiences with Terry Bogart, a Peckham client artist.

“We were charged with a goal to depict an image of personal significance to Bogart and she chose to paint her work scissors,” says Johnson. “Her scissors are iconic of the importance of her job position at Peckham and the opportunity to support herself financially.”

“Hearing the explanations of clients’ artwork were the most memorable moments of my experience at Peckham. Everyone understood that their artwork was going to be displayed, first as a small installation in the art studio, and later on in the manufacturing of the floor wall. Their images and stories would make a beautiful ornament in their workplace, hopefully encouraging more clients to join in on the art making.”

Johnson, now a kindergarten teacher in Istanbul, Turkey, credits her time at Peckham for shaping her career. “Teaching Bogart how to create orange, purple, and green from red, blue, and yellow paint was one of those moments that foster my love for teaching and partnership,” she explains. “This project, among other mentoring opportunities, reinforces my need to teach and learn throughout my career.”

Daya Rai is a refugee from Bhutan and, like Terry, is a client artist who has contributed to the Art@Work installation during her three and a half years at Peckham. Rai, who is responsible for sewing work and serves as a team leader, says that memories of lighting an
oil lamp for peace prompted her Art@Work piece. “I remember my country, I remember my culture, so I painted the oil lamp,” says Rai, whose representation of her memories includes the words “Peace on Earth” near the center of the installation. She believes that this project allows one to demonstrate abilities that might otherwise go unnoticed. “When given chances in areas like art and writing, it is better for us to express ourselves and explore ourselves in the community,” she notes.

With nearly 80 client artists already contributing to the Art@Work project and more art-making opportunities planned for the current and upcoming semesters, it was necessary to develop a physical framework for the installation that provided an efficient process for rotating in new artwork. Students in the College of Engineering developed ideas for the wall’s overall structure design and, most recently, partnered with RCAH students to prototype and implement viewing technology for the installation.

Satish Udpa, former dean of the College of Engineering and current executive vice president for administrative services at MSU, emphasizes the mutual benefits present within this interdisciplinary collaboration. “We create magic when we leave engineering creativity with artistic imagination,” says Udpa. “Our students were given an opportunity to create such magic when they worked on this project.”

Alexa McCarthy, now a sophomore in the RCAH, was part of the fall 2012 course that brought engineering and RCAH students together to collaborate on a community-based project that required a set of creative solutions. She speaks enthusiastically about the Art@Work experiences that challenged her to work with people who had distinctive ways of approaching the project. McCarthy says, “The two engineers I worked most closely with seemed to have a good idea of how to work with the hardware and technical side of the project, which was something I know little about. It became clear that our minds worked very differently. Whereas I thought of the bigger picture, they thought in terms of the smaller details. We played off each other well, but this also taught me to look at the smaller details.”

“From the beginning, we were not seen as just freshman students, but equal members of the project,” McCarthy says. “We were required to communicate with our contacts at Peckham and Traction as professional individuals. I now know how to identify a problem, solve the problem, and formally present it to a business—those aren’t skills that most first-year students can say they learn.”

McCarthy’s time with the Art@Work project has also prompted her to consider future career steps and employers. “I want to work somewhere that allows me to solve problems that are multidisciplinary and utilize skills that can’t be taught in the classroom,” she says.

On February 23, 2013, nearly three years of work with Art@Work’s creators and collaborators were celebrated at an unveiling of the installation’s first phase—a section composed of nearly 70 paintings or drawings and more than 20 photos of the artists and art-making process from Lansing worker—as people—to create something of great meaning to us all. We saw the stories of all of us as a community reflected back in that mosaic of portraits. It was more than the sum of its parts. It was something I believe none of us will ever forget.”

Greta Wu, senior vice president of human services at Peckham, describes the installation as an amazing representation of the organization’s culture of inclusion and diversity. She says, “This installation is a true reflection of the diverse abilities, talents and backgrounds of each individual who is a part of the Peckham community. This visual representation reflects what words cannot—community, storytelling, and the sharing of experiences.”

Wu, who attended the College of Education for her master’s degree in rehabilitation counseling, has been supervising interns from MSU over the course of her 30 years at Peckham and looks forward to the partnership's next steps. She adds that the community of client artists is excited for upcoming opportunities to display work on the left and right sections of the installation’s physical framework. “Art@Work took my breath away when I saw it unveiled,” says April Clobes, executive vice president and COO at MSU Federal Credit Union (MSUFCU). “The collaboration between the two colleges’ students along with the Peckham clients is remarkable. . . Seeing this work inspired me to find ways to connect people through art and community within our organization as well.”

