



Art in Early Childhood

BLACK ON WHITE AND WHITE ON BLACK: WHERE TODDLER'S ARTISTIC CREATIONS AND BABIES' AESTHETIC ENGAGEMENT MEET

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INTRODUCTION

First Encounters: An Art Studio for Little Ones provides opportunities for caregivers to learn about babies' aesthetic preferences, early visual literacy, and brain and language development. Babies (ages 6-16 months) and their caregivers are provided with experiences of looking at original works of art that babies can touch and experience in their way. An effort is made to work with artists in the community who are willing to display their art in this space for babies to interact with. Artwork is placed at the child's viewing level, where they can have easy access for tactile and visual engagement. Caregivers are provided with support on how to talk about the art while pointing out colours, shapes, and textures as the child is viewing it. Related studio art experiences are often provided that allow babies to explore different media in a safe environment.

In addition to the experiences provided for babies, toddlers (ages 18–28 months) are given opportunities to engage in art-making sessions in the studio where they are exposed to various media. The art materials serve as a stimulant with the children free to explore all of the nuances of each medium, with a different theme or focus for each session.

The studio is a shared space where sessions for babies and toddlers are at different times to better meet the needs of each age group. Inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards, et. al., 1998), the environmental stimulations in this space change every two to four months and are carefully curated by the studio director to maintain the interest of the children. Because the focus for babies is looking at art, the environment is designed mainly to pique their engagement because "An important aspect of young children's lives is their physical engagement with their environment" (Clark, 2005, p.6). If the 'environment' is engaging for the child, "it will enhance their learning and their social development in equal measure" (Dudek, 2005, p. xxi). Even though the

environmental stimulations are designed for babies, toddlers enjoy interacting with the environment as well, so it suits both age groups.

As is widely known, the environment plays an important role in the Reggio Emilia schools, where it “Conveys a respect for the interests, rights, needs, and capacities of those that use that space” (Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 1998, p.267). The environment is designed to serve as an instigator with an array of materials set up for children to explore. “Everything is thoughtfully chosen and placed with the intention to create communication, as well as exchanges among people and interactions between people” (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998, p. 163). Additionally, the Reggio Emilia approach views learning as a collaborative process where children and adults co-create and learn together. Such experiences provide children an opportunity to employ their human rights, take responsibility, and develop a sense of belonging. When young children serve as co-designers, the environment becomes truly child-centered (Clark, 2005).

This concept of co-creation and environment as a instigator planted a seed to try something different in this studio space. Instead of securing artwork from artists in the community and the studio director preparing the space with stimulants, what would happen if toddlers, as artists, created the artwork and also helped to co-create with the First Encounters Studio Director an aesthetic environment for themselves and the babies? Could a space be created to showcase children’s authentic voices and material culture? This is where the story begins. Starting with the interest of the child is important in keeping them engaged (Dunst, et. al., 2000; Dunst & Raab, 2013). Therefore, to meet the aesthetic tastes of babies, one needs to know what kind of art babies like to view. Here is what we know.

WHAT KIND OF ART DO BABIES LIKE?

Early development plays a major role in what babies prefer to view. For example, the visual system develops very rapidly over the first few weeks of life (Dodwell, Humphrey, & Muir, 1987). Researchers have found that the neurons for vision begin sending messages back and forth at approximately 2 to 4 months of age. This process will peak at about 5 months (Graham and Forstadt, 2011), which means that providing early visual stimulation is important. Because the rods in the eye are developed, newborns can see black and white images. But by four months, the cones are developing and babies can begin to see colour better.

In 1963 Fantz observed that babies looked the longest at high-contrast black-and-white images. Today, babies still enjoy looking at high-contrast black-and-white imagery (Hauptert, Raymond &

Sather, 2022; Rymanowicz, 2014). But current research tells us that babies also prefer to view images that are abstracted, colourful, shiny, and in high contrast (Krentz & Earl, 2013; Danko-McGhee, 2010, 2011; Piscitelli & Smith, 2009).

