



Colors! Looking for My Parts

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ABSTRACT

The artwork, “Colors!,” is about the celebration of being a woman. The reproductive parts of a woman’s body, particularly the genitalia, were desensitized and antagonized in my Biology class in high school, which essentially robbed my right to knowledge about the most important body parts of a female, all because of the adults’ predisposed belief that knowledge of it would lead us to “sin.” This article touches on how sexual education is vital, especially for adolescents, in strengthening their autonomy. It aims to empower creative expression without shame, ridicule, and judgment, through Poddar’s visual vocabulary composed of elements of the arts, and finding the metaphor in Schwartz’ different parts inside me through the art process. The scope of the work is an expression of celebration, and how meaning-making served as a gateway to understanding the self and highlighting the purpose of the artwork.

KEYWORDS

Female reproductive parts; bodily autonomy, sexual education; art for change

ARTICLE HISTORY

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ABSTRAK

Ang obra na pinamagatang “Colors!” ay tungkol sa selebrasyon ng pagiging isang babae. Ang sistemang reprodiktibo ng isang babae, partikular ang ari, ay nadesensya at pinagmukhang masama sa aking klase sa Biology sa mataas na paaralan. Ito ay nagdulot ng pagbaliwala at pagnakaw sa aking karapatan sa tamang kaalaman sa pinakamahalagang parte ng katawan ng isang babae nang dahil lamang sa tingin ng mga nakatatanda na ang kaalaman nito ay magdudulot ng “pagkakasala.” Ang pagsusulat na ito ay patungkol sa edukasyong sekwal at kung paano nito pinagtatibay ang awtonomiya ng isang tao, lalung-lalo na sa mga nagbibinata at nagdadalaga. Layunin nitong bigyang halaga at kapangyarihan ang malikhaing pagpapahayag ng damdamin at saloobin gamit ang biswal nang walang hiya, pangungutya, at paghahatol. Ginamitan ito ng panuntunan ni Poddar patungkol sa bokabularyong biswal tulad ng iba’t ibang elemento ng sinig biswal, at talinghaga sa proseso ng pagbubuo ng biswal na obra mula sa panuntunan naman ni Schwartz patungkol sa iba’t ibang bahagi ng kalooban ng isang tao. Ang obra ay isang pagpapahayag ng selebrasyong makabuluhan, na syang naging daan sa mas malalim na pagkilala ng sarili, at pagbibigay liwanag sa layunin ng biswal na obra.

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sistemang reprodiktibo ng isang babae; awtonomiya sa katawan; edukasyong sekwal; sining para sa pagbabago



The artwork displayed on the wall. Size is 5x5' framed using natural wood. Total size dimensions including frame is 6x1.5x6"



Work in progress. The different parts unstitched and loosely composed.

Artist: Liz Rañola

Title: Colors ! Looking for my Parts

Medium: Mixed media (canvas fabric, beads, threads, pearl)

Year: 2024

Description

My artwork is a representation of the single identifier of the female body, the vagina. It is a relief sculpture made of beads and cutouts of canvas fabric colored with bright colors of pink, green, blue, and red oil sticks. The vagina births life, biologically and metaphorically, and through the whimsical and creative presentation of the artwork, it invites the viewers to answer questions such as, "What does life, or being alive, mean to a woman? Is it having vitality, strength, or movement? What does it take to have it? Is it by being loving and compassionate? Is it by being self-sacrificing, or making own decisions? Is it by allowing oneself to enjoy? How can you achieve these?" The answers, of course, are best given by the viewers, as a self-reflection starter. The artwork wants to connect to other people. It wants to say that breasts and vagina are biological parts, much like the heart and lungs; therefore, it is not taboo and should not be laughed at or be shameful about. It has to be discussed with openness and in a respectful and scientific way, especially at schools. It also wants to say to people that these body parts go beyond the biological; they contain stories that need to be heard.

Background

Colors! was created in 2024, for an exhibition and auction at Super Duper Gallery entitled “What Makes You Happy.” It was organized by a collective group of female artists called Girl Gang of Art PH, of which I am a member. The artwork is only 5 x 5 inches in size, a challenge by the group to its members to tell one’s story on the theme in such a small space. The concept of my artwork is a vagina that is celebratory of what I believe it takes to be female, fun, caring, strong, compassionate, self-sacrificing, and ambitious. It was inspired by the lack of sufficient education in my Biology class in high school about the sexual and reproductive organs, where there were no discussions on their parts and usage, but instead, our teacher highlighted the discouragement of sexual pleasure. Looking back, there is a feeling of betrayal for the intentional lack of information, and the heavy discouragement of sexual pleasure outside of marriage, which for me felt like this important body part was reduced to an organ that can cause grave sin. Thirty years later, there is minimal development towards openness and inclusivity in the manner of teaching and curriculum on sexual education in the Philippines, including the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE).

