



shifting ground

A Socially Engaged Immigrant Outreach Project Working
with Creative Processes and Cultural Sustainability.



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Creative Thinking and the Use of Imagination as Survival Skills

Joshua and Jeremy seemed like they were born shaping forms in clay - complete concentration and a sense of purpose. Both had been quiet at first and didn't seem very interested when their *Shifting Ground* workshop began. No doubt their immigrant parents had talked them into participating. But when it was time to write and talk about a specific memory, their eyes lit up. The swimming hole as a mysterious vortex - and sharks! Yes, SHARKS! Gradually, every teen's little obsessions began to be revealed. Just what we artists/teachers hope for!

At a time when immigration policies demonstrate increasing intolerance and social injustice we, as artists concerned with social issues, wanted to demonstrate that the visual arts, in particular, and culture, in a broader sense, are an important means for embracing difference. None of us can be sure - whether short-term or long-term, as refugees from war, natural disaster, or other causes - that we might not be in a similar situation, without our home or country, being shuffled between temporary living spaces. Searching for a better future in a new place is something common to all living species, and we, as intelligent beings living in civilized societies, must provide new forms of welcoming and inclusion that incorporate the arts and encourage creative thinking and the use of imagi-

nation as survival strategies. Through the *Shifting Ground* project, sponsored by The Iowa Ceramic Center and Glass Workshop (ICCGS), we hoped to empower and give visibility to undervalued immigrant groups in our own community, while also promoting social and cultural sustainability.

With this purpose, and the support of The City of Cedar Rapids, The Iowa Arts Council and in partnerships with St. Paul's United Methodist African Nationals Congregation and Immaculate Conception Church's Hispanic Ministries, we developed a plan that included two weeks of small group workshops with recent immigrants, local volunteers, and artists. We began by designing a game, an interaction between the artists and the participants, aimed at getting unique personal responses. With M.O.T. (Memory, Object, Talent) each person wrote about a significant memory and an object related to it. Then we used wood letters pressed into clay slabs to form words and sentences from our memories. From this beginning we spent the next few days modeling abstract clay forms based on our selected objects.

As work progressed we noticed some interesting themes emerge among our first group, the Hispanic youth. Nature as remembered from visits back to Central America with family. Stories of a first big goal accomplished, like climbing to the very top of a banana tree or the sound, sight, and thrill of the first time the volleyball made it over the net, that first goal in soccer, or caring for a little pet turtle that revealed a love for nurturing all things.

Torn between the culture of their immigrant parents and that of a contemporary American high school, these teens seemed equally at home in Spanish or English, though they chose to speak Spanish among themselves. Their parents' goal had been escaping adversity to provide their children a better life. Now the expectation is that they reach their own goals as first generation Americans.

While the Hispanic teens took awhile to warm to the project, the Central African group was laughing and talking before the workshop even started. Many of these recent adult immigrants knew each other. Nearly three thousand new immigrants from Central Africa had arrived in Cedar Rapids in recent years. Few of them spoke English. Some had literally arrived within days and weeks of our workshops. Some had led harrowing past lives, escaping war-ravaged villages to refugee camps where they may have lived for a decade or longer. Then they were most likely sent to a larger American city before finally being placed in Cedar Rapids where, hopefully, there were others from their cultural groups.

Florence had waited two years to finally be reunited with her fiancé Fidel. She arrived in Cedar Rapids at last and they married within a few weeks, supported by their church and fellow immigrants. They came to the workshop together and Florence immediately understood. She never stopped working on her amazing organic pod form, perhaps a reference to the potential of her new life here. She refined it like a consummate craftsperson with a true love of the

process. One after another every participant in each workshop found a personal way to succeed. The objects they created were both beautiful and original, beyond our expectations in both form and meaning.

The final *Shifting Ground* Exhibit/Celebration was proof our efforts had been worthwhile. A large crowd showed up to see the clay tablets, sculptures, and plaster casts installed with wall-projected videos documenting the workshops. This tribute to cultural diversity, held at The Cherry Center Space in Cedar Rapids, was a happening where the participants and their families, artists and volunteers, as well as the larger community, shared a moment of social and cultural solidarity through art.

