

Artists in the Schools featured in the Point Reyes Light, May 28, 2025.



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FEATURES

In classrooms, art offers new ways of seeing

 by Sophia Grace Carter
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Bruce Mitchell shows the West Marin School eighth-grade class his woodblocks. (David Briggs / Point Reyes Light)

It's 9 a.m. on a Monday in late April, and a procession of 20 bleary-eyed eighth graders shuffles into the fluorescent-lit art room at West Marin School. Every corner of Colleen Conley's classroom is filled with her students' work—paintings on the walls and pinned to clotheslines, sculptures on tables, mobiles swaying from the ceiling.

At the center of the panoply stands Bruce Mitchell, an Inverness woodworker and sculptor, waiting with a bin of brightly hued ink, a stack of woodblocks and a gentle smile. After a quick demonstration—rolling the brayers, inking the blocks, rubbing paper underlaid with objects to let shapes and textures emerge—Mr. Mitchell steps aside and the roomful of eighth graders dives in.

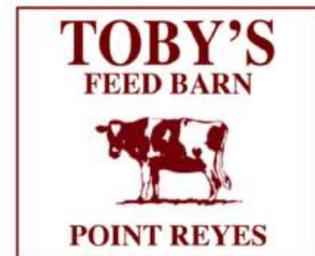
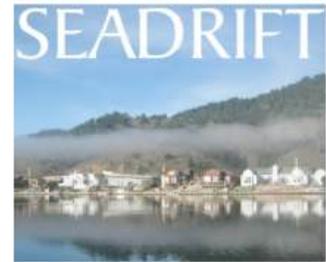
"Who hasn't grown up with a set of blocks?" Mr. Mitchell muses in his soft baritone, beaming like a proud father as he observed the 13- and 14-year-olds at work. "Our brains are so good at recording everything we've ever seen, heard, touched, tasted, even our dreams. It's all up there, shuffled around. And when we face a blank page and don't know where to start, all it takes is to wait for the left brain to say to the right brain, 'You're running the show now.'"

Waiting and working—that's how discovery happens, Mr. Mitchell suggests as he elucidates the practical and mystical sides of artmaking. It's a lesson that lies at the heart of Artists in the Schools, a long-running program that brings working artists into West Marin classrooms, from transitional kindergarten through high school. Their projects unfold over weeks, culminating in an annual exhibition. This year's show, "Human/Nature," opens this Thursday at Toby's Gallery in Point Reyes Station and runs through June 22, offering a window into the creative minds of the region's youngest artists.

At a worktable in Ms. Conley's classroom, two students take diametrically different approaches to the woodblocks. Aurelia is thoughtful and methodical, pausing with a furrowed brow when a mark feels off. Her friend JJ is spontaneous and intuitive, quickly filling the page with superimposed concentric circles layered in red, gold, pink and blue. She treats the relief blocks almost like intaglios—the ink has been forced into the crevices but wiped clean from the plateaus.

"I don't really know...what's my next step?" Aurelia wonders aloud.

"I'm just seeing where it takes me—it's all part of the process," JJ replies.



Mr. Mitchell has first-hand knowledge of the pivotal role arts education can play in a young person's development. As a boy, he spent hours thumbing through his parents' library, but it was a trip to San Francisco's de Young Museum in 1960—where, at age 10, he first saw Van Gogh's writhing lines and hallucinatory palette—that set him on the path to becoming an artist. "That moment changed everything," he said.

For many students, a recent visit to Gallery Route One was their first time stepping into a gallery. There, they encountered Mr. Mitchell's own explorations in woodblock printing: geometric compositions built around triangles, circles and squares cut from lathe-turned wood, their surface inscribed with rhythmic grooves. He likens his work to petroglyphs—ancient carvings on stone—but instead of bringing out the texture of flat-faced boulders and cave walls, his bold prints illuminate the delicate, translucent fibers of mulberry rice paper.

Artists in the Schools, a collaboration between Gallery Route One and Shoreline Unified School District, has blossomed since its early years as a lunchtime elective for middle schoolers. It's now supported in part by the county, Giving Marin, the Kimball Foundation and the school district.

"The thinking was that there could always be more art," said painter Toni Littlejohn, the program's grande dame. "The kids would get 40 minutes a week, which is nothing, particularly if you are interested in art and have a burning passion to do it."

Ms. Littlejohn founded the program in 1993, aiming to fill the void left by meager arts funding. Early classes included darkroom photography, drum making, knot tying, totem building, origami, animation and synthesizing. The program has since expanded to reach all grade levels, emphasizing an interdisciplinary approach to science, creative writing and art making.

Over the years, students have explored themes like the Pacific Ocean, forest ecosystems and coho salmon. In the mid-aughts, kindergartners painted silk to mimic ocean currents, while seventh graders built a shipwreck. Another year, second and third graders painted life-sized self-portraits as fish, while the younger grades fashioned fishing poles from bamboo and yarn and filled medicine bundles with bay leaves, oak leaves and cornmeal. They traced the coho's odyssey from their freshwater spawning grounds to the Pacific and back. Eighth graders built canoes from willow sticks and straw, structures that, with the National Park Service's permission, were later used to stabilize the eroding banks of Olema Creek.

This blueprint—pairing professional artists with students to explore their surroundings—has remained remarkably steady, even as projects and people evolve.

Ms. Conley, who has taught art to every student from transitional kindergarten through eighth grade for the past 41 years, says bringing working artists into the classroom is essential. When she arrived at West Marin School in the 1980s, there was no art program at all—a casualty of Reagan-era budget gutting.

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“It’s not just more hands in the classroom,” she said. “It’s another voice. The kids see me all these years, so it’s good for them to encounter other artists and teaching styles. Sometimes they just need to hear a lesson from someone else for it to click.”

Across the district, students are working with a dozen other artists—writing poems about the Point Reyes National Seashore on paper prayer flags, learning to paint plein air, developing cyanotypes and weaving. At West Marin School, Lagunitas weaver Travis Meinolf has spent the past six months guiding a group of fourth, fifth and sixth graders through the slow, meditative process of creating a collaborative fabric—each student learning how to send a bobbin of weft thread gliding across the loom’s horizontal surface.

“This is a practice that certain types of people really plug into and find deeply satisfying,” Mx. Meinolf said. “It can be a grounding, healing mechanism for getting ourselves into a good state to face the other things in our lives.”

For the artists, too, the program offers a kind of nourishment, said Jennifer Tesoro Reese, who directs Artists in the Schools.

“It’s a way for artists to share their passion with a new audience—and make a little extra money,” she said. “And for the kids, it’s a supplemental art program that introduces them to new people, new possibilities, and new ways of thinking. It opens their world.”