

Bringing Latino Culture to the Streets:

Community Development Through Art in East Somerville



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Preface

The research for this project took place in East Somerville, a small and disproportionately underdeveloped neighborhood of the larger city of Somerville that is home to a large percentage of Somerville's Latino population.¹ The project is part of the Urban Borderlands Oral History Project, which is sponsored by the Anthropology Department and American Studies Program at Tufts University. Each fall, students from this small seminar interview members of the communities around the University to learn more about what is happening outside the so-called "Tufts bubble." Undertaking a project like this would not be possible without these narrators.

This year, the eleven students in Deborah Pacini-Hernandez's Urban Borderlands class set out to learn more about cultural production in the Latino community. Here are one student's findings.

¹ Throughout this paper, the term "Latino" will be used as an umbrella term to refer to people of South or Central American origin, including Brazilians. This terminology can sometimes be problematic, either because Brazilians are seen as separate from the Latino community by other Latinos or because they see themselves as a distinct group because of origin and/or language differences. In addition, the terms "Latino" (meaning someone of Latin American origin) and "Hispanic" (meaning someone of Spanish origin) are sometimes used interchangeably, resulting in discrepancies between who is seen as "Latino" and who is seen only as "Brazilian."

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the input from my narrators, who took time out of their busy lives to talk with me about their experiences in Somerville. Carrie, Beto, Alex, Toni, and Christopher: Thank you! Additional thanks go to Deborah Pacini-Hernandez and the rest of the Urban Borderlands class for thoughtful input and suggestions. Finally, thank you to Liz Pierson for reading with a careful eye and giving me an outsider's perspective on this project.

Narrators

Carrie Dancy: Carrie is the executive director of East Somerville Main Streets, an economic revitalization organization that sponsored the East Somerville Art Walk in May 2008. Carrie has been with ESMS since its incorporation almost two years ago and has been involved with projects such as the Art Walk, the International Movie Nights in the summer of 2008, and most recently a photo exhibit titled “Interpreting East Somerville.”

Alexandre Emmanuel: Alex is a Brazilian artist currently living in Dorchester, Massachusetts. He left his hometown of Recife, Brazil, four years ago despite his great success as an artist there. He spent a year and a half living in Somerville, and still maintains a strong connection to the city. As an artist participating in the Art Walk, Alex displayed his work at Awards Unlimited, a trophy store on East Broadway, and is currently showing a collection of figure paintings at Beto’s Hair Salon. (See Artist Profile, p. 43.)

Carlos “Beto” Marques: Beto is the owner of Beto’s Hair Salon on East Broadway in East Somerville. Originally from the state of Minas Gerais in Brazil, Beto immigrated to the United States eighteen years ago to escape the economic crisis in his native country. After living in the Brighton area, Beto moved to Somerville twelve years ago. This past May, Beto participated in the Art Walk. Since then, he has been exhibiting the work of Brazilian artist Alexandre Emmanuel in his salon windows.

Antonio Oliveira: Toni is a Brazilian artist originally from Bello Horizonte, Brazil. He came to the United States in 1994 after hearing stories about the country from friends and family who lived here, and ended up in Somerville after stays in places such as New Jersey, and Worcester and Marlboro, Massachusetts. Originally a painter, Toni now considers himself a mixed media artist. In the Art Walk, Toni exhibited at Pastelería Broadway, a Brazilian coffee shop.

Christopher Poteet: Chris has lived in Somerville for ten years. He is the founder of Rocket Science Screen Printing, a T-shirt printing shop near the Davis Square area of Somerville, and worked with Carrie Dancy on coordinating the Art Walk. He is also the person who organized “Interpreting East Somerville,” a photo exhibit about East Somerville currently on display in Somerville City Hall.

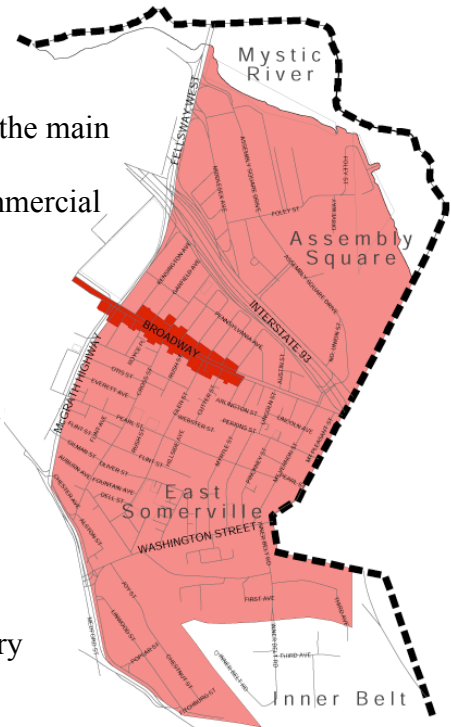
Introduction

When first visited, East Somerville, Massachusetts, can seem like an unassuming neighborhood. Although only minutes from Tufts University's hillside campus, it is worlds away from both the campus and Davis Square, the Somerville that Tufts students frequent for coffee, shopping, and T rides into nearby Boston. Located between Somerville's Winter Hill and Sullivan Square, the neighborhood of East Somerville is cut in half by Broadway, the main thoroughfare in the area and the site of East Somerville's commercial district.

Take a closer look, however, and it is clear that East Somerville is bustling with activity and home to an ethnically diverse population. A short stroll down Broadway on any given day will clarify this: the wide street is lined with pastelerías, taquerías, Irish pubs, Ethiopian restaurants, grocery stores, hair salons, retail shops, and the triple-decker

houses that are typical of densely populated Somerville. Brazilian flags hang in many of the store windows, a sign of the large Brazilian population in the area, and up and down the street, people of every race and nationality engage in lively—and often multilingual— conversation.

A trip down Broadway in May of 2008 was somewhat different. While the street itself looked the same, there was something new in place. In eighteen of the store windows hung beautiful works of art by artists representing thirteen countries in the



<http://eastsomervillemainstreets.org/Maps.html>

Americas, from Canada to Haiti to Guatemala.² From April 19 to May 20, 2008, East Somerville was home to an exhibition called “The Colors of the Americas: East Somerville Art Walk,” which was hosted by East Somerville Main Streets (ESMS), an economic revitalization organization in the area.³ The exhibit aimed to connect the artistic community in Somerville—a city with the highest per capita artist population outside of New York City—to the culturally and ethnically diverse community in East Somerville.⁴ This small and distinctive neighborhood, which has a flavor all its own, has quietly existed within the larger city of Somerville but has had little interaction with it. East Somerville Main Streets hoped the Art Walk would be the first step in bringing the two together.

I was first introduced to the Art Walk during an interview with Carrie Dancy, East Somerville Main Streets’ executive director, as part of my research for *Urban Borderlands*, an ongoing oral history project based out of Tufts University that documents the lives and livelihood of the Latino population in Somerville.⁵ After talking to Carrie about the Art Walk and about East Somerville Main Streets’ economic revitalization efforts, I wanted to hear more about it from the artists and business owners who participated in the event.

I believe that art plays a vital role in creating and maintaining a tight community, especially in communities such as Somerville that have large immigrant populations, with people coming from countries that may not have that much in common. A 2002 report

² East Somerville Main Streets. 2008. “Colors of the Americas: The East Somerville Art Walk.” <http://eastsomervilleartwalk.blogspot.com/> (accessed 20 November 2008)

³ Ibid.