Beyond this growing collection of artwork from client and community, the installation reflects what words cannot: community, storytelling, and the sharing of experiences.”

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In late 2012 and early 2013, McCarthy and her classmates partnered with instructors Vincent Delgado and the College of Engineering’s Tim Hinds, Peckham’s facility and technology teams, and Traction, a creative studio in downtown Lansing, to create an Art@Work viewing system. The Ford Community Fund gave $17,000 to develop this technology. The interface, available online ([artatwork.peckham.org](http://artatwork.peckham.org)), enables employees and visitors on the mezzanine level overlooking the installation to use a touchscreen to select and view larger versions of the artwork and video interviews with client and student artists.

On February 23, 2013, nearly three years of work with Art@Work’s creators and collaborators were celebrated at an unveiling of the installation’s first phase—a section composed of nearly 70 paintings or drawings and more than 20 photos of the artists and art-making process from Lansing photojournalist Becky Shink. Over 300 client and student artists, Peckham employees, students, faculty, donors, and Lansing community members attended the public event.

“It was a revelation,” notes Vincent Delgado. “As the curtain went down, we all saw for the first time the power of engaging together as a community of artists, students, teachers, supporters, workers—as people—to create something of great meaning to us all. We saw the stories of all of us as a community reflected back in that mosaic of portraits. It was more than the sum of its parts. It was something I believe none of us will ever forget.”
student artists, what’s next for the Peckham and MSU collaboration? Mitchell Tomlinson, Peckham president and CEO and member of the RCAH’s Dean’s Advisory Council, has a proactive and optimistic vision for the semesters ahead. “Peckham is fortunate to have MSU right in our own backyard,” he says. “We have reached out to the faculty and students over the years and created many meaningful connections. From internships, special projects, and practicums, the Art@Work installation is a visual reminder of this long-standing relationship. We continue to look for and be open to any opportunities that give us a chance to work with the outstanding and innovative students and faculty at MSU.”

One of those future collaborations that Tomlinson speaks of is already underway in Next Step, Peckham’s pilot program for 18- to 21-year-olds who have been in the court system. Next Step is funded by the U.S. Dept. of Labor and provides educational and vocational options for participants; though it is a nationwide program, Peckham hosts the only Michigan-based location.

In spring 2013, a group of five RCAH students from previous semesters of Art@Work-focused civic engagement courses started meeting weekly with Next Step to begin the planning stages of a mural project that would be designed, painted, and installed with the program participants. The mural’s art is centered on the theme of “Good Things Come from Lansing” and, when completed, will be displayed on the fence surrounding the former General Motors plant on Lansing’s Westside. Poetry workshops and writing will be an integral part of the process as participants journal about the mural’s creation.

As Art@Work expands, RCAH aims to create a co-creative writing component that will facilitate ongoing sharing and archiving of client artist stories. Through textual and multimedia narratives, biographies, interviews, poetry, and performances created by clients and students working together, an increasing number of voices from the Peckham community can accompany the inspiring visual representations of collaboration, creativity, culture and diversity in Art@Work.

Katie Wittenauer, MA ’09, is the communications manager for the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities. She is originally from Bozeman, MT. When Katie’s not on campus, she spends her time DIY-ing, experimenting with new recipes, traveling, and exploring Lansing’s neighborhoods.

Support for Art@Work

Art@Work has received significant support through a combination of grants and in-kind contributions from campus, community, and project partners. These include:

- Ford Community Fund
- Integrated Architecture
- Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs
- MSU Center for Service-Learning and Engagement
- MSU Development
- MSU Communications and Brand Strategy
- National Endowment for the Arts
- Peckham Community Partnership Foundation
- Pioneer Construction

If you are interested in supporting Art@Work and future such collaborations contact RCAH Dean Stephen Esquith at (517) 355-0212.

Art@Work is available for public viewing at 3510 Capital City Blvd., Lansing, Michigan. Call Peckham, Inc. at (517) 316-4000 to arrange a tour.

For more information, visit artatwork.peckham.org.