Historically, women have been denied ownership of their bodies, and the acceptance of women’s agency on their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, and the promotion of sexuality education have been slow to develop (Gacad, 2022). Although the existing Comprehensive Sexuality Education (RPRH Law) that was stated in the Manual of Operations for Adolescent Health and Development Program by the Philippine Department of Health (2017), indicates that the state shall provide age and development-appropriate reproductive health education to adolescents, several adolescent participants have shared during a closed group discussion for research on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, that there is societal reluctance and discomfort to openly discuss such topics, especially in a mixed-gender group (Verceles, 2024). This stigma is caused by sexualizing the “private parts” instead of discussing them as body parts, much like the lungs and heart. This is further enhanced by the Catholic Church, which has been critical in teaching sexual education due to the belief that it seeds promiscuity and immorality (Danguilan, 2018, as stated by Gacad, 2022), specifically pre-marital sex. Pope John Paul II, in his speech addressed to a group of bishops from the United States of America, stated:

“...we must teach that sexuality transcends the purely biological sphere and concerns the innermost being of the human persons as such. Sexual love is truly human only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death. This full self-giving is possible only in marriage.” (John Paul II, 1983) .

The church in the Philippines argues that by teaching sexual education to children and adolescents, one is permitting sex before marriage. This diminishes the value of the institution of marriage itself, along with its purpose of procreation, and the values of purity and self-control, among others, which are all rooted in love between man and woman.

Although one can recognize the church's teachings and the values it wants to uphold, Colors! believes in the right to information and the freedom of choice, with the latter being dependent on the environment the person grew up in and lives in. It accepts that values differ from one another, and that no value is better than the other. It recognizes that further information does not necessarily mean inculcating risky choices, but instead, resulting in informed choices. Colors! refuses to decrease its tone and presence. It is not only a matter-of-fact body part, but much like the theme "What Makes You Happy," it encompasses all that women feel happy and joyful about, and in totality, how it makes them feel whole. It celebrates the autonomy of knowing, of owning, and of deciding for oneself, which can be influenced by what the person learned from experiences with their relationships. The Manual of Operations for Adolescent Health and Development Program by the Philippine Department of Health says that:

"Parents who are highly knowledgeable about their child's activities have adolescents who are less likely to engage in problem behaviours." (DOH, 2017, p. 48).

With this being said, it believes that the problem lies in whether or not the person has a supportive and guiding community, such as family or guardians, teachers and other adults surrounding them.

Looking for My Parts: The Process and Aesthetic Analysis, What it seeks and Empowers

Colors! is a reflection of my lived experiences, the desire for societal change, and the hope for a kinder and better community. Through the choice of colors, strategic use of materials, and the art-making process, I was able to create a visual language of my thoughts and emotions, and discover parts of myself that were dormant and alive. Rukmini Poddar (2023) wrote that in order to make sense of one's emotions, a person needs a robust emotional visual vocabulary through colors, lines, shapes, and other elements of art to help understand one's feelings and communicate one's needs. The Internal Family Systems (IFS) model, developed by Richard Schwartz states that people have various parts within oneself that emerged and can emerge in response to experiences, with the Self as the leader of the system, and all of which are valuable and with a purpose (Brenner, et al., 2023). By expressing and having dialogues with these parts inside me using colors and materials exploration, acknowledging and understanding their purpose and needs was essential for my self-worth and continuation to advocate for women and girls.

The neon colors of pink, orange, and yellow, with hints of light blue and red, represent life, joy, happiness, sacrifice, endurance, and love. The labia with random colors and unkempt threads and beads signify women's far from perfect lives, but one that gives opportunities to find inner strength and capabilities amidst imperfections. The vaginal opening with translucent beads placed together using transparent glue in order to form a river-like image, is akin to the rivers women traverse in their lives. I then used a pearl to represent the clitoris to complete the celebratory mood of the artwork.

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The process of stitching parts of the vagina was a metaphor for what the different parts that Schwartz developed (Brenner, et al., 2023). Forming the canvas into different shapes and sizes, stitching them together in place, coloring and putting beads on it, felt like finding the parts of myself, naming and organizing them according to their purpose to create harmony. Upon finishing the artwork, I realized that the characteristics and purpose of the parts of this organ are hugely similar to what women go through.

The vagina is elastic and strong. It stretches to give birth to another human, much like how women can stretch their patience, adapt, and adjust for the sake of another.