Keeping this in mind, infants' visual preferences for high-contrast abstracted imagery were at the forefront in guiding this project. Toddlers, who create more abstract renderings, were the perfect artists for this project.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT TODDLERS AND THEIR EARLY MARK-MAKING?

Mark-making can start as early as a child can sit up independently. They don't necessarily need art materials as they often start their mark-making journey by using readily available materials such as when they play with their food on their high chair table top. When given a drawing tool, they rhythmically create lines and squiggles as they weave them into designs (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2007). Toddlers enjoy watching their movements leave marks on a surface (Fox & Schirmacher, 2015). While doing so, they combine their five senses and motor movements to engage in a pleasurable activity (Di Leo, 2003). Scribbling provides young children with opportunities to try out new ideas and explore an endless array of linear patterns (Plamper, 2020) that become a part of their material culture, which is defined in this paper as objects and drawings created by them (Brittanica, 2023).

Mark-making is important to them. These creative explorations stimulate toddler's curiosity – helping them think in new ways (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2007). Mark-making involves playing and experimenting with a variety of drawing tools, many of which may be new to the child. The play aspect of drawing fosters the development of the whole child and supports learning (Fox & Schirmacher, 2015).

Young children typically don't draw from reality but instead, “reflect their unique perceptions and imaginations” (Plamper, 2022). Therefore, their mark-making experiences result in abstract non-objective renderings as they explore drawing materials while creating expressive lines and shapes.

During their mark-making experiences, children should be provided with quality visual arts materials that allow them to create expressive and rich marks. Providing them with enough time in an inspiring environment with quality materials is important (Plamper, 2022). The First Encounters Art Studio endeavors to always provide these opportunities for children to explore all of the nuances of a variety of art materials.

THE EVOLUTION OF AN INFANT /TODDLER ART EXPERIENCE

If babies like abstract high-contrast black-and-white imagery, and toddlers create abstract renderings, what would happen if toddlers, as artists, created black-and-white drawings in the art studio for babies to view? It could become a space for children's material culture that would resonate with their unique voices.

The experience started with the toddlers when a story was read about lines, *The Squiggle* by Carol Lexa Shaefer (1999). It's a tale about a little girl who makes a variety of lines in the air using a string that she finds. As the story unfolds, she creates a myriad of dragons, storm clouds, and fireworks, to the amazement of her classmates. As a follow-up to the story, each child was given a thin ribbon. As they listened to music, they moved their ribbon in the air to create a multitude of linear patterns. Little James got carried away as his body movements got entangled in the long ribbon. He spent some time just observing the tight mesh of scribble lines that he made. All of the children enjoyed the experience of line discovery as they were free to run around the studio with their fluttering and swirling lines following them.

Then they explored how to make linear marks using various drawing tools on white and black drawing surfaces. Instead of having the children draw individual renderings to hang on the walls, a larger wall space, as their canvas, was provided for them so they could explore the expanse of space as they co-created drawings together directly on the walls.

To prepare for this experience, the wall surface in the art studio was covered with black and white strips of removable wallpaper. It provided a vertical drawing surface for the children, who were normally not permitted to draw on the walls ANYWHERE. They had choices of a variety of tip sizes of black and white acrylic paint pens to use. We made available to them Posca pens because they are very fluid and easy to draw with. The different size tips lend to the exploration of a variety of line width variations. This was a new drawing tool for the children, so they were excited to use it in their mark-making.

The children were provided with repeated opportunities to 'get to know' these new drawing tools by becoming familiar with their expressive qualities and "...learning how to use them through experimentation, play, and trial and error" (Lindsay, 2022). They experimented on smaller paper before they drew on the large expanse of walls. Experimental and playful 'engagement with materials' is an essential prerequisite to later artistic and creative expression (Lindsey, 2022). This exploration of a new marking tool really piqued their curiosity in their quest for knowledge and drove the learning experience.