This catalog documents both the process and the products of the *Shifting Ground* workshops, which became a way to share life stories and cultural knowledge while also creating closer ties among us. We sincerely hope *Shifting Ground* gives visibility and voice, in a dignified way, to recent immigrants to Cedar Rapids while also promoting public art that benefits both the local community and those marginalized from it. Most importantly, we want to thank all our participants, without whom this project would not have been possible.

Cedar Rapids, Lisbon, August 2019

Jane Ellen Gilmor

Paula Reaes Pinto

António Gorgel Pinto

Funding for *Shifting Ground* was provided in part by a grant from The Iowa Arts Council, a division of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, and by The City of Cedar Rapids, Iowa.





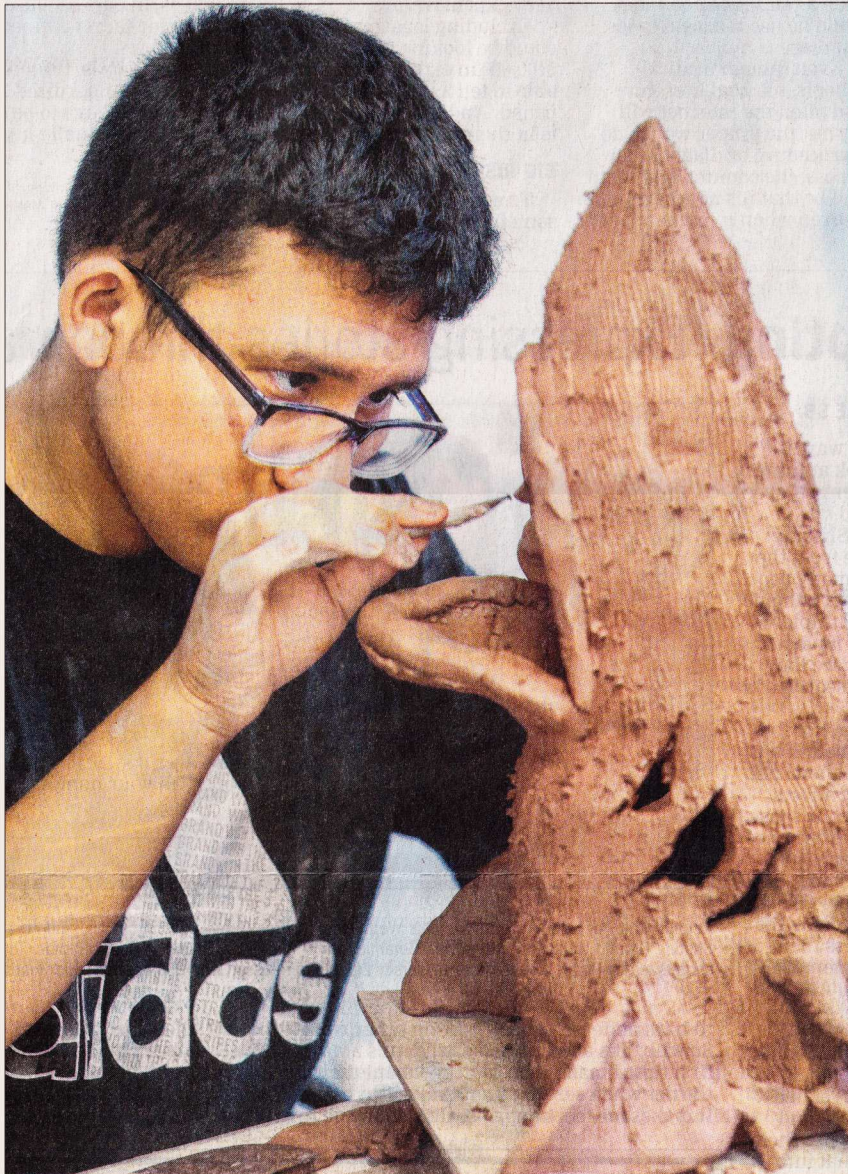




Sculpting stories



Antonio Pinto (right) of Lisbon, Portugal, talks to Elijah Troche, 14, about his sculpture Wednesday during an art-making workshop called Shifting Ground at the Iowa Ceramic Center and Glass Studio in Cedar Rapids.



