

Big Rock Candy Mountain: the Start of Something Bigger and Smaller

by Vanessa Kwan

An impossible proposal takes time to build. For the better part of a year, Hannah Jickling and Helen Reed have been in residence at Queen Alexandra Elementary School, located at Clark Drive and Broadway in East Vancouver. It's an inner city school, with 200 students and an incredibly dedicated staff team. It's also surprisingly welcoming venue for the difficult proposition that is Big Rock Candy Mountain: to build a candy factory in an elementary school. Here, the project has played out in a series of workshops, field trips, after-school programs and studio visits with Divisions Six and Seven (Ms. Nickel and Mrs. Wong's students) that have produced an incredible array of outcomes, interactions, collages, prints and other works. The bulk of these outcomes will remain part of the unseen social life of the 'factory,' but a precious few things are chosen for export into the public realm.

These Tall Tale postcards are among the first 'products.' As the curator, my role for the last many months has been mostly as an observer—doling out snacks, snapping photos, making awkward conversation with eight year olds. Taking the long way around, I might best explain the relevance of these postcards in an incomplete journal of our time together:

Day 3: Good Taste vs. Bad Taste



The idea of taste is a tricky one; of course it's subjective in the purest sense (as in one of five), living in the mouth, on the tongue and as related to human desire—our evolutionary prerogative allows us to discern fairly quickly what we like from what we don't, what will feed us and what will not. Dirt vs. Marshmallow seems simple, but being in possession of "good taste" is the result of cultural, class and market forces reaching far beyond a single taste bud. In the constellation of good and bad taste, kids are a special case: they are a powerful marketing demographic, but their dependency on the full-fledged agency of adults makes it hard to access their creative potential in real terms. They are wild consumers, with guardians as proxies.

Day 4: Jelly beans

Candy is camp: it tastes good, but it's rarely *in good taste*. Candy is junk, candy is empty, candy will rot you. And also: candy is for children. It's a cultural minefield as well as a language that is deeply understood, and has currency, within communities of kids.



(See the playground for any number of candy-related underground economies—as divorced from adult rules of play). This aspect of candy—culturally devalued, but passionately appropriated—relates to a history of camp as a powerful vehicle for queer, feminist and outsider sensibilities (see Waters, Sontag, Halberstam, Shugart/Waggoner and many others). Despite odds to the contrary, there is a flourishing outside the bounds of good taste.

Big Rock Candy Mountain asks: is there a way to work with-in these tentative areas of youthful self-definition to access new aesthetic terrain? What happens when we re-frame children as tastemakers rather than consumers? Is there is a place where adult rationalities might productively stretch, crack, dissolve, like taffy, like Warheads©, like Toxic Waste©?

Day 5:
Surrealism

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun speaks to the group of 4th graders. A wash of pink jersey, brightly coloured sneakers, ponytails, Gore-tex jackets and wide eyes face the artist. He holds out a tiny disco ball, plucked from a pile of studio remnants. “How would you feel,” he asks the girl in the front row, “if this was your land?” Blink. “But I took it. And lived on it, and profited from it?”

A massive blank canvas leans against the wall. Ovoids spill over day-glo landscapes. Faces stare out from the boughs of trees. A human/ animal figure leaves one scene, a briefcase full of money. One kid, hood up, backpack fully loaded, picks out every detail. Later, he can’t stop asking over and over how Yuxweluptun gets high enough to paint the upper reaches of the canvases. How can you reach the tops of trees? Defy height, gravity, rules, order?

“It’s my land.”

Afterwards, he signs autographs.

Days 6, 9, 10:
Works-in-progress

3 cups of iced tea mix, hidden in a toque.

LOL.

A piece of pizza says to a can of lima beans:

“No one likes you, dude.”

Fazzy Phach.

A collage made only of pictures of pickles.

The last Nacho Cheese Sun Chip, licked and held between two fingers for the entire bus ride.



Karyl asks for a hug.



A meat chandelier.

Jelly beans cut precisely in half with safety scissors, and recombined. Tantrum.

Day 7:
I don't like chocolate.

Sometimes things don't go the way you think they should. Sometimes they won't put their shoe back on, hate tomatoes, and give you the silent treatment for the whole day. Sometimes they cough all over the cups and you have to drink from them anyways. But it is the unruliness that is so important. The absolute, irrational contrariness. The mercurial freak-outs. The weirdness.

In other words: the resistance that we want to dismiss as immature, as unvalued, as simply a side effect of not-knowing-better. But whole worlds might be built from the cracks and insufficiencies of our version of order. And it makes you question what else—what behaviours, emotions, strange and unruly bodies—are also left uncounted.

Day 8:
Scale

There is much to be gained from the unrealizable, the preposterous, the wholly out-of-proportion. Big Rock Candy Mountain as imagined by Jickling, Reed and their collaborators is not for our gratuitous consumption. It's a carefully considered, sustained engagement between artists and children, sharing the common language of candy and its many digressions.

As social practice, the project challenges many of our assumptions around what it means to "place art in public;" here monumentality takes a decidedly different form. There is no built structure to assert a presence on the landscape, and Big Rock Candy Mountain opens instead a space of powerful imaginative and aesthetic potential. To live "out of scale" is a first step to considering a radical reorientation of surroundings, and points the way to new forms of definition. It is the possibility of a twenty-foot high Ring Pop that, like its folk-song namesake, is an invocation of a world both too-large and too-small; of outlandish tastes, extreme dreaming and a hierarchy of rationality, coaxed undone. △

