

ART

PLACE

ARTIST

## MARIA GOMEZ UMANA & ALICIA BORISONIK.



**Maria Gomez Umana:** I have nourished my passion for arts and culture wherever I live while juggling jobs, family life and artwork. Paths have taken me to live in Colombia, England, Switzerland and now Canada. I have explored different techniques in visual arts and at this stage I am looking for ways to combine them, in search of a unique artistic language.



**Alicia Borisonik:** Alicia Borisonik is from the Argentinean province Buenos Aires and is a teacher, singer, vocalist, arranger, composer and performer. She has performed extensively across Canada and in Argentina

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Song Mural is a sequence of activities for a group of youth from 13 to 16 years old. The goal is to give participants a space in where they can feel safe to share and explore ideas without judging each other in order to 1) develop a sense of belonging, 2) nurture curiosity, 3) strengthen bonds between the group of participants, and 4) create and try out new forms of expression. We will propose a variety of games and creative activities that will allow them to know each other, and build a sense of teamwork and mutual trust

## PARTNER SITE

The **Alexander Community Centre** offers a wide range of programs for children, youth and adults.

## ABOUT ART PLACE

Art Place, a 3-year professional artist-in-residence program, addresses social issues by placing artists and arts groups in community settings to co-create art projects and provide free of charge arts programming. The 2015-2016 projects enable participants from non-profit groups, in Ottawa, to take creative journeys through theatre, dance, music, storytelling and visual art. Art Place amplifies voices in various underserved communities touched by the project, to tell their stories and share their unique perspectives.

# EXPLORING ELEMENTS OF STORY MAKING, COMPOSITION AND VISUAL ARTS

## Blog Post 1 - November 2, 2015

The project Song Mural was conceived for youth from 13 to 17 years old, as a space for sharing, creating, and building together. The residency's goal is to create stories that will become a musical composition. In the end, the musical composition will become a mural that will remain at the Alexander Community Centre. The participants will be guided through the elements of story making, as well as the main aspects of musical compositions, and the basic elements of visual arts. This is a very ambitious program to be achieved in ten sessions of two hours each, but with passion and discipline we are convinced we will achieve our goal.

The group varies from session to session, from 10 to 13 participants. Most of them came to Canada in the last four years from Burundi, Congo, China, Iran and Guatemala. Only one participant was born in Canada.

Today the parents were invited to attend but were unable to. As a result, Alicia and Maria did

a short performance. Alicia improvised on the accordion while Maria painted in free form with China ink on paper. Afterwards, the participants were invited to imitate the exercise, and to experiment with China inks while listening to Alicia's music.



# ASSORTED MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND STYLES OF MUSIC

## Blog Post 2 - November 9, 2015

The group today had a chance to jam with an assortment of musical instruments Alicia brought. They instruments were different types of drums, rattles, rain sticks, maracas, and shakers. They all expressed great joy with this activity, and great curiosity for the instruments and their country of origin. We could see that most of the participants have a great sense of rhythm, which will enable us to do a great musical composition during this Song Mural Residency.

Each participant was asked to bring a musical piece they enjoy, and we listened to all the music they brought on their cellphones. There was a lot of rap, pop and rock. Maria brought

Arias from Mozart, and Alicia brought contemporary tango from Argentina. The different instruments and music styles were discussed.

Maria gave a general introduction to concepts



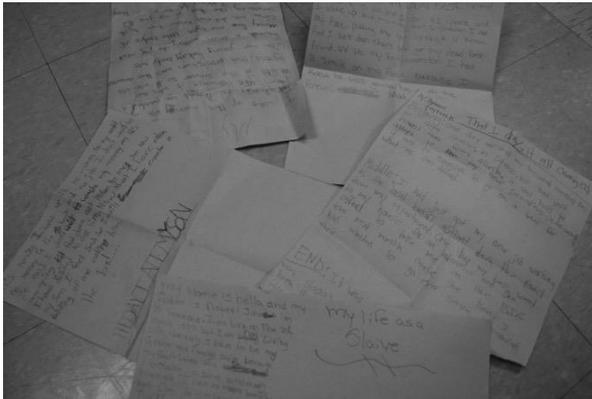
of contrast between black and white. They painted on black paper using soft pastels while listening to different styles of music. Some participants wanted an image to copy from but

we asked them to base the painting on the emotions brought by the music rather than another image. Teens seem to enjoy this activity a lot.