Jim Slosiarek photos/The Gazette

ABOVE: Josh Landin, 13, trims a shark tooth after placing it in the mouth of his shark sculpture Wednesday during the Shifting Ground workshop at the Iowa Ceramic Center and Glass Studio in Cedar Rapids. In the first week of the program, artists will work with Hispanic youth to create sculpture that tell stories of their experiences. In the second week, artists will work with youths who are recent immigrants from Central and East African.

Shifting Ground workshop connects immigrant communities with artists

By Alison Gowans, The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS — Cris Garcia's tree sculpture wasn't coming together the way the 14-year-old had envisioned it.

But that was OK, said the rising freshman at Linn-Mar High School as he carefully sculpted clay during a workshop Wednesday at the Iowa Ceramics Center and Glass Studio in Cedar Rapids.

"It's changing into something else. It's banana peels, now, wrapped around the tree," he said. "When I was little I used to climb trees in the Amazon, and I picked up bananas. ... It was peaceful up there. There were no problems; it was just nature."

Garcia, who was born in America, was sculpting a memory from a visit to his parent's native Ecuador when he was 6. He was one of several Latinx teens taking part in "Shifting Ground," a two-week workshop hosted by the Ceramics Center, Mount Mercy University Emeritus Professor Jane Gilmor and artists Antonio Gorgel Pinto and Paula Reaes Pinto of Portugal.

The first week of the workshop focused on Latinx youth, and the second week will include adult East and Central African immigrants and will take place at St. Paul's United Methodist Church. Cedar Rapids is home to a large community of immigrants from Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and St. Paul's has services in Swahili and Kirundi languages.

Artwork from both weeks will be unveiled for the public at a celebration and exhibit July 27 at the Cherry Building. The event will feature music by St. Paul's African Nationals



Paula Pinto of Lisbon, Portugal, shows Cris Garcia, 14, a technique to use on his sculpture Wednesday during the art-making workshop called Shifting Ground at the Iowa Ceramic Center and Glass Studio in Cedar Rapids.

Choir, projected video documentation and international food.

Gilmor met the Pintos when she was in Portugal on a Fulbright grant in 2003, and has worked with them since then, including with an exhibition of Portuguese artists at Grinnell College in 2008. The idea to do workshops with immigrant communities sprang from conversations with them and with community organizations in Cedar Rapids, including the Catherine McAuley Center and Immaculate Conception Catholic Church.

"The church said there wasn't programming for Hispanic youth, particularly children of immigrants," Gilmor said. "They have this between-cultures experience."

The workshops, organized by the Ceramics Center and international artist collective CREATURA, received funding from the Iowa Arts Council, the City of Cedar Rapids and other sponsors.

Gilmor said her hope is partnerships between places such as the Ceramics Center, local churches and immigrant communities can continue.

"Art makes you see things

in a different way. It helps you look at things from a different perspective," she said.

The name *Shifting Ground* came from the idea that for many people, the concept of home has shifted multiple times as they have left the places where they were born in search of a better life.

"It's a metaphor for the way the ground has shifted under them, and asks how that affects identity and your sense of place. Home becomes something entirely different," Gilmor said.

The goal is to give workshop students the tools to express their own stories, memories and emotions, Antonio Pinto said.

They started by encouraging students to think about a memory and an object related to that memory, and then worked with them to translate that into sculpture.

"They don't have to be literal in construction of their objects," he said. "This is a way of representing their context."

The workshop also aimed to build community, both between participants and the broader community.