⁴ City of Somerville. 2008. “About Somerville.” <http://www.somervillema.gov/AboutSomerville.cfm>. (accessed 20 November 2008)

prepared by the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., had this to say about the importance of art in community building:

When community builders recognize arts and cultural participation as a form of civic participation and as a potential path of engagement to other forms of civic participation, new possibilities for engaging people take shape. Arts and cultural events attract people in ways that some other types of community activities do not, and they attract people who might not participate in other types of community activities. For example, arts and cultural events are central to how people celebrate their heritage in many ethnic groups and are thus a tool for community organizing in communities where such celebrations are valued.⁶

I wanted to see if this was true in East Somerville. While community organizing and economic development are not the same, East Somerville Main Streets has a unique approach to economic development that is based around organizing the community through events such as the East Somerville Art Walk. Through talking with artists, business owners, and organizations that encourage the arts, I believed I would find that residents had benefited from the Art Walk by experiencing an enhanced sense of community.

When starting this project, I was familiar with other organizations that encouraged the arts, although I was unsure how many of them specifically focused on Somerville's Latino population. I assumed that East Somerville Main Streets was not the only organization that promoted the arts in the Latino community, and I sought to find out more.

⁶ Urban Institute. Arts & Culture: Community Connections. Washington, D.C., Urban Institute. 2002.

The research questions this paper is based around are:

- How do organizations like ESMS work to make the immigrant population in East Somerville more visible?
- What role did the East Somerville Art Walk play in this work, from the point of view of the artists and business owners who participated?
- How does ESMS interact with other organizations that encourage Latino artists in Somerville?
- Has the Art Walk encouraged the community in East Somerville to take its own initiative to sponsor similar events?
- How does art serve as a medium for expressing sentiments that are common among the Latino and/or immigrant population in Somerville?

Methodology

In my research, I focused on the area of East Somerville and hearing the points of view of artists, business owners, and organizations that have a relationship to the area. While contacting these people and arranging an interview with them was difficult, each narrator offered excellent insights to my project, and all had suggestions for more people to contact. Apart from my five central narrators, I also got information from a director at Union Square Main Streets as well as a director at Centro Presente, an organization in East Somerville that works to provide a safe space for Central American immigrants, mainly Guatemalans and Salvadorans, through legal assistance programs and youth groups. Although my narrators have varying degrees of engagement in Somerville, they are all connected to and invested in the area in some way.

I spent a large part of my initial research simply exploring the East Somerville area, particularly East Broadway and Union Square. Each area has a unique population and a personality that reflects that population. Although I have been at Tufts for over two years, I had never visited either place. My research opened my eyes to an entirely new perspective of Somerville, particularly that of Somerville as an “immigrant city.”

For background information on Somerville and the Urban Borderlands project, I looked to past reports written by former Urban Borderlands students as well as articles in scholarly journals. One study that was especially useful and intrinsic to helping me adjust my focus within this project was the Urban Institute’s 2002 study *Arts & Culture: Community Connections*.

Chapter One: East Somerville and the Latino/Brazilian

Community

Putting it in Context: A Brief History of Somerville

Somerville's rich history extends back to the time of the Revolutionary War, when it was the site of such landmark events as Paul Revere's ride in April 1775 and the first raising of the Grand Union flag, with its thirteen stripes, in January 1776.⁷ Since then, Somerville has evolved into a popular destination for immigrants from all over the world.

The first wave of immigrants were the Irish, who began to arrive in the United States, and more specifically Somerville, in the 1820s and 1830s to escape Ireland's spreading poverty. They continued to arrive throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, settling mostly in the East Somerville and Sullivan Square areas.⁸ Close on their heels were the Greeks, mostly men, who arrived in the early 1900s and settled near Union Square and McGrath Highway, on Linwood Street.⁹ The two ethnic groups maintained an amicable relationship, but neither one became as strong a presence as the Italians, who built a community in Somerville around the 1930s and continue to be visible in the area.¹⁰ Somerville, particularly the Winter Hill area along Broadway, is spotted with Italian shops and Irish bars, a reminder of the first immigrants to the area.

After the Irish, Greeks, and Italians were well settled in the area, the Portuguese began to stream in, especially after World War II.¹¹ Unlike other European immigrants,

⁷ Lund, Frederick J. "Brief History of Somerville, 1600-1942." Spring (1996), http://www.somervillema.gov/CoS_Content/documents/Brief%20History%20of%20Somerville.pdf, (accessed 20 November 2008)

⁸ Johnson, Carla B. "City Options." (Somerville, MA: 1975. Accessed 1 December 2008.)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

the Portuguese who arrived in Somerville were not from the mainland but rather came from the small islands off the coast of Portugal: Santa Maria, São Miguel, Terceira, Pico, Faial, and Flores.¹² Once settled in Somerville, they abandoned their agrarian lifestyles for more fast-paced work in Massachusetts's factories and mills.¹³ The Portuguese presence in Somerville set the stage for a future wave of immigrants from South America.

In recent years, Somerville has become a hot spot for Latino immigrants, especially those coming from Brazil and El Salvador. Brazilians flooded in during their country's economic recession and subsequent crisis in the 1980s, while Salvadorans fled a twelve-year civil war that spanned 1980 to 1992.^{14,15} This boom in immigration has made Somerville "one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the nation."¹⁶ Immigrants continue to pour into the city to join their family and friends.

Today, about a third of Somerville's 77,500-plus residents are foreign born.¹⁷ Data from the 2000 United States census shows a "Hispanic/Latino" population of 6,786, or about nine percent, making Latinos the second largest demographic in Somerville.¹⁸ The same census also documents more than fifty languages spoken in the area.¹⁹ While this is the story the data tells, I also considered it important to ask my narrators about their impressions of the community in Somerville. While their answers varied in length

¹² Johnson, Carla B. "City Options." (Somerville, MA: 1975. Accessed 1 December 2008.)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Perz, Stephen G. "The Rural Exodus in the Context of Economic Crisis, Globalization and Reform in Brazil." *International Migration Review*, 34, no. 3 (2000). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2675947> (accessed 20 November 2008)

¹⁵ "Enemies of War." (PBS.com) <http://www.pbs.org/itvs/enemiesofwar/elsalvador2.html> (accessed 21 November 2008)

¹⁶ City of Somerville. 2008. "About Somerville." <http://www.somervillema.gov/AboutSomerville.cfm>. (accessed 20 November 2008)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

and detail, all agreed on one thing: Somerville residents are a highly diverse, “eclectic mix.”²⁰ As Carrie Dancy pointed out, however, many members of Somerville’s foreign-born population come from the same area within their respective home countries. The city’s residents are divided about evenly among Brazilians, Salvadorans and other “Hispanics,” and white or European Americans.²¹ These three subpopulations give Somerville a special flavor, which Carrie explained to me:

The culture and flavor of this neighborhood is very alive because people, whether their family emigrated here 100 years ago or 2 years ago are still very connected to what it means to be from the country they are from, and I think that’s really cool because I didn’t expect that especially from people who have been here for so long.²²

Toni Oliveira, a Brazilian who is well integrated with the Brazilian population in Somerville, expressed a fondness for the community as well as certain frustrations:

[The community in Somerville is] diverse. It’s a lot of people and...different backgrounds, but very simple people...Especially the Brazilian community, the Spanish [Latino] people...it’s exciting to be involved with the community, but it’s also hard. Everybody’s so busy doing different things.²³

As the majority of my narrators are Brazilian, I find it important to discuss the Brazilian history and presence in Somerville. Around the 1980s, Brazil began to sink into an economic recession with the rise of international interest rates and a decrease in

²⁰ Carrie Dancy, Interview, 15 October 2008.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Toni Oliveira, Interview, 1 November 2008.

agricultural credit and subsidies.²⁴ During this time, Brazilians began to arrive in large numbers in Somerville and places like it, where there were already established Portuguese populations and therefore less significant language barriers. A strong presence in Somerville, the Brazilian population proudly displays flags in store windows and hangs signs in Portuguese. A simple Google search for “Brazilians in Somerville, MA” yields pages of links advertising local Brazilian establishments: a clothing shop on Somerville Avenue, restaurants such as Rodizio on Broadway, a supermarket near Union Square, and the *Brazilian Times*, a Brazilian-run newspaper that reports local, world, and Brazilian news.