## STORYTELLING WITH WORDS, MOTION AND SOUND

### Blog Post 3 - November 16, 2015

The group discussed the parts in a story (introduction, middle, conclusion). Afterwards, each participant created a story made up of three sentences, accompanied by motion and sound. They each performed their story and accompanied by the chosen sound and the body motion. Each youth wrote a short story on paper, which gave us a sense of where they are in terms of literacy.



*Beginning to tell the story*



*Using rhythm to enhance story telling*

Guided by Alicia the group created patterns in rhythm with sticks and using the elements the environment offered: sticks, chairs, tables, micro-soccer game etc. Each participant created a rhythm that was followed and enriched by the others. They were not taking the activity too seriously at first, but later when they heard what the group was creating they enjoyed it and understood the purpose of it.

## LEARNING VISUAL COMPOSITION TO CREATE A STORY

### Blog Post 4 - December 7, 2015 by Maria Gomez Umana & Alicia Borisonik at Alexander Community Centre

The majority of the participants are girls but boys have also registered, although they do not always come. The dynamics change a lot when the group is mixed. During this session we discussed elements of visual composition. The youth learned about the difference when using horizontal, vertical or diagonal lines. We discussed repetition to create pattern and visual texture.

In groups of three, they built booklets, created a story and wrote them down. These stories are very telling of the kind of their environment,



*Learning repetition, pattern and visual texture*

their fears, motivations and questions. The stories deal with questioning authority, issues around finding one's own identity, and loyalty in friendship among others. These stories will become the core of the song they will write.

The group played different rhythm games, individually and in groups. At the end of the session we played mirroring each other's movements. They love all the activities that involve movement, music and dance.

## IMAGINARY STORY BASED ON THE WORKS OF MASTERS

**Blog Post 5 - December 14, 2015**

Today a sequence of exercises was designed based on well-known masters. Using postcards of famous painters the group discussed stories told through the artwork. Each participant chose a postcard and studied it. Then each of them created an imaginary story. The stories were later shared with the group. Later on, and without looking at the postcards, each participant used their written stories to create a new painting using oil pastels on paper. Maria gave a short demo of how to use the art supplies. The result of this exercise became a connection between storytelling and image making that was fascinating.

For every session Alicia brings cookies for the break. This is a very important part of the session, and it is becoming a ritual and an important social aspect of our creative gatherings.



*Connecting images with story telling*

## EXPLORING RHYTHMS AND SKETCHES FOR SONG MURAL

**Blog Post 6 - December 21, 2015**

The group listened to different rap composers on the computer. Then they had chances to make rhythms with different instruments, in a jamming following Alicia's rhythmic patterns while playing on the keyboard. After discussion of the essential elements in the stories they wrote, the beginning of a song has emerged, including lyrics, rhythm and melody. The four participants in this session thoroughly enjoyed creating music, improvising, and sharing it with their friends.

Maria showed samples of public murals around the world, using her Pinterest account. The

youth saw a great variety of messages, techniques, scale, and final look. The canvas for the final mural of the project was presented to the group, for them to see the actual material as well as the size of the work they will produce in the future sessions. Maria gave them a demo on how to paint with knives, how to use texture gels, and how to use acrylic mediums. The group created the first sketches that will be used towards the final mural based on the musical composition. Some of the paintings will become key elements in the final Song Mural.

# INTERVIEW WITH MARIA GOMEZ UMANA

January 21, 2016

## **How would you describe yourself as an artist?**

I like to work by myself and mostly in silence during the art making process. However, I also love working as a team to create something larger and more complex, and that is why I love teaching, creating collective projects and participating in events and art projects.

## **What inspired you to pursue a career in the arts?**

Since childhood I was interested in the arts. I did painting, drawing and classical guitar. However I was also interested in nature and I thought of studying biology, which still informs my work in the use of scientific anatomy. However I use it as an excuse to talk about human experience from my personal point of view.

## **What are some recurring themes in your art practice?**

I have worked around notions of identity and power in the body, with the use of words and anatomy. These themes keep coming back.

