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Photo by Aaron Flacke

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## Stepping stones to art

*A summer workshop for children opens up the world of poetry and sculpture*

By DONNA GOLD

**J**imena Lasansky's dance studio is a large, light-filled space enveloped by a garden bower. Ordinarily, this dance studio just north of Camden would be filled with straight-backed girls delicately raising arms and pointing toes as they learn to dance -- but not the last week in June. For that week, most of the dance floor was covered by two large white drop cloths, and the 11 girls assembled there were not dancing at all, not with their legs. They were hunched over large pieces of cardboard, paintbrush in hand, adding finishing touches to sculptures they had created.

"I'm making steps," reports Amelia Merrill, 10, raising her head from the long spiral of wire on which she was stringing blocks of painted cardboard rectangles, forming a long staircase to the stars. "We're all working on the same idea," she explains. "We're making steps. Any kind of steps, footsteps, staircases, steps to change things." Returning to her spiraling staircase, she grimaces. The steps to making her stairs are tedious, rote, time-consuming. But the result is ultimately absolutely spectacular.

Which takes nothing away from the work of the other girls. Claire Banks, 11, is painting a fat, wavelike ramp climbing to the attic of a green, snarly brain. As the day wears on, she cuts out a piece of cardboard -- more star shaped than rectangular -- paints it bright red and affixes it within the green brain.

The steps Anna Rich, 9, is making look a bit like the game of snakes and ladders, but these rest on an angular mountain-like frame. Lasansky notices Anna balancing her stairs on this frame and glides over. "Look, it turns, it dances!" she exclaims as she kneels next to Anna's work. She calls the others to look.

As the kids gather 'round, Lasansky's eyes beam, and the frizzy, gray hair she wears pulled back in a dancer's knot seems to pop out around her face. "You don't know what will happen," she tells them. "You can only ask questions. What will it do? Look. Even when we leave it alone, it continues to move."

## Beyond your standard-issue hearts

Lasansky has had her dance studio for 20 years and has been holding similar week-long multidisciplinary workshops for children, a kind of art camp, for the past 13 years. She also does work in the schools. These workshops are for boys, too, but this year, the girls signed up first, and no boy made it past the waiting list.

The focus is different each year. One year, it was windows; another year it was pockets. This year, the focus is on steps, all kinds of steps. But ultimately, each workshop is about the same thing: making art that is genuine because it is connected to oneself.

As adults reading this, we may say, "Well, of course. That's what art is about."

But look at kids' work, most of it. If they're working on their own, how often are they making standard-issue hearts and flowers? That's if they're girls. It's usually guns and helicopters for boys. Go into an elementary school, and the art is all strikingly similar. Whether it's fish or birds or snow scenes, some may be neater than others, some better drawn, but all have the same idea, the same style. You can bet that not one child making that art has taken the idea into them, made a real connection to it.

In Lasansky's studio, every piece of work is different. The girls have had time alone, time to think, individually, about what steps are, what they mean. Though many kids are using cardboard, not all are. Even those with similar materials are using it in strikingly different ways. That's because the kids are encouraged -- expected may be the more accurate word -- to think, feel, experience -- and create. It's obvious. The work proves it.

"Jimena tries to stretch our imagination," according to Meghan Bresnahan, who at age 9 is one of the younger students in this workshop, though Lasansky also offers a similar, shorter workshop for very young kids. "She tells us things like, 'If you were a stepping stone, where would you be located?' She gets us to really think about it, so rather than saying, 'I know what a step is,' you think about what your step is."

Lasansky does know what her steps are: They're specific actions, creative expectations that also work internally, so that step by step her students climb that inner staircase to art-making.

As the daughter of the influential Argentinian-born artist Mauricio Lasansky, Jimena Lasansky learned about the creative process from a very early age. Her studio walls are lined with prints by her father, as well as her grown son. Most are figures, many of her own family, so as students work, or (at other times of the year) as they dance, they have a powerful visual sense of transformation through the work of one of the contemporary experts of printmaking.

