

*This article was written in response to an ART vs REHAB focus group, entitled **Providing and Promoting Social Inclusion: One in the Same?** The session addressed how artworks made by vulnerable groups are presented to the public, and whether or not these artworks should carry the label of the artist's past, e.g. homeless art, offender art. For more information, please visit artvsrehab.com.*

With art as a tool for reflection and change, is foreshadowing a past the artist might want to move away from merely the way forward?

Linda Bartoli

In the back yard where I am residing leans a mirror against a wooden fence with a sentence written on it in permanent marker - *Something good is gonna happen to me soon.*

As the words were put to glass, I was not part of the experience; I was nowhere to be found. The letters standing on their own are meaningless. The impact has no specific significance to me. I am unmoved but alerted.

S o m e t h i n g g o o d i s g o n n a h a p p e n t o m e s o o n .

At a second examination, I notice that a capital letter starts the string of letters and a period; a full stop makes it a sentence. When I step in front of the letters, I see my image and I am attached to the words. It is a personalized message, "Something good *is* gonna happen to me soon." I smile. Placed together the words give way to a context that evokes a present, a past and a future; a fantasy of what I wish will happen, where I am now and what I know has already happened.

With a refined glance, the words echo on my mind conjuring up all sorts of hypotheses. The impact of the experience leaves me with a new association to the object, sentence and author.

Working to effect change for individuals, communities and systems, I collaborate with art and reflective practice to build a frame where the present is a fulcrum that holds the past and the future in a continuum. Respecting resistance to change and empowering people to find resilient ways to move forward into a future, free of the labels that leave one's status in jeopardy, uncertain and excluded, is my job.

Art and advocacy often share a beautiful relationship. For example, the art of Catherine Opie, Jenny Holtzer, Kara Walker and Krzysztof Wodiczko moves one to engage with issues and identity. By framing a construct that needs to be challenged, I understand from their art how dangerous it is when difference is used to exclude people from their rights and exclude society from its obligation to include all those who are not allowed access.

The Tuvan's, living in the Republic of Tuva, located in the Tannu Mountains on the Siberian border in northwest Mongolia, use the word 'songaar' interchangeably to mean to go back and the future, while the word 'burungaar' means both to go forward and the past. Their endangered language shapes a context for their culture that by going forward they see the past clearly in front of them and the future, the unknown, is behind, waiting to be seen.



If we apply the Tuvan's understanding of the companionship of the present and the past with social and cultural exclusion we can't move away from our past because it precedes us. Labels of the past are in front of us. We see them clearly in the paradigm and are not haunted by them. They lead us. By telling our story, the knowledge remains in front of us, present and seen, in reach. There is no shame.

The *something good is gonna happen to me soon* is like an open door we walk into backwards, entering into to the future behind us, unseen. Our being becomes the hub and linkage of what is possible; without fear, without judgement, without status. It is if the centre point of our authenticity and vulnerability, binding us to the human experience.

Slowly but surely excluded communities are moving from the fringes of society to the centre, reclaiming names and redefining identities that set them apart to now resembles the attitudes and ideals of the mainstream. Yet many who are seen as different do not want to be seen as the same as the majority; rather they want to be respected for their differences.

Art does this. It allows us to examine the tension of where we are and how our intentions impact each other.

In today's continuous improvement not for profit culture, it is not enough for the artwork of clients to tell a story. Anecdotal evidence does not preclude garnering funding from funding sources- outcome driven programming does. My hope, as a person who uses art to transform, is that our clients are informed participants affecting the dialogue about how marginalised communities are seen. And that we have reached a point as a culture where we are not so worried about the label one is moving away from, rather that its an individual's choice and societies' responsibility to be aware that we all carry labels, behind us, in front of us, and the labels make us human.

- Linda Bartoli

Further Reading and References

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