## **What are the most important influences?**

The work of Valerie Hammond.

## **What is your experience in art projects engaging social practice?**

I have been using art for social change since my years as a student. In 1985 I founded and participated in the artists collective Artifact, with whom we painted murals in Nicaragua and Montreal with provincial funding. Since then I have participated in numerous art mural projects in Colombia and Dominican Republic among others. As an art teacher in schools and universities in Canada and Colombia I have broadened my capacity to reach youth from diverse communities. More recently I was the operations director of the Coalition of New Canadians for Arts and Culture (CNCAC), and we organized events and designed opportunities in arts culture for new immigrants.

## **What did you gain from your experience?**

Art Place has given me a closer look at the interests and concerns of youth today. I have

seen the influence of rap and social media in the way youth communicate. This group often talk about gangs, delinquency, and physical abuse as ordinary themes.

## **How long have you been active in the Ottawa arts community?**

Four years.

## **What interested you about working with the AOE Arts Council?**

I have known the work of the organization for many years and have been involved in different activities such as exhibitions at Selections, Articipate, Cultural Pluralism in the Arts Ontario (CPAMO), and other events. I like what AOE Arts Council offers to artists in Ottawa.

## **What made you want to participate in Art Place?**

During my professional artistic career I have taught art in diverse schools and universities. I have also been involved in different arts organizations that use art to empower youth. Art workshops offer underprivileged members of a community tools for creativity, ingenuity and teamwork.

## **What inspired you to pursue this project with this community?**

Alicia and I wanted to work together in an art project that integrated music and visual arts and this was the perfect opportunity so we decided to apply.

## **How would you describe the project you will be working on?**

Song Mural is a sequence of activities designed as 10 sessions for a group of 10 to 12 youth from 13 to 16 years old. The goal is to give participants a space where they can feel safe to share and explore ideas without judging each other in order to 1) develop a sense of belonging, 2) nurture curiosity, 3) strengthen bonds between the group of participants, and 4) create and try out new forms of expression. We will propose a variety of games and creative activities that will allow them to know each

other, and build a sense of teamwork and mutual trust.

**As an artist, what do you hope to get out of this process?**

We hope this residency gives youth an array of tools to expose and empower themselves around difficult social issues.

**What do you hope participants will gain from this process?**

We hope Song Mural will offer opportunities to youth of underprivileged communities to have access to artistic expressions, healing tools, communication skills, and empowering elements to build a better future.

**How do you anticipate this work will have an impact on the community?**

Through artistic expression, youth will express their issues and concerns. We hope the

community will have a chance to understand, assimilate and react timely to support and advocate for them. This will benefit the future of this community as a whole.

**How will your project give voice or expression to the social issue(s) you will be exploring?**

Song Mural will use stories, songs, and paintings as the main vehicle to express social issues.

**How will you know your project is a success?**

The attendance is great, between 10 and 15 participants per session.

Youth come and are eager to participate in the activities and games.

The resulting stories, songs, drawings and paintings will be evidence of the process.

The final presentation to the community will be a summary of the experience.

The presentation to other residency programs will be a final test and synthesis of the program.

## INTERVIEW WITH ALICIA BORISONIK

January 21, 2016

**How would you describe yourself as an artist?**

As an immigrant, I know I will always miss my country, my traditions, my friends, family and my culture. I feel that through my music, I am able to create a mood of a homecoming that is both joyful and melancholic. The process of writing music puts me in a privileged position; it leads to a deeper level of self-understanding. When I write, I connect with my past and at the same time I acknowledge my present.

**What inspired you to pursue a career in the arts?**

Nothing really pushed me; I follow a way of expressing myself that I was able to find through music and composition. If there was something that pushed me, it was the desire to express feelings that I had since I was little and didn't have words for. Music, timbre and harmonies became the tools of my life.

**What are some recurring themes in your art practice?**

My music and lyrics attempt to represent and express my past and present, the joyful and the melancholic, the good and the bad, and the beautiful and the ugly. They talk about the

craziness, the mystery and the chaos that are found in big cities, the routine and the misery of some lives, but also the happiness, love and hope for the future that exist alongside and even in the same people. A main theme in my songs is finding who you are.