"I think it's important — the dimension of working in a group, talking about their cultures and experiences, of using art as a tool to have a voice," Paula Pinto said. "I think art is a very good way of growing. It's good even for self-esteem. It's good for them, and it's good for us."

The art created during the Cedar Rapids workshop will connect to a second phase of the project, which will be held next summer in Evora, Portugal. The Pintos will take molds made from the sculptures created in Cedar Rapids with them to engage with immigrants in Portugal. Evora

has a large population of African and Syrian immigrants, Antonio Pinto said.

Teens working on clay sculptures at the workshop this week were crafting things such as a soccer ball hurtling toward a goal, a pet turtle and a volleyball net.

"My favorite sport is volleyball. I'm making a net sculpture in the form of a ball," said Estephany Perez, 14, a freshman-to-be at Jefferson High School. "It's about the first time I made it over the net when serving it. It makes me feel happy."

In other words, the student's art was simply about their lives as American teens. How they continue to express their identities and create art in the future will be up to them.

July 20, 2019

This article was reprinted with the permission of **The Cedar Rapids Gazette.**

emeritus professor of art at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids.

The Pintos describe their work as social art and have organized a slate of projects specifically designed to help disenfranchised and displaced communities hold on to their history and culture as they find their way in their new homes.

"This kind of social art and social engagement art, I think it's important," Gorgel Pinto said. "Art can help people and boost their inclusion in their new societies."

Under the guidance of the Pintos, participants focused on memories and objects from home, blending their heritage into their new way of life, and molding it in to clay.

Esther Mwamikazi is originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and has been in the U.S. for three years. In that time she says she's taken great comfort in the biblical story of Noah, who found safety and connection even while she weathered the storms that destroyed her home. This week Mwamikazi built her own ark.

"The good story of Noah in the Bible is very, very important. The boat and the many people inside," she said as she described her piece. "It's necessary...connected here in America. The many people..."

Mwamikazi says she and her children have found their own community in Cedar Rapids, which they sought out for its diversity of immigrants and refugees. In Iowa she can once again speak with friends and neighbors in one of her many languages.

"Connection is very good. I'm happy because, me speaking five language in Africa. And today I'm happy because, speak English is the sixth language."

The Pintos hope the project gives this group of new Iowans a stronger voice in their new society.

"To give them the opportunity to have a voice, choosing what way they want to work," Reaes Pinto said. "Have a voice in the new environment, yes that's it," Gorgel Pinto adds.

Ellen Kleckner of the Iowa Ceramics Center and Glass Studio helped put on the project as well. She says clay is an ideal medium to explore something as malleable and changeable as memory; the artists can take experiences that may be scarred by trauma, and create a new story, literally setting it in stone through the firing process.

"We're working with earth in itself, and we're also talking about the literal difference between people's earth where they're standing, where they are from, being different places," Kleckner said. "I think it's a really beautiful use of material to be talking about memory and sort of building your own new memory and we actually turn it into this permanent object."

Some artists made an intricate clay weaving of a net, to capture the feeling of a very first soccer goal; others made an elaborate clay skirt, recalling sewing skills developed in refugee camps.

Adija Sinumvayaha is originally from Burundi. After ten years in Cedar Rapids, she simply wanted to recreate her home near Bujumbura.

"When she was in Africa, she was (sic) a house like this. That's why she likes the house," an interpreter for Sinumvayaha explained. "That can be the memory for her."

Gilmor says the memory that the artists chose speaks to their diverse experiences before coming to Cedar Rapids.

"*Shifting Ground* is about shifting localities, too. Most of them have been relocated several times. This might be the third place they've lived, and I think that really comes through in the memory they've picked," Gilmor said.

An exhibition of the *Shifting Ground* project will take place this Saturday July 27th from 1pm – 4 pm at the Iowa Ceramics Center in Cedar Rapids, with another exhibition planned this September at Mount Mercy University Gallery.

Next year the Pintos will recreate the project with another group of immigrant artists in Evora, Portugal.