Her students know, too, that as Lasansky challenges them, she also challenges herself. Recently, a sixth-grade science teacher in the Camden-Rockport school system wrote a grant inviting Lasansky to physically interpret, through motion, various scientific concepts. Lasansky studied up, relearned her science and led students to kinesthetically experience acid rain and the alteration of matter from solid to liquid to gas.

But her summer workshops are more about writing and art-making than movement. On the very first day, as Lasansky talks with the group about the theme of the week, she elicits lines from them for a group poem.

"Everyone was thinking of the future, about steps in your life," recalls Anna, "then someone [it was

Amelia] said that heartbeats are steps -- for living."

That line goes into the poem, as do many others, like, "You step into your future/And step out of your past."

As the students explore the meaning of steps, Lasansky asks questions -- silly absurd ones that get the children into a sense of play: Where does a step live? When was it born? What does it eat for breakfast? Lunch? What about dinner? Through such brainstorming, through adding lines to this group poem, the girls meet each other and begin to think about the further steps along the path of this week-long workshop. Next up is a poem of their own, a process Lasansky describes as "weaving that little spider web from that little idea that's born" to quite vivid poems.

Just listen to the opening of the poem written by Callie Hand, 11: "Under water steps/Take you to the stars ... If you walk backward on them."

"I want them to go into the garden to find things," says Lasansky. "I want them to gather information from elsewhere. They need to find what they need to do to create. They need to go into the creation. It's not about just feeling good -- you know you have to go out and work."

### **Art as friend**

Each child's view of steps is different. Haley Warner, 11, explores the sense of knowing -- but not knowing -- by creating a "knowing shell" that "grows and changes colors" but "has the steps to her life." In her poem, Haley talks about the feeling her knowing shell gives her -- a feeling, says Lasansky, she knew but had the hardest time describing. Finally, Haley decided it was all right not to know: "My knowing shell gives me a feeling when I think about her/I can't name the feeling."

These poems become the jumping-off step for the sculptures they have already begun to build. This is the hard part, says Lasansky. "That's where you see frustration." The kids have written their poems; they've developed their idea; they come to visualize what their steps will look like. Then they have to find a way to make their materials approach the image they have in their minds.

Haley created her knowing shell by painting paper with a subtle, sponge-like texture, then cutting it into long, wide strips she bent around to create a complex, intricate shape. But again, it wasn't easy to get there.

That's when Lasansky begins to stress process. She likes students to think of this process as having a relationship, a friend. She talks about how these girls relate to their friends, the give and take of their friendships. If you have a problem, she tells them, you don't just walk away, you might argue but you also listen. "Maybe you don't agree. That's where growth is.

"Have a relationship with what you're making," she adds. "Talk to it, like it was your girlfriend."

Later, as she sits in her garden, Lasansky says she gets teased a lot for metaphor. The girls set up their cardboard pieces as mouths, "they have their pieces talk back to me," she says, grinning girlishly. Though these are intense, fun and even profound steps these students are taking, they're not the only ones they learn. As Lasansky draws them into their work, she also involves them with the work of the others. Just as she did before she sent them into her garden to write, Lasansky reminds them to notice textures, folds, ways of movement. In this way, she's helping to solidify their relationships with both the ideas of the

poems and the actualities of the sculptures. Soon, they're giving each other ideas, helping each other solve problems, grandly but also graciously. By the end of the third day, they're not only fascinated with each other's work, they're extremely curious about the work of the 6-, 7- and 8-year-olds who come in the morning, for only an hour a day, leaving before the older kids arrive. They may be younger, but they're all colleagues at this stepping game.

And then Lasansky grows quiet. As an artist, she knows that what's left out is often as important as what is put in. "A lot of what I do is stay out of the way. When they get their idea, they possess it and they want it really badly." By the end, they're working as seriously as if they were students at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. They look at each other's work with the same keen interest you'd find there. "I want them to discover what it is that they need to do to create," says Lasansky.

That's often a lifelong process for an artist, but these girls have been given some good stepping stones.