Somerville: An Artist’s City

A visitor to East Broadway would have no idea how many artists live in the area. Whereas other places in Somerville are bustling with art galleries and events, there are few signs of the artistic community in East Somerville. East Broadway itself is barren of signs of the arts, with the exception of the Mudflat Gallery and the odd promotional poster hanging in a store window; any outsider would be clueless as to the number of artists living in the area. With artistic hubs like Union Square and Davis Square just minutes away, East Somerville seems to be lacking the draw necessary for artists to display their work there.

According to a director at the Somerville Arts Council, Somerville’s development into an artist’s city is a result of “reasonable rents, proximity to Boston, [and] a small city

²⁴ Perz, Stephen G. “The Rural Exodus in the Context of Economic Crisis, Globalization and Reform in Brazil.” *International Migration Review*, 34, no. 3 (2000). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2675947> (accessed 20 November 2008)

character.”²⁵ In addition, the openings of artist living and/or work spaces, such as Brickbottom Artist Building and Vernon Street Studios, starting about twenty years ago has helped make the city more appealing to artists.²⁶

Now, there are hundreds of artists dispersed around the city. In 1999, sixty local artists started Somerville Open Studios, an event that gives artists a chance to exhibit and sell their work at studios around Somerville.²⁷ While the event started out small, it has exploded into one of the most anticipated art events of the year in Somerville. By 2004, the number of participating artists had skyrocketed, with more than two hundred and fifty artists displaying and selling their work.²⁸ Although I did not find concrete information that Somerville Open Studios has contributed to the high number of artists in the area, I would speculate that this is in fact the case and that Somerville Open Studios’ annual occurrence has made Somerville a more attractive place for artists to settle. Alex Emmanuel reinforced my hypothesis in my first interview with him:

I love it, the things that you guys do here about the open studios in many, many different areas. I love that. There’s none of these kinds of things in my country, there’s nothing like that. Well, there’s something, little groups, sometimes they do something a little bit bigger...to show another people about what the art is, about what they’re doing and everything, but not like here, not scheduled like every year and everything.²⁹

²⁵ Somerville Arts Council, Email Correspondence, 12/9/08

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Somerville Open Studios. “History.” (Somerville Open Studios)
<http://www.somervilleopenstudios.org/about/history.shtml> (accessed 30 November 2008)

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Alexandre Emmanuel, Interview #1, 28 October 2008

For artists like Alex who are less familiar with the art scene in and around Boston, events like Somerville Open Studios offer a chance to break into the art world—and to make both money and connections while doing it.

Chapter Two: A Cultural Awakening in East Somerville

East Somerville Main Streets

The logical place to begin learning about the East Somerville Art Walk was at East Somerville Main Streets, the organization that sponsored the event. I met Carrie Dancy, the executive director of ESMS, on a brisk sunny day in October at the ESMS office on East Broadway, in the heart of East Somerville. Although just starting my project and unsure of what I would find, I knew I wanted to get information about the organization and the roots of the Art Walk.

Carrie has been with ESMS since its incorporation two years ago. Essentially an economic revitalization organization, ESMS uses a business model founded on working from the assets of a community and using those assets to build a thriving business district.³⁰ Along with other Main Streets organizations around the country (all of which are connected to the National Trust for Historic Preservation), ESMS is based around four central committees, each of which focuses on a different aspect of economic development.³¹ Carrie talked me through the committees: Design, which works on improving storefronts, getting out fliers for events, and generally working to make East Somerville an aesthetically pleasing place to spend time; Promotion, which works to overcome negative stereotypes about the neighborhood in order to promote its assets; and Economic Support and Development, both of which work closely with business owners to develop business in the local commercial districts. The Art Walk is a brainchild of these four committees. Through the project, ESMS worked to make East Broadway more

³⁰ Carrie Dancy, Interview, 15 October 2008.

³¹“The Main Street Approach.” (National Trust for Historic Preservation).
<http://www.mainstreet.org/content.aspx?page=3§ion=2> (accessed 5 November 2008)

attractive, promote the distinct cultural flavor of the area, and form bonds with business owners to ensure cooperation and collaboration in the future.

ESMS's location in East Somerville means that it is important for the organization to form and maintain close bonds with the Latino population in the area. Carrie spoke about the organization's trilingualism, which is one way that it reaches out to the community:

In a lot of cases, that's the thing, people can understand English but doing things trilingually is a way of saying, you know, "we want you to be involved." We know you can read English, but we're going to put it in Spanish because it's like an invitation to be involved... We want your participation enough that we want to put it in your language so you feel comfortable. Because you know, there's a lot of initiatives out there that just expect people to step up to the plate and sometimes you need to move the plate closer to people.³²

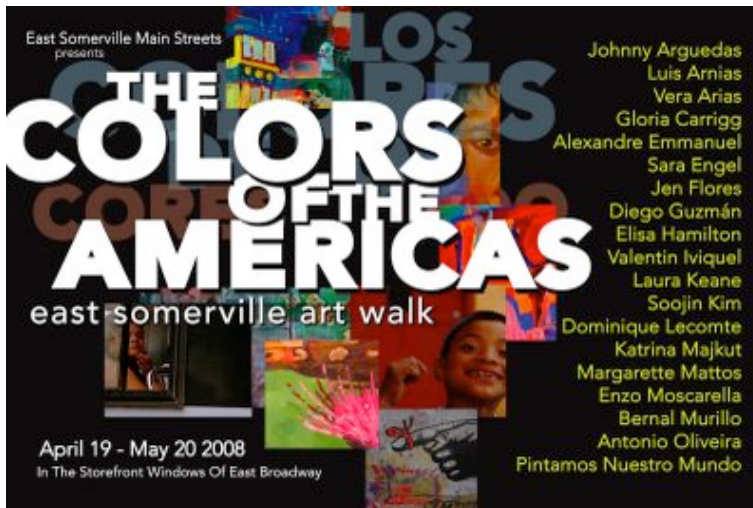
These efforts are clear in everything that ESMS does; its website, fliers, and posters are all published in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, to encourage everyone in the community to take part in any ESMS-sponsored activities. In addition, ESMS's trilingual outreach helps make the Latino population in East Somerville more visible, if only by physically demonstrating the presence of languages other than English in the area.

ESMS's approach to outreach is evident in the artists who participated in the East Somerville Art Walk. After an initial call for artists, ESMS ended up with nineteen participating artists representing thirteen countries in the Americas. Thanks to multilingual outreach, the Art Walk attracted artists from English-, Spanish-, and

³² Carrie Dancy, Interview, 15 October 2008.