When children are curious, as these children were, they engage in persistent information-seeking behavior (Markey & Loewenstein, 2014; Shin & Kim, 2019; von Stumm, Hell, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2011; Tutchell, 2014). Their curiosity drove their exploration of using the various sizes of markers to see what kinds of lines they could create, i.e., broad lines, thin lines, squiggly lines. Through their experimentation, they got to know what the marking tool would and would not do, how to hold it to make broad lines, and how to hold it to make more slender lines. After experimenting on small pieces of paper, the artists were ready to make marks on the large expanse of the wall. Little Evan, who hadn't had the experience of drawing on the wall before, was a bit reluctant. With the drawing tool in hand, he kept looking back at the adult observers to get affirmation that it was okay to put a black marker on the section of the white wall surface. After the first tiny mark, he looked back again for more encouragement. Still a little hesitant, Evan began to explore, little by little, the kinds of lines that could be made with this new tool on a large vertical surface. (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. Evan drawing on the wall.

Ready to move on to the next strip of wallpaper, which was black, he looked back again to get the okay to proceed. Will a black marker show up on a black surface? He found out instantly that his marks did not show up, so he moved to the next strip of white paper to continue with his line discoveries. Feeling a little more confident, Evan started to walk with his marker, leaving linear patterns on the wall along the way. And then, with a burst of energy, he just went for it and ran all along the wall leaving a trail of expressive black lines – running back and forth he went. It was a beautiful moment of the merging of whole-body movement and the thrill of mark-making. This

'play' with a marking tool allowed him to "discover, think and refine and this is the sequence that forms artistic character" (Tutchell, 2014, p.11).

Before long, the wall was filled with an array of black-and-white linear patterns created by the little artists (See Figure 2). Those explorative marks, created by Evan along with the other little artists, served as an aesthetic provocation for babies, who would visit the studio in the months to come.

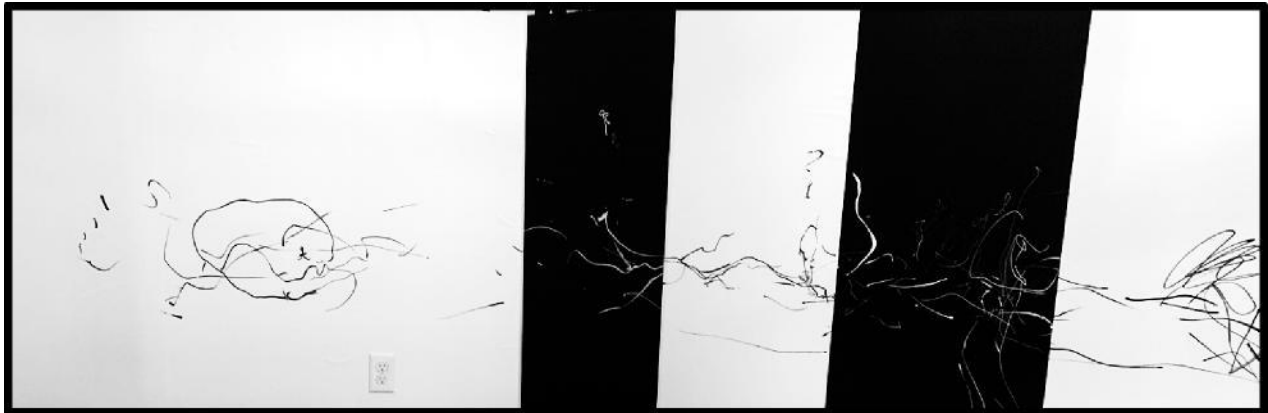


Figure 2. Black and white renderings on the studio wall.

In addition to mark-making explorations using the acrylic paint pens, the children also experimented with thick black yarn. It was a very tactile and messy experience. Strips of yarn were dipped into white glue, with the excess scraped off. The yarn was then dropped onto a wax paper surface, resulting in an organic linear scribble. Children loved this experience of dropping the glue-saturated yarn as new scribble patterns emerged. They repeated this exercise while standing on chairs and dropping the yarn in a free-spirited way. It was much like the little girl in the story who played with her ribbon. When these yarn scribbles became stiff during the drying process, a string was attached to one end, and they were suspended from the ceiling as scribble mobiles (See Figure 3).

