

# PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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## Artweek

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### “How I Learned To...”

By Jakki Spicer

For *How I Learned To...* **Weston Teruya** and Michele Carlson re-created their version of a high school classroom at Intersection for the Arts. The installation was replete with rows of student desks; a teacher's desk furnished with stapler, three-hole punch and shiny red apple; maps overlaying a chalkboard, and industrial bookshelves lining the back wall. The artistic-social commentary is both obvious and subtle; a ceiling-high muddle of desks rising out of the back row, a hidden “repository” of student wisdom behind one slightly ajar bookshelf—a reference to the site.

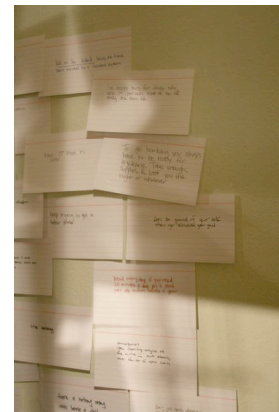


from which Oswald shot JFK?; the tangle of colors and lines that form a mural on three walls; a compressed video loop of clips from civil rights histories like *Eyes on the Prize*

Teruya and Carlson claim that this piece is simultaneously a critique and a commentary on education and the transmission of knowledge. In the “classroom” space they place indicators of institutionalized learning, and then tweak them. The wall mural on one end is an abstracted version of a wall chart created from Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, the other loosely connected side is a mess of lines and colors. We are to infer that history is not easily contained “when it happens.”

Similarly, the printed tomes that line the bookshelves—bound copies of 1904 issues of *Scribner's Magazine*, algebra textbooks from the 1980's, Theodore White's *The Making of the President 1964*—are paired with graffiti on the student desks and the heartfelt sentiments on note cards that line the space in what Teruya and Carlson term the “repository” behind the bookshelves.

This repository consists of responses actual students had to the artists' instructions to create their own sentences or thought that would assist another teenager to make it through the school year. Comments range from “Be nice to the bus driver” to “Don't get pregnant at a young age” to “Mrs. Peterson will let your homework slide if you tell a sad story.” They are interesting enough to read, but perhaps more so in conjunction with the desktop scribbles, which



consist of less outward thinking sentiment: 'I'm so bored bored bored bored,' "SL + RT4ever," "Lex is Da Best," or a polylog of adolescent mentality and cruelty:



Brown ink: "I could kill myself and give you my guilt but you'd still never feel the pain that I've felt."  
 Black ink: "Boo Hoo."  
 Brown ink: "Fuck you say that to my face."  
 Blue ink: " You suck."  
 Green ink: "you're so mean" (to Black ink) and "you need help" (to Brown).

Although Teruya and Carlson Attempt to chronicle the "actual" peer-to-peer transmission of information that occurs in high schools, what is also telling is that the students who participated were solicited to participate. The desks, donated by Marin Catholic High School, were essentially clean of all graffiti when they arrived at the gallery, and had to be tagged by youth groups wo were brought in got that purpose. This suggests that there is something a bit forced about the

artists' efforts to uncover the streams of knowledge sharing that actually take place in contemporary schools.



Indeed, Teruya and Carlson finally don't do much to comment on what education is or isn't, other than to point out that it doesn't all come from the text books or from the mouths of authority figures. The weakest aspect fo their piece is the lack of conversation at work between the writing on the walls- the tangled timeline and the battered and worn books-and that on the desks and behind the shelves. Does the history that is taught become at all absorbed by the scribblers upon desks? Do warnings to "not get pregnant at a young age" or to be nice to the bus driver relate in any way to the admonitions of civil rights marchers? How is history always at wok and present in the classroom, in the quotidian decisions and desires of student? Teruya and Carlson never seem to quite get at this tangle of trajectories and unintended transmissions-the ghosts in the education machine.