Portuguese-speaking countries, as well as Haiti. The Art Walk's great success will be discussed in the following sections.

The Colors of the Americas: East Somerville Art Walk



The East Somerville Art Walk, an ESMS-sponsored event, was created as a way to “bring the culture [of the area] to the streets.” Chris Poteet, a local artist who came up with the idea for the Art Walk, explained to me how it came about:

I had been living in this neighborhood for several years and I had moved to East Somerville...it feels very different from this neighborhood. It's a very Latino neighborhood, Brazilian community, it's like a different place...I personally am familiar with the arts scene and I realized that the arts scene in Somerville did not address East Somerville at all. It was like all the stuff that goes on in Davis Square and Union Square, and when you think about the Somerville arts scene none of it has anything to do with this neighborhood, or vice versa, this neighborhood doesn't have anything to do with the Somerville arts scene at large. It's two totally different

worlds...I think it's primarily a cultural divide...You can really boil things down to a handful of people who really set things, and so a lot of the people who are the movers and shakers in the Somerville arts community don't live on that end of town. And it wasn't that they were against it and there was a conspiracy to keep the Latino community out of the mainstream, it was just there was so much going on in Davis Square and the Somerville arts circle as it was that nobody bothered to notice that it's not a very inclusive scene in a lot of ways...ethnically and culturally, the arts scene here is very homogeneous. And because Somerville is so vibrant, it's easy to overlook that...but then when you go over to East Somerville you're like "where are all these people in the big picture?"...And then you realize there's no public art going on down here, there's nothing happening, there's no talk of it, there's no energy, something's not adding up. And we just kind of had a theory like, hey I bet if we had an East Somerville art event then people in the neighborhood would come out of the woodwork and make it happen. And it did.³³

To get these people "out of the woodwork," ESMS had to craft a call to artists that would draw the local artists they were looking for. The call to artists, found on the event's blog, <http://eastsomervilleartwalk.blogspot.com>, emphasizes the importance of cultural diversity in the event:

This unprecedented multicultural event will celebrate and reflect the vibrant, welcoming spirit of East Somerville by intertwining bold contemporary works of art among the daily social and commercial life of

³³ Christopher Poteet, Interview, 13 December 2008.

an evolving, living neighborhood. By anticipating the 21st Century as the century of the Americas, the East Somerville Art Walk will feature and explore the many interpretations of our identity, the connections we have to one another and our community, and what it really means to be an American.³⁴

My narrators, all of whom were affiliated in some way with the Art Walk and all of whom had different perspectives on the event, agreed that the event succeeded in bringing the community together. In addition, it drew attention to the large Latino population in the area, particularly since many of the artists chosen “actively work[ed] with themes such as cultural symbolisms, ethnic identity, the immigrant experience, assimilations, and interpretation of community.”³⁵ Many community members were in fact surprised that such an event was coming to East Somerville, an area that is usually so separate from artistic hubs like Davis Square. As Carrie Dancy told me:

For us to be able to bring not just pictures but installation art to East Broadway when most of the business owners were like....well, one business owner was like, “So this is going to be in Davis Square, right?” They didn’t get it because no one’s ever done anything like that on East Broadway.³⁶

Community organizers are equally aware of the disconnect between the two communities. In “The Art of Drawing Neighbors Together,” a *Boston Globe* article that announced the Art Walk’s opening, Christopher Poteet explained how he hoped the Art

³⁴ East Somerville Main Streets. 2008. “Colors of the Americas: The East Somerville Art Walk.” <http://eastsomervilleartwalk.blogspot.com/> (accessed 20 November 2008)

³⁵ East Somerville Main Streets. 2008. “Colors of the Americas: The East Somerville Art Walk.” <http://eastsomervilleartwalk.blogspot.com/> (accessed 20 November 2008)

³⁶ Carrie Dancy, Interview, 15 October 2008.

Walk would close the gap: “We’re just matchmaking. It’s a blind date between the East Somerville predominantly immigrant community and the larger creative community...The two do not know each other.”³⁷

After reading up on the Art Walk in local newspapers and talking to Carrie Dancy, I decided it was time to hear from the participants themselves to find out if they, like me, thought that the Art Walk was a successful form of community building.

³⁷ Green, Kristen. “The Art of Drawing Neighbors Together.” *Boston Globe*, 20 April 2008. http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/04/20/the_art_of_drawing_neighbors_together/ (accessed 30 November 2008)

Chapter Three: Voices of the East Somerville Art Walk

From what I had gathered so far, I knew that the Art Walk was a completely new idea in East Somerville, one that aimed to use art as a means of starting a continued dialogue about the identities at play in the community. For more information, I looked to the artists and business owners who had made the Art Walk what it was. My first stop: Beto's Hair Salon at 88 Broadway in East Somerville.

Beto's Hair Salon: A Business Owner's Experience with the Art Walk

I first met Beto (full name: Carlos Marques) when I cold-called on him at his salon on Broadway after meeting with Carrie. He agreed, mid-haircut and scissors flying, to meet with me the following week. I was immediately drawn to his quiet manner and pleasant character, and I looked forward to hearing about his experience with the Art Walk. As I left his studio, I noticed something in his window that Carrie had mentioned in passing: several large canvases painted with human figures—the work of Alexandre Emmanuel.

The next week, I sat down with Beto in his salon. Originally from Minas Gerais, Brazil, Beto moved to the United States eighteen years ago, and has been living in Somerville for the past twelve years. He calls Somerville “a good place to be” and recognizes a close community among the Brazilians in the area.³⁸ While he hadn't heard about East Somerville Main Streets before participating in the Art Walk, he has seen some improvement in the community in recent years. Whereas East Somerville was

³⁸ Carlos Marques, Interview, 21 October 2008.

formerly a “dump,” according to Beto, it looks much better now, an improvement that in recent years can most likely be attributed to ESMS’s economic revitalization efforts.³⁹

Beto got involved with the Art Walk when Carrie Dancy and Christopher Poteet approached him. He spoke to me about ESMS’s approach to getting the community involved in its work:

The thing she [Carrie] does is the best thing because she...talks to the people. I think it’s the best thing to do in the neighborhood...the way she would come and talk and explain, you know, we like getting involved in it.⁴⁰

Throughout late April and May of 2008, Beto displayed work by Costa Rican artist Johnny Arguedas.⁴¹ At the outset of my project, I had hypothesized that business owners would have experienced a jump in business during the Art Walk, with people coming in and out to see the artists’ work. While Beto did not see a significant change in business at his salon, he did witness a “change for the neighborhood.”⁴² Throughout the exhibition, he watched as people stopped outside to look at Mr. Arguedas’s work and gladly talked to them if they came inside to inquire about it. In this sense, I imagine Beto experienced an enhanced sense of community—without the Art Walk, the people who stopped in to inquire about art would have simply walked by, perhaps not even noticing the salon. Although a short conversation with a stranger can easily seem like an insignificant and forgettable event, I propose that such small conversations over a long period of time can help to establish a feeling of community and enhanced social capital.

³⁹ Carlos Marques, Interview, 21 October 2008.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ East Somerville Main Streets. 2008. “The Colors of the Americas: East Somerville Art Walk.” <http://eastsomervilleartwalk.blogspot.com/> (accessed 20 November 2008)

⁴² Carlos Marques, Interview, 21 October 2008.