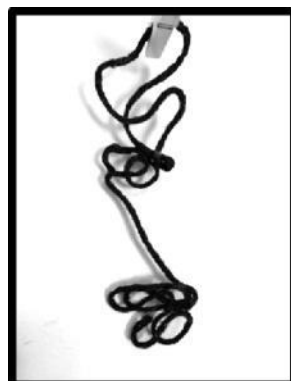


Figure 3. Yarn Scribble.

The final art experience with the toddlers was the creation of a baby play mat. There has always been a mat in the centre of the studio floor to serve as a play space for the babies. It has been a solid colour cushiony material, but this time, it would be different. A large piece of gesso-prepped canvas was placed on the floor. Because the canvas was so large, it posed a challenge for the little ones to paint. So, a paintbrush was attached to the end of a broomstick. The brush was loaded with black paint, and the children painted bold marks onto the surface of the canvas. This was also a new experience for the children as they had not used a brush attached to a long stick, nor had they painted on a large canvas on the floor. It was a different vantage point for them. (See Figure 4). The children were very concentrated on their work as they intuitively followed their line explorations. They were in a 'flow' mode, "a state of optimal experience characterized by total absorption in the task at hand" (Schmidt, 2010, p.605). They were mesmerized by the act of painting this way and were totally absorbed in the process. This mode of working, with total concentration and no distractions, allowed the children to make new and exciting discoveries, like how the paint thins out and almost disappears as continual broad strokes are made. They enjoyed dipping the long brush in the paint and experimenting with the types of marks they could make. When the canvas was dry, it was covered with several coats of clear water-based acrylic varnish to protect the surface.



Figure 4. Painting a large canvas on the floor.

The studio space was now complete with the expressive marks created by the toddlers. Large black and white pillows for caregivers to sit on were added by the studio director, along with an assortment of black and white picture books and stuffed animals. Black and white ribbons and tulle were provided as sensory stimulation. Would the babies, who were coming soon, enjoy the space that was created for them?



Figure 6. Studio Space with Sensory Items.

BABY'S REACTION TO THE SPACE

When babies arrived at the studio, they were curious about the black and white markings. They were enchanted by the allure and open-ended nature of this aesthetic experience and, as a result, were more confident to explore this space on their terms. It was a safe space for them with lots of visual stimulation. Little children are hardwired to learn in a whole-bodied way where they need to be “constantly on the move, touching things and discovering the world with all of their senses” (Gascoyne 2019, p.184).

One little baby, Ella, dressed up for her visit. She wore a white and black sweater with a fluffy black skirt and leggings. As soon as Ella toddled into the studio, she went straight to the wall full of black and white scribbles. Her little fingers followed the trajectory of the lines. It kept her attention for a while as her eyes followed the linear patterns on the wall. “When babies find their world interesting and are allowed to explore it at their own pace, they learn to entertain

themselves in the process of discovery” (Gonzales-Mena & Eyer, 2015, p.122). And that she did. The bold black and white marks kept her attention for a long while. It was obvious that she, as an observer of art, was in the ‘flow’ mode as well (See Figure 7).



Figure 7. Ella viewing the black and white renderings.

Other babies who visited the studio enjoyed the black and white play mat. Not only did they delight in the painted line patterns, but they were captivated by all of the sensory materials available to play with, such as a black and white rattle, board books, black and white stuffed animals and sensory tubes with black and white beads floating inside them. Two of them, Robert and Mary, savored a moment together exploring some of the materials. No words were spoken, just little giggles as they observed each other playing (See Figure 8).



Figure 8. Robert and Mary are at play.

Babies also had an opportunity to create their own marks using Zen Boards, drawing surfaces covered with a special paper. Some babies used their fingers dipped in a small container of water to make marks on this surface. Others used a water pen. After a while, the marks disappeared so that new ones could be made. For many babies, this was a new experience for them and their first mark-making experience. Maeva, who visited the studio to celebrate her first birthday, was assisted by her mother as she explored using this new art material (See Figure 9). All of the babies enjoyed playing with the Zen Board.



Figure 9. Maeva using a water pen.

