

Artist Book Essay

By Jacquie Jones, 2008 Transformation Award Panelist

Each year we produce a book which profiles the artists who were funded in the previous year. This book serves as a kind of annual report for us and also highlights the work of our artists as each is given their own page. We also invite former panelists, recipients, community parties, and allies of all sorts to contribute an essay to the book. This is from 2008--written by Jacquie Jones, Executive Director of the National Black Programming Consortium.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.
-- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Over the last year, we've been hearing a lot about change. At first, it was about the power of the solitary voice speaking clearly and loudly, excitingly even, over the tedious din of racism, sexism, entrenched self-interest, and greed — a voice that seemed to extend out into the farthest reaches of our consciousness and our nation, to speak about the inevitability of what is right, even in the face of what is wrong but powerful. Politicians, grassroots organizers, and pop stars alike encouraged us to believe that nothing could stand in the way of millions of us if we were united in a true desire for transformation. And the more we were told by those who would resist our beloved change that it would never happen, the more sure we were that it would. After all, nothing breeds optimism like a challenge.

What happened next was as if 50 million of us here and hundreds of millions more around the world all clicked our red Mary Janes together at exactly the same moment, chanting, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's no place like home," and willed into existence what had been, just a few short months earlier, unimaginable. And on the day the whole thing came together — the freezing cold, sunny day — we made this dream real, this manifestation of the success of our old melting-pot mantras, our pull-yourself-up immigrant dreams, our deepest longings as abandoned children who learned to love again. When we brought this reality into our history books forever, we were asked to believe that this could mean that we, as Americans, could lift ourselves up to a mythical place of democratic aspiration that is the best of who we are or can be. And even though, deep in our hearts, we secretly feared this place exists only there, deep in our hearts, we believed. We still do.

But believe in what? What is the change we hope to see? The change we hope to be? Where does it begin? Is it lower executive pay for millionaires we are after? Or universal health care? Or gay marriage? Is it a reframing of the way we understand our adversaries and our neighbors, our environment, those who have inspired and disappointed us, ourselves? Is it winning? Is it beginning our relationships anew to each other, to those who come after, to materialism, to happiness, to power, to glory? Is it all of these things and more?

As you will see from exploring the pages of this beautiful book, Leeway artists pick the latter. It is all of these things and more. They show us that it is only by embracing the power of the present and the lyricism of the possible that the unlikely — and even impossible — and the truly transformative are born.

Imagine this: A Japanese American woman appears with tracing paper and charcoal in a remote village in Iraq. She begins to rub the charcoal over her paper on ancient trees, and the world is changed. Peep this: Another woman from the West Side of Philly takes over a community center one night and breaks down the business of hip-hop for a next generation of prophets, and the world is changed. Feel this: On the other side of town, a muralist works long into the night, etching Girl Scouts in the sky forever, as the guys from the neighborhood look on in wonder and admiration and maybe a little confusion. The world is changed. The world is changed. The world is changed.

And just as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s quote reminds us, we do not learn by beating a book against our empty heads, and we do not change by complaining about what needs to change. We change by bringing beauty and justice and light to everything we do and driving out the darkness, together. By being all we are and more.

And discovering, looking over the shoulders of these amazing artists, there's no place like home.

Jacquie Jones is a tireless crusader for irony in all aspects of public life, a mother, a registered voter, a veteran funding panelist, and, yes, an artist too.

You can view past and present artist books online at:
leeway.org/grantee-info/artist-books.html