Beto must have felt the same way—once the Art Walk was over, he agreed to display Alexandre Emmanuel’s artwork when the artist approached him about it. On the sunny October day when I visited the salon, Alex’s artwork was up, along with some information about the artist and a flyer for his most recent exhibition in Boston, titled “Black & White.” After Alex is done exhibiting, Beto tells me there is another artist lined up to show his work in the large windows of the salon.⁴³ Soon enough, I predict, the community will expect Beto’s windows to be a showplace for works of art.

What Beto is doing by continuing to display work long after the Art Walk’s finale is exactly what ESMS hoped would happen. As Carrie explained to me:

That’s what we want to do—we don’t want to be doing stuff, we want to create a space in which people feel comfortable to do things that contribute to the community...In the beginning we want to get the wheels turning but really what we want to see is that...artists feel comfortable and know that East Somerville is a place that they feel welcome, especially Latino and Brazilian artists that maybe don’t have a specific neighborhood they feel like they can call their own in terms of their artist community.

They can take on East Somerville as being that.⁴⁴

Although Beto is the only business owner currently displaying art along the street, he is taking one step for the whole community towards ESMS’s goals of making East Somerville an aesthetically pleasing, welcoming, economically stable community that attracts not only nearby residents but people from all over the city as well as nearby Boston. If he keeps this up, I project that other business owners will follow suit in taking

⁴³ Carlos Marques, Interview, 21 October 2008.

⁴⁴ Carrie Dancy, Interview, 15 October 2008.

advantage of the artistic community at their fingertips, and that art will begin to appear in many more storefronts.

My interview with Beto highlighted the importance of organizations like ESMS that make a point of forming close relationships with their surrounding communities. When I asked Beto if he knew of other organizations like ESMS that promoted the arts—Somerville Arts Council, ArtsUnion, and BrickBottom Artists Association come to mind for me—he replied that he did not.⁴⁵ He does, however, now have a working relationship with ESMS, giving him a gateway to other organizations that he may not know directly but that work closely with ESMS. In this case, Beto’s involvement with the Art Walk has the potential to open many more doors for him to various other sections of the community.

Alex Emmanuel: Expressing the Immigrant Experience

While getting in touch with artists initially seemed impossible, I realized once I reached Alexandre Emmanuel that all I needed was an in to the artist community. For this project, I was lucky enough to interview both Alex and Toni Oliveira, both successful artists and, as it happens, both Brazilian.

When starting my research, I had guessed that artists would be more on board with my hypothesis that art plays a vital role in creating and maintaining a tight community. In Somerville, a city with a large immigrant population, Latino artists in particular have the potential to contribute to a sense of community by reflecting on their own experiences and representing either places or ideas that community members can closely relate to. Alex, a recent immigrant to the United States, had a lot to say about

⁴⁵ Carlos Marques, Interview, 21 October 2008.

how he presents his experience as an immigrant in his work. An excerpt from my first interview with him demonstrates his frustrations:

[Alex]: ...This new one [exhibit] called “Black & White.” It’s all about the immigrant situation.

[Anna]: It’s difficult to arrive here and then...

[Alex]: Yes, it’s difficult, it’s like I feel sometimes like a prisoner...

[Anna]: And when you say you feel like a prisoner, is that because...the community isn’t welcoming, or you just feel like it’s really difficult to make a life here or...?

[Alex]: Well sometimes they’re just the same question, you know, like,

[Americans think] oh, “cause I don’t know you guys,” because, you know, “where are you from originally,” because, you know, “I don’t like this, I don’t like that, I don’t know your behavior...” you know, they think we are strange too much sometimes.

[Anna]: So...people have stereotypes, or they have this certain idea of what immigrants are like and it’s hard to kind of break that?

[Alex]: Basically. Sometimes I think like this, sometimes I don’t. And sometimes I think—sometimes it’s the same what like you said, sometimes it’s not like this. Sometimes it’s everything’s equal and, um, it’s nice...⁴⁶

What Alex expresses is undoubtedly a common sentiment among both foreign-born and American-born residents of Latino descent.

Vera Arias, a Guatemalan artist who exhibited during the Art Walk at Joe’s Liquors, was another artist who expressed the frustrations of being an immigrant through

⁴⁶ Alexandre Emmanuel, Interview #1, 28 October 2008.

her artwork. Although I did not get a chance to speak with her, the *Boston Globe* article, “The Art of Drawing Neighbors Together,” explained her piece:

Arias created a statement about the immigrant experience using a 7-foot stack of handmade paper, “an insane amount of paper,” she said, “which is a metaphor for all the money and paperwork you go through” to immigrate here. She said her parents became citizens only after she turned 21, and her sister is still working to get her citizenship.⁴⁷

Although not an immigrant, Carrie Dancy acknowledged her awareness of the immigrant community’s frustrations as well:

I think a lot of people, especially in Somerville,...think that nobody from Brazil is a citizen...People only see Brazilians as immigrants and that they’re here mooching off the system and to see the Brazilian artists...as people was a cool thing to be able to offer others.⁴⁸

In East Somerville, I believe that an outlet for such frustrations, or even an acknowledgement of these feelings, can make people feel they share something with their neighbors besides a common turf. Alex, along with other artists who express the immigrant experience through art, is helping to make these frustrations more visible so that—hopefully—they can begin to be addressed.

⁴⁷ Green, Kristen. “The Art of Drawing Neighbors Together.” *Boston Globe*, 20 April 2008. http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/04/20/the_art_of_drawing_neighbors_together/ (accessed 30 November 2008)

⁴⁸ Carrie Dancy, Interview, 15 October 2008.

Toni Oliveira: Creating Community Through Art

I got Toni's name from Alex, who has worked closely with him and named him as another participant in the Art Walk. Not an e-mail user, Toni probably would have remained a mystery to me had it not been for Alex, who gladly provided me with Toni's phone number and encouraged me to contact him.

I met Toni on my own turf—at the Danish Pastry House, a coffee shop a block from the Tufts campus. Although we had never met and had only spoken on the phone briefly, Toni was unbelievably open to talking about his artwork and answering the questions I had prepared for him.

While Alex had proposed that yes, art brings people together, Toni was adamant about it. He thinks that an event that brings a community together is not something that “happens every day,” and he feels that when the opportunity does arise it is his responsibility to show art.⁴⁹ I asked him about what made Somerville a unique place to exhibit his work:

Well, I don't really think it's about the community or about Somerville, I think it's about the art. Art really brings people together. So I try to not be selfish about my artwork so anywhere people invite me to show my work...not that I feel like obligated, but I think it's a responsibility, it's a commitment.⁵⁰

Naturally, when the opportunity arose for Toni to show his work in the East Somerville Art Walk, he was excited about it. He exhibited at Pastelería Broadway, a Brazilian coffee shop, and his experience there exemplifies his feelings about the relationship

⁴⁹ Toni Oliveira, Interview, 1 November 2008.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

between art and community. As he told me, over the course of the Art Walk, Toni formed a friendly bond with both the managers and the customers at the Pastelería: “Every time I go to the pastelería, people...they [the customers and management] know me, and they talk to me. People come to me and they say ‘Oh, I saw your work...’”⁵¹ Like Beto, Toni expressed an enhanced feeling of intimacy among community members during the Art Walk.

Besides the artists bearing the responsibility to display art, Toni also believes that it is a community leadership’s responsibility to encourage the arts. When I asked Toni what more Somerville could do to encourage artists, he was forceful in his sentiment that the city should create more programs for artists—for example, a program in which local artists could teach local school children.⁵² Yet when I mentioned the possibility of doing something like that at Centro Presente, a local organization that runs a youth art program called Pintamos Nuestro Mundo, Toni told me he had never heard of the organization. This again highlighted the disconnect between such organizations and the Somerville population.