WONDERINGS AND REFLECTIONS

Toddlers really enjoyed making marks on the wall and felt liberated to do so, with a little encouragement. They also enjoyed making broad strokes on the canvas mat using a broom-like brush. Opportunities to explore new art materials were beneficial to them and their growth as artists. Providing visual stimuli that served as sensory provocations for babies was a new experience for them.

Babies were fascinated by the environment offered to them by the toddlers. They were intrigued by the black-and-white imagery on the walls and enjoyed interacting with the sensory items provided. The studio became a space that both toddlers and babies could enjoy in their own way.

It became an arena for play, investigation, and experimentation. Creating an inspiring environment “where toddlers can draw without pressure or expectations and where they can work in a concentrated way is an important start “(Pampller, 2022). The toddlers were proud to leave their personal marks on the studio walls. It helped to elevate them as contemporary artists creating in their own cultural milieu. Toddler’s sensorimotor skills and developing awareness cast moments of great power as they expressed themselves in the artmaking process (Tutchell,

2014). Toddlers also had the opportunity to be researchers as they explored the marks they made and expressed themselves in a visual symbolic language. “Their ability to work as artists ‘was’ unselfconscious and dynamic” (Tutchell 2014, p.1).

Including young children as co-creators of a learning space does not always happen. But there are benefits in doing so. According to Hart (1992), such experiences enable, “individuals to develop into more competent and confident members of society, and those that improve the organization and functioning of communities” (p. 34). Additionally, Hart (1992) notes that,

“Participation not only allows a child the right to have a voice; it is equally valuable in enabling children to discover the rights of others to have their own very different voices. Because they are concerned with real projects, dialogue and negotiation with other young people and adults is inevitable. There is an important spin-off benefit from developing the skills of social cooperation for a child’s personal development.” (p.34).

When children are given free licenses to explore and nurture their curiosity and creative reserves, they are priming their future role as creative thinkers and citizens of the world (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2007). Arts engagement, whether creating or viewing it, can improve social skills, confidence, creativity, and expression (Young People, Children, and Education, The Arts Council, 2013)

Respecting children and their aesthetic milieu and material culture is important in informing us as educators and caregivers. Giving children the opportunity to explore and ‘just be’ as they engage in the world of art by viewing and creating can inform our path forward. But this is where this experience may have fallen short. It is so hard for an educator to step aside. We all often feel the need to serve as a facilitator and provocateur. But do we always need to do that? There is that ‘gray area’ where stepping back and facilitating overlap. What is too much? What is too little? Our influence as practitioners underpins the resources we choose to provide and the environment in which these materials are provided (Gascoyne, 2019). With that, there is always some bias. But, “As children encounter materials, they bring to bear their existing knowledge funds, skills, and interests which, if permitted, influence the nature of their engagements” (Gascoyne 2019, p. 180). However, in this studio experience, my decisions in providing materials likely restricted the children’s learning outcomes to a certain degree.

The children could have been provided with more ‘flow’ opportunities so that they could benefit from being totally immersed in their creative world where experimentation, problem-solving,

and magic happen. Children need and deserve to have spaces that make them feel welcome, invited, involved and empowered. “We need to trust children to know that they are doing something with such focus and intent that it must be beneficial” (Gascoyne 2019, p.181). While children did have these opportunities in this studio space, more could have happened here with me taking a step back to observe more and facilitate less.

With all of this in mind, several wonderings remain. What would happen if toddlers had full reign of their learning space? What if I put my adult aesthetic preferences on pause and let theirs truly lead the way? Giving them the freedom to decorate their walls with a medium of their choice, move furniture around, and place objects from their material culture that they cherish in this space – what would it look like? Empowering children in this way can be beneficial in creating future citizens of the world who can make decisions without the fear of repercussions. Kudryavtser (2011) notes that children embody divine creativity that we, as practitioners, should honor. “Recognition of this privilege should drive us to do the right thing by the child and hold on to the very magic that is art education” (Tutchell 2014, p. 2). Learning to step back and just let things play out is sometimes a good thing, even when things could get very messy and don’t meet our own aesthetic preferences. That is when the true magic happens.

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