July 26, 2019

This story was reprinted with the permission of **Iowa Public Radio.**

[https://www.iowapublicradio.org/post/new-iowans-explore-memory-home-shifting-ground-art-collaboration?fbclid=IwAR00qwjPfnX3_3EUyuR8wnc54EDBlz7k8-Ju29oyorr6M0lEnaylq2Qcft8#stream/0]

New Iowans Explore Memory, Home In 'Shifting Ground' Art Collaboration

By KATE PAYNE, IOWA PUBLIC RADIO



A collaborative art project in Cedar Rapids is helping immigrants and refugees explore the meaning of home by working with clay. The *Shifting Ground* project grapples with identity, memory and relocation as new Iowans from Central Africa and Latin America make lives for themselves in the U.S.

Over the past two weeks, new Iowans from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Honduras and Mexico have translated some of themselves into clay.

Shifting Ground is the vision of Lisbon, Portugal-based artists Paula Reaes Pinto and António Gorgel Pinto, and their collaborator Jane Gilmor, an















Above: Jeremy Bezan
Below: Elijah Troche



Left: Joshua Landin
Right: Christian Garcia



Left: Estiphany Perez Rubio
Right: Michelle Bender



Above: Aimerance Narmasoma
Below: Florence Nshimirimana Taylor



Left: Adija Sinumvayaha
Right: Finias Nyandwi



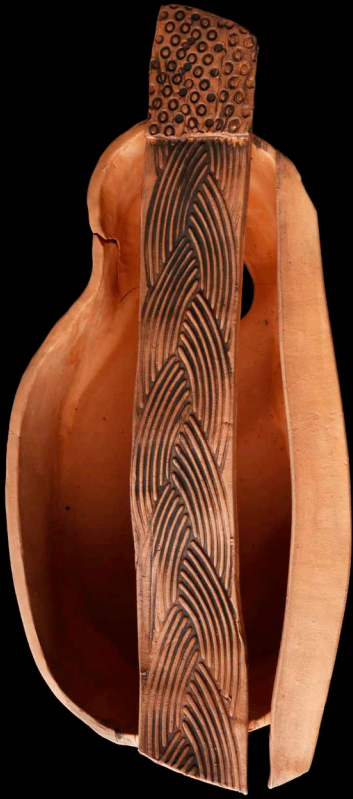
Left: Helen Mensah-Blevi
Right: Francine Niyonyishu



Above: Pascazia Nzeyimana
Below: Pamela Mukendi



Above: Anna Tuyisenge
Below: Esther Mwamikazi



Above left: Fidel Taylor
Above right: Sonia Mounzeo-Mampassi
Below: Erisa Niyibhitanga



Above: Francoise Swedi
Below: Siriro Hakizimana



Paula Reaes Pinto and António Gorgel Pinto are two fearless artists whose work confronts social, economic and ecological issues by partnering with locals in disenfranchised Portuguese communities. For the past fifteen years, their work has addressed issues of displacement, habitat deterioration, and cultural degeneration due to globalization. Their vision is one of an art that crosses diverse disciplines and pushes the boundaries of what we call “Art” to create new models for a way of life that includes long-term sustainability of diverse communities, worldviews, and practices.

<https://www.behance.net/pintos>

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António Gorgel Pinto
Paula Reaes Pinto

Workshop Participants

Jeremy Bezan
Elijah Troche
Chris Garcia
Joshua Landin
Estiphany Perez Rubio
Michelle Bender
Aimerance Narmasoma
Florence Nshimirimana Taylor
Adija Sinumvayaha
Finias Nyandwi
Sonia Mounzeo-Mampassi
Francine Niyonyishu
Pascazia Nzeyimana
Pamela Mukendi
Anna Tuyisenge
Esther Mwamikazi
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Narciso Xnme
Joyce St. Clair Volz
Michelle LaCompte
Jade DeLang Hart
Bobbie McGee
Kelly Loeffelholz
Mary Zart
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David Van Allen (photography)
Rodney Bradley (photography and design)

Title

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A Socially Engaged Immigrant Outreach
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and Cultural Sustainability.*

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