Perhaps, then, city leaders should be doing more to connect the various artistic organizations that exist around Somerville to each other and to the community. Toni, a member of both the artistic and immigrant population in Somerville, was full of ideas:

To really bring people together, it is a necessity being in touch. Even the leaders of East [Somerville] Main Streets...I am not so aware of how they

⁵¹ Toni Oliveira, Interview, 1 November 2008.

⁵² Ibid.

are operating, but I think we should be more involved...the artists should be more involved.⁵³

Public art was one medium that Toni suggested as a way of making both communities, artistic and immigrant, more visible. He enthusiastically described his idea to exhibit installation pieces or other forms of public art in the squares around Somerville, as there are so many of them—Ball Square, Sullivan Square, Union Square, and Davis Square, to name a few. It would be another Art Walk, of sorts, but would extend throughout Somerville:

If the city would sponsor an art project on the squares...that's something that I would love to be part of...For example they just put a new—you know the Porter Square Mall? This guy, he wanted to do that little garden with the white and black paths. That's beautiful...So I'm talking something like that. [It would make the city] more involved, and also that's something real that when it's done is going to be there as a mark and everybody's going to go there and not just enjoy [it] but they are going to know there is something going on [in] that city...I think that's very important...I know now it's very challenging times, especially to put money in art, but there's no other way to do it [show people what is going on in the artist community in Somerville.]⁵⁴

As shown, Toni is full of ideas for how to use art as a means of building community and making the artist community more visible. My interview with him helped urge me on to the next part of my project: understanding what impact the Art Walk made in East

⁵³ Toni Oliveira, Interview, 1 November 2008.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Somerville, which I will discuss next, and investigating how arts organizations in Somerville interact with each other and the community at large, which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

After the Art Walk: Keeping the Ball Rolling in East Somerville

Having heard so much about the great success of the Art Walk, I wanted to know what was next for East Somerville. In my interview with Carrie Dancy, she had said that East Somerville Main Streets and the East Somerville Art Walk were meant to plant seeds in Somerville that would then inspire similar events in the future. Midway through my research, I heard that a new photo exhibit was opening at Somerville City Hall called “Interpreting East Somerville.” Organized, like the Art Walk, by Christopher Poteet and East Somerville Main Streets, the photo exhibit invited members of the community to submit pictures of East Somerville. Christopher talked about his reasons for organizing the event, which opened in November and will last until January 2009:

When the Art Walk was done, I was really happy, but I felt like there needed to be like a period put at the end of the sentence. After the photo show got hung, I really felt closure on the Art Walk. Not that it’s over, but it needed something else to say “Yes, see, there’s momentum.”...And some people might be surprised that the biggest art exhibition ever at City Hall came entirely out of East Somerville. It’s kind of like this notion that a lot of people in town have that nothing goes on in East Somerville— “Oh, they don’t do anything, they don’t care about anything,” and the

photo show was kind of like “Then what’s this? Then how do you explain this?”⁵⁵

As Chris expressed in my interview with him, East Somerville Main Streets wanted to organize another event to show that the Art Walk wasn’t the only thing going on in East Somerville. The Art Walk and the photo exhibit are small steps towards a larger goal of showing the rest of Somerville what the small but culturally rich neighborhood along East Broadway has to bring to the artistic community in the area. Chris, however, is quick to say that the goal of these events is, most of all, to get the wheels turning in East Somerville for the neighborhood to begin to sponsor arts events independent of East Somerville Main Streets or other organizations:

Neither [Carrie Dancy nor I] are aspiring to become the spokesmen of the Latino arts scene. We’re kind of getting stuff going...and we have connections. I happen to know the mayor just around town, so it was easy for me to just go to the mayor and say “Hey Joe, can I have city hall for two months?”...But a lot of people don’t have that...they think “No, it’s connections, it’s who you know”...so we have the connections...we can kind of make things happen, we can get stories in the newspaper, we can put the pieces together, but after that it’s got to take on a momentum of its own...so hopefully if we do more stuff it will get people thinking. There’s no reason all these other people can’t think up stuff and put it on. I think there will be much more creative happenings going on in East Somerville, and I would hope that they take on a character that very much looks like the neighborhood. I think there’s a possibility [for East Somerville] to be

⁵⁵ Christopher Poteet, Interview, 13 December 2008.

a very vibrant, contemporary, multiethnic arts scene, and that's what I want to encourage.⁵⁶

From what I can see, the Art Walk has planted the seeds for a more visible artistic movement in East Somerville. Not only has the Art Walk encouraged people like Beto to continue to show art along Broadway, it has also given local artists a voice and a jumping off point from which they can continue to participate in the art scene in Somerville.

⁵⁶ Christopher Poteet, Interview, 13 December 2008.

Chapter Four: Connecting to the Rest of Somerville

After learning about East Somerville Main Streets and the Art Walk and hearing a variety of perspectives, I wanted to follow up my research by examining how East Somerville Main Streets relates to and interacts with other organizations like it, particularly ones that revolve around the arts. To do this, I spoke with a director at Centro Presente and got in contact with an employee at Union Square Main Streets, another Main Streets organization that I assumed would work similarly to ESMS.

Union Square Main Streets: A Sister Organization's Approach

While I was not able to talk in person with a representative from Union Square Main Streets (USMS), I exchanged emails with one of the directors there and ended up with the *Union Square Creative Uses Report*, a publication produced by ArtistLink and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Although the report is not written by Union Square Main Streets specifically, it does highlight improvements to creative spaces in Union Square that can be attributed to USMS's presence in the area since 2005.⁵⁷

According to the report, "since the launch of...USMS there has been in the Union Square Central Business District a net increase of six cultural businesses and a shift of 1,200 square feet of commercial space from vacant or industrial uses to cultural uses."⁵⁸ While the report makes it clear that there has been an increase in cultural businesses and space, there is little discussion of events like the East Somerville Art Walk that have taken place in Union Square.

⁵⁷ City of Somerville and Somerville Arts Council. *Union Square Creative Uses Report*. (Somerville, MA, City of Somerville and Somerville Arts Council, 2008).

⁵⁸ "Arts Scene." (Union Square Main Streets) <http://www.unionsquaremain.org/unionsquare/arts.html> (accessed 5 December 2008).

Researching in September, I happened to wander into Union Square during the Urban Country Fair, one of the recent events sponsored by Union Square Main Streets. Knowing the area and its large immigrant population well, I was surprised to see almost no representation of the foreign-born community at the event. Instead, it looked as if the Davis Square types had migrated and set up shop in Union Square.

After seeing the Country Fair, I began to wonder how closely Union Square Main Streets and East Somerville Main Streets actually worked together. From what I had heard from Carrie and the Art Walk participants, ESMS focused most of its events around the diverse population in its surrounding community. It seemed to me that Union Square Main Streets had a different plan of action.