**What are your most important influences?**

The most importance influences in my music are tango, jazz and contemporary folkloric Argentinian music.

**What is your experience in art projects engaging social practice?**

I have an organization called World Folk Music Ottawa and what we do is bring all kinds of music projects (concerts, music workshops, courses, etc.) to low income communities and new immigrants. I also have extensive experience working in schools and communities outside Ottawa. My work as a music educator and musician constantly engages with social issues.

**What did you gain from your experience?**

I gained understanding of the amazing power of music to open channels of communication and

expression for people who wouldn't have the opportunity otherwise.

**How long have you been active in the Ottawa arts community?**

Since I came to Canada in 1994, in different ways, as a volunteer with the Canadian Museum of History. As a musician, composer and music educator I had been doing a lot of work in schools for the two boards OCDSB and OCSB, in community centres, libraries, community houses in low income areas. I also performed with my band "Alicia Borisonik and the Argentinian project" in various venues from the

4th Stage at National Arts Centre (NAC) to the Ottawa Jazz Festival.

**What interested you about working with the AOE Arts Council?**

Actually I didn't know about your organization and my partner Maria Umana told me about the possibility of doing some meaningful work in a low income community through some funding we could get from your organization.

Now that I know a little more about AOE I see many possibilities of working together and include more music projects in your programs.

**PROJECT CHECK IN - SONG MURAL  
WITH MARIA GOMEZ UMANA & ALICIA  
BORISONIK**

**February 8, 2016**

**What types of changes did you notice in the participants during your Song Mural residency as you transitioned from music, to visual arts and to the mural?**

Throughout the ten sessions, the group went through different phases of development in music and visual arts. In terms of music, it was very interesting to observe the involvement the participants had during each session. These girls have an incredible potential to express themselves through music and movement. They loved dancing and creating rhythms, and we could see how it is natural for them. We are certain it has to do with the rich cultural background and the traditions they bring to Canada as immigrants. By means of exploring traditional music instruments of the world, they became more sensitive to sound differences, and they became aware of different new instruments and their provenance. They learned to jam with different instruments and they loved it. They also learned new movement and rhythm games and became more confident and willing as the program evolved.

In terms of visual arts, the group explored different techniques as part of the introduction to image making. They had opportunities to try India ink, drawing pencils, soft and oil pastels, acrylic inks, and acrylic paints. The group had presentations on colour theory, composition,

and some exploration of texture. They enjoyed the opportunity to try out new supplies, although the time was short for them to explore the techniques in depth. Some of the participants showed talent and interest in painting, and we saw how the interest resulted in behavioural improvement throughout the program.

**Now that your project is reaching close to its ending point, what stands out or surprised you most about the experience?**

This project was an excellent learning experience for everybody. However, the number of participants was constantly changing. The fluctuation in numbers made it difficult to obtain the quality we were aiming for. At the end we had a group of four or five committed girls who supported the progression between creating a story, writing a song, and painting the mural. What surprised us the most was the incredible potential some of the girls have. We wish we could continue working in this project longer to obtain better and richer results.

Looking back it seems to us that in our proposal we had too high expectations for a short period of workshops. We aimed for high quality artwork after only 10 sessions split into music and visual arts. The end result was a positive experience for teachers and participants.

### **What impact did Song Mural have on the participants and how did it impact the community surrounding the project?**

The impact of this project wasn't only for the participants, but it also impacted the facilitators, and we hope it will affect their community. During the sessions where the participants were creating, telling and writing stories, a lot of conversations took place regarding issues that concern them, and we hope we contributed in positive ways. The themes ranged from use and abuse of power; the fact that teens question authority and how to do it clearly, respectfully and efficiently; and the importance for girls to have a voice and getting it heard. The project gave the girls some tools to express themselves, ways to communicate to each other, and how to

work as a team. All of these improved their self-esteem and their sense of belonging to the community. The girls obtained tools to become better members of society, as they grow feeling empowered and more creative.

As facilitators, we learned how to get the participants to trust and to open up to us. This is how they began telling and writing stories about issues that are important to them. Only some of these stories are visible in the mural, but were present throughout the process. With the group we also learned about negotiating and finding a balance between freedom and the discipline required to develop an artistic project. And finally we learned that this project needed longer and more sessions to achieve the artistic excellence we were aiming for.

