

MARY HEEBNER REFLECTIONS ON POVERTY
Community Action Commission June 25, 2003 5:30 – 8PM
Faulkner Gallery. Juried award presentation

(thanks to CAC, Carmen, Patrick, the artists showing, Manuel, the library...)

My name is Mary Heebner. I am an artist, and a writer. I have lived in Santa Barbara since 1969. I've lived in many different circumstances and I have tried to give back to this community that I love through my art and through service. I have taught from grades Kindergarten through University graduate level, and I've had the good fortune to travel to many countries on working assignments. I believe that travel increases my sense of humanity and it also undermines my prejudices and prejudgments. It reminds me that we are part of a whole network of people – a worldwide community. It inspires me to "Think Globally, Act Locally"

The topic tonight is Reflections on Poverty.

I've lived in places so poor that there is no trash. Everything is used. And in the simple homes of people whom I befriended there, I was offered food, a place to rest, the warmth of conversation and the riches of laughter and hopefulness and sheer candor. So, yes, poverty is a state of mind as much as it is an economic reality. I've been in some homes as lavish as palaces that aren't always as lively and forthcoming. So, generosity is a state of mind too, a state that understands that we are all human, all part of a community.

But, there are barriers that are entrenched in our society that keep us from *acknowledging* our neighbors — especially in a culture that places such enormous importance on material gain. When society redefines poor people as "less than", and when that "poor person" turns invisible to the greater society, not just for a moment, but for years and years, then we are guilty of dehumanizing part of our population, of dividing community. How do the

economically disadvantaged keep from becoming invisible, unapproachable?

Art is a way to make visible. ...so we call on our artists to articulate, to make known, some unspoken things about this community. Art that is genuine, not just decorative, comes from within, it speaks of one's vision, it comes out of one's unique history. Art reflecting on Poverty will have a different face from art from the academy, for example. It may be a face we don't recognize, so we must pay attention to what these artists are saying.

Poverty deadens the mind, it insinuates itself into the lives of families, neighborhoods, communities, it siphons off the desire to imagine, to envision a way to say "yes, I can" to your life. It depresses and devalues human resource. When you are hungry or unemployed, greedily, poverty eats your time away.

We need artists at the heart of a community, they are a presence that reminds a community that it has a SOUL. Art can touch a nerve in you the way nothing else can. It can heal, it can transform, it can bring about change, and so there should not only be artists showing in galleries, but there should be art and artists in hospitals, public places, in prisons, in the barrios, the media, the military, in all aspects of a healthy community.

Think of stories have you heard of a person who's lifted himself out of poverty. Not by some hair-brained lottery scheme, but by the power of his own mind, and or her ability to imagine, to stretch the boundaries. Poverty is a trap that you can get out of by thinking your way out. Perhaps. If so, than how can we in this community help this thought process along, with dignity?

Art requires keen observation, intuition, and thought. Art can be an antidote to depression, to fearful acquiescence, to drugs and to violence — the most

popular ways people turn to try to break out of impoverished circumstances.

**as the former mayor of Cleveland, said in a speech: ...“I know where the weapons of mass destruction are, Mr. Bush. You come to urban America – we’ll show you weapons of mass destruction. Poverty is a weapon of mass destruction. Homelessness is a weapon of mass destruction.

There are different sorts of poverty — having no money, no power, no “stuff” — is the obvious. There is the dangerous poverty that banks on the fact that if you keep people down, ignorant and fearful, you can get away with anything. Whose responsibility is this?

How does Politics affect us and what does it have to do with art?

Well, for example, people sometimes refer to the unilateralist actions of our 'cowboy president'. I take offense at that. Cowboys - part of our western heritage, knew that their success rested on their ability to get along with their neighbors. The West is vast and it's no good having enemies of all four sides of you. So they learned it was better to treat their neighbor as they would like to be treated - the golden rule - and they helped out when neighbors were in trouble. This seems close enough to me to what I'd call Democracy.

But Democracy only works if you have an educated, informed, inquisitive public, including a strong and free press, and an integrated artistic community. If you don't read, you don't know who your leaders are, if you can't picture where Afghanistan or Senegal or Pueblo or Paris is, if you say you don't care, and once you turn 18, if you don't vote, hell! How can you complain when the whole thing goes haywire! It's up to us - to educate ourselves, to read with a hunger and an intellect and a questioning mind. To

talk about what matters, what disturbs, what excites us. It is up to all of us to look at those who are thinking about their world and are trying to be heard, to listen with fresh senses to what they've learned and what they have to say. Otherwise we wind up living in a bubble, in some damn clique of flatterers and backslappers. What a bore. Wake up and look, and keep our precious democracy alive. It's a damn good system for getting out of poverty ONLY if you participate in it. Otherwise you have people tell you they are Cowboys when they are just cattle rustlers and you won't know enough to tell the difference.

There is the Poverty of not knowing who you are and where come from. For instance, what do you know about your natural environment? Can you name some of the creeks, a few of the native plants, trees? Do you know where your water comes from? Can you name some of the birds that migrate here? Have you ever drawn the mountain peak you can see from your office? Have you hiked any of its trails? What does white sage smell like? Why does the sun rise and set over the ocean here? What's el niño? Why do we have fog? What's a drought?

All this is a part of knowing your roots, where you are from. In knowing, you begin to love, and in loving you care about your home and you feel a sense of true ownership, not only for you but for your children and their children. *Cuidate* - A beautiful saying. To take care.

These artists are giving us something important to look at. They might show us something about our community we never thought about, never saw, so pay attention. Don't take their generosity for granted, don't miss the insight they offer.

Thank you.