Through email correspondence with the executive director at USMS, I learned more about how the two organizations interact:

USMS serves as the fiscal sponsor for ESMS—they've not yet received their formal designation from the IRS as a non-profit so we represent them for grants. We collaborate on projects like business workshops for entrepreneurs, proposed revisions for the city's facade improvement grants and similar business related city-wide programs. We share resources—like books and information on our work, advise [sic] on consultants, passing on reports that were helpful, etc. We've together done some site visits to other main street groups and done networking together with groups like Somerville Local First.⁵⁹

Clearly there is a connection between the two organizations. In addition, the *Union Square Creative Uses Report* acknowledged a strong relationship between USMS and

⁵⁹ Union Square Main Streets, Email Correspondence, 12/8/08.

other arts organizations like Somerville Arts Council and the smaller ArtsUnion.⁶⁰ I believe East Somerville Main Streets' connection to Union Square Main Streets will remain important in the future, as ESMS is a much younger organization and therefore without the same connections as USMS. It seems, however, that the two organizations have different approaches towards community involvement in their events, and it will be interesting to see how these differences evolve in the future.

Centro Presente

I did get a chance to talk to a director at Centro Presente, an organization that helps to incorporate immigrants into the social fabric of Somerville and that is located five minutes from Sullivan Station, a transportation hub and one of Somerville's T stations.

I first heard of Centro Presente when walking down Broadway towards East Somerville. Every few blocks, the traffic light control boxes on the side of the road were painted with scenes of Somerville, inspirational and bilingual messages, and a name: "Pintamos Nuestro Mundo." I discovered, via the internet, that Pintamos Nuestro Mundo is a youth art program under a larger umbrella organization—Centro Presente. After glancing over a flier that Carrie had given me with information about the Art Walk, I noticed that Pintamos Nuestro Mundo had participated in the event and got in contact with a director at Centro.

I sat down with Wil⁶¹ to get more information about the organization. Centro Presente was started in 1981 in order to create a safe space for Central American immigrants, specifically those arriving from Guatemala and El Salvador. The

⁶⁰ City of Somerville and Somerville Arts Council. *Union Square Creative Uses Report*. (Somerville, MA, City of Somerville and Somerville Arts Council, 2008).

⁶¹ Wil did not fill out an informed consent IRB form, so I am not including his last name in this paper.

organization now offers legal services, adult education programs, youth leadership programs (such as Pintamos Nuestro Mundo), and community organizing. When talking to Wil, I was most interested in the youth art programs. The young artists' work hangs around the small office, and it is clear that Centro has tapped into a talented group of young people. Currently, the kids are working on a mural for the Growing Center, a garden and environmental education center near Union Square in Somerville.

Through art, Wil sees a community growing among the young people at Centro Presente. Much of this is because of the space that Centro provides. In addition, projects are group-based and the kids have to work together to make progress in their projects. Another way Centro Presente is able to build community is by using the connections the organization has to other agencies around Somerville. One in particular that Wil mentioned was SCAT, Somerville Community Access Television, located in Union Square. There, the kids in the art programs have the chance to learn about video editing. Wil also mentioned Mudflat Gallery, a make-your-own pottery studio where the Young Men's group gets together.⁶² Although different from East Somerville Main Streets and Union Square Main Streets, Centro Presente is working towards the same goal: a stronger, more visible community.

⁶² Centro Presente, Interview, 18 November 2008.

Conclusions

Throughout my research for this project, my narrators repeatedly named art as an effective form of community building and as a means of expressing common sentiments that revolve around the immigrant and Latino experiences. These experiences are unique in Somerville, a city with a diverse population and large Latino community.

That said, I conclude that the East Somerville Art Walk was a success and helped to build community in East Somerville, an area that is disproportionately underdeveloped in comparison with other areas of the city. Through organizing the community and bringing artists and business owners together to produce the event, East Somerville Main Streets, along with Christopher Poteet, helped make the Latino population more visible. By exhibiting Latino artwork in the windows of East Broadway, ESMS gave local artists the chance to express their experiences to the rest of the community.

The Art Walk has planted the seeds of a cultural awakening along East Broadway, as my discussion with Beto exemplified. Although Beto is currently the only business owner still displaying artwork in his windows, I predict that once artwork in his window becomes a norm, more business owners will follow suit.

Besides the Art Walk's great success, I also noticed the varying connections throughout the artists and organizations in the Somerville community. Although the organizations seemed to be connected to each other, many of my narrators were not familiar with East Somerville Main Streets or other organizations I mentioned. There is a clear disconnect between the community and its organizations, and something needs to be done about this disconnect.

Like any research project, this one has its shortfalls. One in particular that stands out to me is that I only talked to those artists who were the most accessible. Naturally, these were the artists who were also the most successful, and I was able to find them because of their connections to East Somerville Main Streets. Since many of my interviews highlighted the disconnect between not only the many communities in Somerville but also the different organizations, I would be interested to see what an artist with a different level of success from Alex or Toni has to say about being an artist in Somerville. I imagine that the struggles and frustrations expressed by some of my narrators would be even greater among artists who do not have the same successes and connections.

In addition, I did not get a chance to talk to a community member who experienced the Art Walk, although talking to Beto was close. It would be interesting to learn more about how the Art Walk influenced East Somerville residents' perceptions of their surroundings, and to hear their thoughts on East Somerville's potential development into a vibrant arts community.

Looking Ahead: Suggestions for the Future

After completing my research and expressing my findings in this paper, I suggest that East Somerville Main Streets sponsor an annual Art Walk or similar event. The three narrators who were directly involved with either displaying work in their windows or exhibiting their own work all expressed an interest in participating in another Art Walk, and I believe that making the Art Walk an annual event would help East Somerville Main Streets attain its goal of making East Somerville a destination for people other than the area's residents.

Events such as the East Somerville Art Walk are especially important to the Latino community in Somerville, as they help to make this underrepresented population more visible in the area. In the future, it is important that events centered around the arts make an effort to include the Latino and immigrant community.

In further research, it would be helpful to get the perspective of a community member who is neither an artist nor a business owner, as I mentioned in my conclusions. This new point of view would be beneficial in determining what events are most influential in building strong communities, and what role art can and should play in the community.

Artist Profile: Alexandre Emmanuel



www.alexandreemmanuel.com

Narrator and Artist, Urban Borderlands

I first met Alex at a rented studio on a rainy day in Boston’s South End. He was midway through his most recent exhibition, “Black & White,” and as we sat on the floor of the small studio we were surrounded by the black, white, and grey scenes of Alex’s artwork, which he describes as a reflection of his life as an immigrant in the United States.

Growing up in Recife

Alex was born and raised in Recife, a city on the northeastern coast of Brazil. As a child, he was constantly doodling and it was clear at an early age that he was artistically inclined. Alex’s career launched at the young age of six, when he saw his father working outside in the garden and was inspired to make a sketch of the scene, and his mother,

after getting hold of the picture, proudly displayed the work to all of her friends. From then on, Alex was officially an artist. As he grew, his parents provided him with the tools to continue creating art: colored pencils and paper, and later paints and canvases. At the age of thirteen, Alex was already selling his art from his home, where his mother hosted tea parties for her friends to come see, and purchase, his work.⁶³

To develop his skills, Alex's parents sent him to a year-long art program in the area—six months of painting, three months of drawing, and three months of further technique development. He continued painting and drawing throughout high school, although it was not his main focus, and got the chance to invest himself fully in art when he went on to study at the University of Pernambuco in Brazil, where he received a degree in Architecture and Urban Studies.⁶⁴

I did not realize Alex is also an architect until my second interview with him, when I was talking to him about his life in Brazil. After he graduated from the University, he first contracted with a company that built houses for low-income families who otherwise would not be able to afford housing—he describes the project as similar to the Habitat for Humanity organization in the United States. After working with the company for a few years, Alex started working on other projects that helped incorporate art into architectural design. Two projects in particular that he described me were the Kids Club at the Blue Tree Park Resort in Recife and the Pleasure to Read bookstore, which was decorated with castles, Jack and the Beanstalk, and other fairytale scenes.⁶⁵

⁶³ Alexandre Emmanuel, Interview #2, 16 November 2008.