The vagina is a flusher. When an unused endometrial lining sheds every month, it flushes it out to clean itself and prepare for the next possible life formation, much like women who are good at organization and preparation.

The vagina knows fun. It has thousands of nerve endings for stimulation, much like women who take pleasure in relationships, career, and skincare to sustain her joy and sanity.

In effect, the artwork and art-making process have allowed me to take up space by knowing the parts inside me, biologically and spiritually. Since the reason behind this artwork was my high school's insufficient education on sex and sexuality, I realized that the part of me—my high school self—who has been uninformed, needs to actively advocate for sexual education that aims primarily to inform, value oneself and others, without instigating fear and moral presumptions. It is, after all, a human right to know the holistic parts of oneself. Through this artwork, I gained autonomy.

Significance/contribution to Gender and Education.

Autonomy is one of the main goals of CSE. As described by UNFPA, CSE helps young people to learn about the holistic aspects of sexuality—emotional, physical, and social—by providing them with the knowledge to protect and advocate for their health, well-being, and dignity (UNFPA, 2025). ASRH encourages adolescents to explore their sexuality, their bodies, and their beliefs. By knowing about their bodies and how their reproductive system function, it teaches them to be responsibly curious and how to take good care of themselves, hoping that this would help them be responsible human beings for themselves and for others as they navigate adulthood.

Omission of knowledge to adolescents does not solve problems, but rather creates one or more. For example, adolescents resort to several social media posts with unverified content, peers, and internet pornography (Verceles, 2023), which often lack the responsibility and values formation that are relatable to it.

Sexual education is a human right, and access to correct and concise information is a human right. It is not only about knowing more, but also about empowering people to make choices suitable for their lives through the knowledge they have understood. Education, in the general sense, is the first step to having autonomy.

On Pleasure vs. Morality

One of the grave concerns of the Catholic Church and its organizations regarding sexual education and CSE being taught at schools and health centers is the possibility of adolescents engaging in sexual acts once they are exposed to this information. Although there is no evidence, the question of morality plays an important concern in such disagreement, hesitation, and insufficient implementation. Concerns of adults on the morality issue are highlighted by their belief that since adolescents do it outside of marriage, they do it for pleasure and curiosity. But what is pleasure?

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines pleasure as a feeling of happy satisfaction and enjoyment. This begs the question, aren't adolescents allowed to experience sexual pleasure in particular? Is it really just curiosity? Sexuality education at school with values inculcated and support readied, would allow the adolescent to make the right choices for themselves, whatever that may be, because of their awareness and care about their health and well-being.

On Art as a Tool for Connection

Art as a tool for self-expression enables the artist not only to release emotions and thoughts but also to connect with an audience by evoking meaning through the viewer's perspective. It challenges the viewer on the subject being expressed, which may or may not have crossed the viewer's mind, which, either way, is essential because there is the invitation for an internal dialogue between the viewer and the artist. This creates resonance, disagreement, or awareness of the topic. Through this, I was able to understand parts of myself and create a visual language of my thoughts and emotions, which viewers are free to interpret and make meaning of, thereby igniting their own creative thinking as well. In essence, I could say that the connection I made was not only with myself, but also with others.

The power of the arts to invite self-reflection, initiate communication and connection with the self and others, and additionally, its intrinsic therapeutic characteristic, can be a great tool to use in a group setting such as workshops and seminars, that are intended for gathering insights on general or specific topics. It can also be used for therapeutic purposes, which are most helpful for participants with gender-related trauma. Arts-based research has been done in the Philippines and abroad, and has been proven to be effective in gathering data that are highly related to personal experiences because of the art's capacity for a deeper and honest communication. As one pours their heart on paper and creates a visual storytelling of their experiences, it gives research participants a wider lens of the concerns at hand, therefore, gaining a wider understanding, and acknowledgment or discovery of their inner strengths, which could help them to navigate a chosen path (Manlangit & Rañola, 2024). Since sexuality education is not just physical, but also emotional and social, using the arts is a valuable tool for deeper understanding and to propel change in oneself and, essentially, the community.

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1. **Funding details.** This work has no support from a funding agency.
2. **Disclosure statement.** No financial or non-financial interest has arisen from the direct application of my work; and the author has not been involved in any kind of sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, and abuse (SEA) complaint, allegation, or conviction. Furthermore, the author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.
3. **Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing.** The author did not use AI at any stage in creating the artwork and the article.
4. **Acknowledgement.** I highly thank Girl Gang of Art PH for this opportunity to create and exhibit this artwork.
5. **Ethical Approval.** The manuscript and creation of the work did not undergo ethical approval because the research and creation processes of the manuscript and artwork do not meet the criteria required for ethics approval.

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