## **GIVING YOUTH A POSITIVE SPACE FOR EXPRESSION: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS WITH ALICIA BORISONIK AND MARIA GOMEZ UMANA**

**April 12, 2016**

### **How would you describe your overall experience with Art Place.**

The overall experience was positive. It was key for us that we had a previous relationship with the administration of Alexander Community Centre, which enabled us to deliver our plan in a timely manner. The scarcity of resources for art in the Community Centre resulted in high benefits for the youth participants.

What are some of the most significant things you've learned through out your project?

This project was an excellent learning experience for us as facilitators and for the participants. For instance, as facilitators, we learned:

- the importance of providing space for young people to express freely;
- ways to balance freedom, discipline, fun and commitment;
- how to better communicate with youth;

- the need for patience to give the participants time to trust us;
- seeing the artistic potential in the group we hope to continue to work with them.



### **How was your project a success?**

We realize how important it was for the youth participants to have continuous sessions during ten Mondays to learn about visual arts and music. They valued spending time with new friends, creating, having fun, and dancing. They became more aware of their power as young women in society. They loved dancing and

creating rhythms, and we could see how it is natural for them. We are certain it has to do with the rich cultural background and the traditions they bring to Canada as immigrants.

Here some of the comments about their experience in the program, which make us feel very proud and happy.

“...we had a place to express ourselves...”

“...I loved hanging with everybody, nobody was judging, we all have our opinion and we got along..”

“...Maria and Alicia helped me to express myself, I had something great to do every Monday...”

“...I was shy at the beginning but now I feel comfortable, I got to know the real me...”

“...I was always waiting for Monday to come, and then class ended and I knew I had to wait for another week...”



### **What do you intend for audiences to see, experience, and think about when learning about your project?**

We want audiences to see how the progression of games and activities with the group ensured trust and camaraderie. The participants followed and trusted our plan, and the result was a new and unique rap song, and a collective mural painting. We want people to see the importance of giving youth artistic tools to express creatively. This opportunity benefits and changes their lives forever. They become more confident and they are more aware of the importance to find their voice and to get it heard. This program offered them a space to share without being judged, where they talked about their concerns, and the choices they have as young women. Some of the themes discussed came through in the rap song and in the mural.

### **In what ways did the community benefit from your project?**

The youth learned values as well as artistic tools that make them better human beings. For instance, they learned how to work as a team to plan and create together.

They also learned how to communicate, respecting and valuing each other's opinion. They understand the relevance of committing and participating in all the sessions. Furthermore they learned many artistic skills in visual arts and music, which will certainly enhance their life as members of a community. They will contribute to their community by sharing some of those life skills with siblings, neighbours and friends.

### **In your opinion, what did the participants learn from the project?**

The group got completely involved working with rap music because it represents them. We adjusted the program to their needs, and our goal was to offer space and tools to express themselves musically. By means of exploring traditional music instruments of the world, they became more sensitive to sound differences, and they became aware of new instruments and their provenance. They learned to jam with an array of instruments and they loved it. They also learned new movement and rhythm games and became more confident and willing as the program evolved.

In terms of visual arts, the group explored different techniques as part of the introduction to image making. They had opportunities to try India ink, drawing pencils, soft and oil pastels, acrylic inks, and acrylic paints. The group had presentations on colour theory, composition, and some exploration of texture. They enjoyed the opportunity to try out new supplies, although the time was short for them to explore the techniques in depth. Some of the participants showed talent and interest in painting, and we saw how the interest resulted in behavioral improvements throughout the program.

### **Do you have anything else you would like to share about your project or the program?**

This project was an excellent learning experience for everybody. We see the incredible potential some of the girls have, and we wish

we could continue working in this project longer to obtain better and richer results. We are convinced it is very important to offer arts and culture programs for youth in every community.

When youth are granted activities that make them feel like important parts of society, it guides their life in the right direction. The goal is to take youth away from unhealthy activities based on boredom and lacking of opportunities.

**Art Place is made possible by the following supporters:**

**Place d'art est rendue possible grâce aux commanditaires suivants :**



TRINITY



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO  
an Ontario government agency  
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario



**Danbe Foundation**

**Harry P. Ward Foundation**