⁶⁴ Emmanuel, Alexandre. www.alexandreemmanuel.com (accessed 2 November 2008)

⁶⁵ Alexandre Emmanuel, Interview #2, 16 November 2008

Evolution of the Artist



“Brazilian Beach,” www.alexandreemmanuel.com



“Resting,” www.alexandreemmanuel.com

While he was still involved with architecture, Alex started to work more as a painter as the years went on after his graduation from the University. The art that he produced in Brazil is different from what I saw on the rainy day in the South End—mostly landscapes and views in Brazil versus the faces and people he paints now—and while I was not able to see it in person, there is a large selection of examples on Alex’s website, www.AlexandreEmmanuel.com. Since coming to the United States, Alex has seen a change in his artwork:

In Brazil I remember my painting was just, almost, just like a *ville* [village]...boats, and sea, and trees, and it’s very general. But here it’s more people. It’s human figures. It’s more something like just people in general. I don’t know why, but because I think it’s so interesting.⁶⁶

Thinking of the figure paintings that I had seen in the windows of Beto’s Hair Salon on East Broadway in East Somerville, where Alex is currently displaying work, I asked Alex what inspired him about human figures and why he started painting them when he came to the United States. As he explained:

⁶⁶ Alexandre Emmanuel, Interview #1, 28 October 2008

Human figures are very interesting because I like to paint it, you know, skin, colors, put some clothes on it, and everything...Because here is different, the complexion of people is different. Hair, and everything. Even the *comportament*...you know...the behavior of people is different.⁶⁷

Yet looking around me in the small gallery in the South End, I saw very few human figures. Instead, we were surrounded by gray-scale scenes that exploded with single bursts of color as part of the exhibit “Black & White.” On one wall, there was a painting of a bright orange fish poking its head above a black, gray, and white water surface; on the next, a cherry red bud was blossoming on an otherwise entirely black and white tree. Across the way, an oversized set of piano keys hung silently; there was clearly a theme, and I wanted to find out more about it. As we talked about the exhibition, I found that it was an expression of what it means to be an immigrant.

[Anna]: So, in your artwork...what do you try to portray? Are you reflecting back on your time in Brazil, or do you reflect on kind of a bigger picture?

[Alex]: Well the colors are completely Brazilian. You know, it’s reflective of Brazil. But...you can see, everything is reflecting what I’ve been living in this time.

[Anna]: So, can you expand on that? What do you mean by it reflects on what you’ve been living?

[Alex]: Well, for example, this new exhibition that I’m having now, you can see it’s called “Black & White,” because I was living before in a very

⁶⁷ Alexandre Emmanuel, Interview #1, 28 October 2008

hard moment in my life, as an immigrant, being here in a new country, and I couldn't see the colors in front of me. I could see just black and just white. And I mix in some grays, but you can see there's something bright in the [single piece of] color like, um, hope, something coming to me or coming to you and it tries to reach something. It's a very interesting thing and...my paintings here now in this moment are reflecting what I've been living in that time.

[Anna]: *Pointing to painting of a red heart beating inside a black and white body.* So, like in that painting you have the black and the white and then the red, is that like the hope?

[Alex]: Exactly. It's like the hope and like expecting something more and trying to show you guys about a bad experience that I had or I passed in my moment but something is coming, there is something bright, there is something, very nice colors, you know, are growing.⁶⁸

As I had anticipated in starting this project, Alex expressed the challenges he had faced as an immigrant artist—sometimes feeling like a “prisoner” and facing a community that is often skeptical of newcomers.⁶⁹ He also spoke about how he is overcoming these challenges and gaining success in the artist community in the United States. As “Black & White” demonstrates, things for Alex are finally looking up after four years in the United States. Two recent milestones for the artist include the “Black & White” exhibition, which was his second individual exhibition, and an invitation to a national art exhibit in Washington, D.C.:

⁶⁸ Alexandre Emmanuel, Interview #1, 28 October 2008

⁶⁹ Ibid.

This time [year] I'm going to Washington, D.C., because my work of art was elected to go...to the ninth salon of art. And I think it was eleven Latin countries participating in this selection. It was very hard and very professional...they selected my paintings as the only Brazilian artist painter selected to go to the exhibition and I'm so proud of me because of this...I have to go to Washington, D.C., next month, the 22nd, to the opening and that's it, because, you can see, my painting is growing by living in this country and making art here.⁷⁰

When I asked what produced this success, Alex was quick to say that he thought it was a combination of his gaining confidence and comfort in the United States and the increased opportunities to show his art. One opportunity he mentioned was the open studios that happen annually, and another was the East Somerville Art Walk.⁷¹

Alex became involved with the Art Walk after a suggestion to join from an artist friend in the area. He was excited to be able to show his work in a place that he identifies as “shaking more about art,” and in April 2008 when the Art Walk opened he showed his work at Awards Unlimited, a trophy store on East Broadway. I asked Alex what he liked about Somerville and what connection he had to the city, and he answered:

[Alex]:...I spent [time in] Somerville living about a year and a half, and it was a very nice moment because Somerville was very special for me in my life and living here...it was the moment that I had more time producing art. Not because my room or my house was big, you know, but because I think the environment, you know, made me feel more excited to produce art.

[Anna]: And what was it about the environment...was it the people?

⁷⁰ Alexandre Emmanuel, Interview #1, 28 October 2008

⁷¹ Ibid

[Alex]: It wasn't about, not about the people, because it was very hard to see them, you know, all the time on the street. But, in the house that I usually lived, there was empty space, like in the background with nothing, just trees and flowers. And it made me feel more breathing, more light.⁷²

As he spoke he pointed behind me to a painting of a butterfly, which he had produced a few years ago while living in Somerville. It was a very different piece from those in the "Black & White" exhibit, and exemplified again how Alexandre has evolved as an artist.

Plans for the Future

Many of the projects that Alex is planning are focused around incorporating different types of art. When I spoke with him the first time, he described some ideas that he had, and then got into more detail about them in our second interview.

Alex is currently trying to get a new project started with the Boston Ballet. He envisions it as a ballet performance with artists hanging from the ceiling painting a giant canvas in the background as the performance goes on; each performance would produce a new painting, which could then be displayed somewhere else. He has already met two American artists who are interested in doing the project, which he hopes will get underway in the next year.⁷³

I was surprised that Alex mentioned these two American artists after our previous conversation about the challenges of being an immigrant artist. He explained to me that after four years in the United States he is starting to branch out from Brazilian artists groups (he is currently part of a group called the Brazilian Artists' Group, which is made

⁷² Alexandre Emmanuel, Interview #1, 28 October 2008

⁷³ Alexandre Emmanuel, Interview #2, 16 November 2008

up of roughly eighty artists) and work with American artists. According to Alex, American artists are more willing to do new things and try new ideas, whereas Brazilian artists have to work very hard, often in other fields, to survive—Alex himself is a full-time dental assistant and finds time to paint at night and on the weekends. He is, however, hoping to spend more time on his art, and is moving to a new apartment soon with a bigger space for painting and other artists in the building. There, he will be able to focus on his work and exchange ideas with the other artists around him.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Alexandre Emmanuel, Interview #2, 16 December 2008

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