

## 5. INTERPRETING CHILDREN'S ART



**Note:**

While most of the artwork in this overview was produced in CAP workshops, some drawings and paintings from two other projects are also included: 1) *Disrupted Lives*: refugee children's art work from Central America 2) *Art Therapy workshops with young people from Nyamata, Rwanda*. A self portrait from Sri Lanka was produced in workshops prior to the *Winnipeg Conference for War Affected Children*.



In the past few years we have conducted many art workshops with children and youth. This has been an important research tool for CAP.

This final section contains examples of the drawings, paintings, writing and other artwork produced in these sessions. It is organized as an informal guided tour with comments and interpretations of some of the themes we have found in these pictures.

A major part of CAP's research work has been learning to decipher the messages in children's artwork. As we have increased our ability to read this information, so has our capacity to step inside their world and understand the situation through their eyes. We have learned that there are few accidents in children's art, particularly when they are describing something that has affected them deeply.

This section is divided into two main components: 1) Descriptive Artwork and 2) Interpretive Artwork. Later in this manual there is a description of the methods we have used along with guidelines on using art as a research tool.

### DESCRIPTIVE ARTWORK

#### 1. Size of Objects in the Picture

Children use size and position to code or identify objects or to create impressions. For example in this drawing of bombing the little person hiding in the bushes is actually smaller than the bombs coming from the helicopter.

Children will use size to indicate power relations. Art therapists have noted that in children's self portraits they will enlarge parts of their bodies where they feel strong and reduce those where they feel they have no power. In many pictures children will have their hands outstretched to show their vulnerability against the soldiers.

Most often the soldiers are much larger than the people they are killing. Younger children often do very detailed pictures of soldiers' boots. Soldiers or military men are shown in profile while the people are face-on. Many times the soldiers' faces are coloured bright red. One child explained that the red faces were to symbolize the blood of the soldiers' victims.

In other examples children use size to identify people who are important to them. In the picture opposite the artist is describing her memory of her home village being bombed. In her writing she illustrates a common feature of younger children – they believe that these machines are wilfull and deliberately target children:

*“The plane drops a bomb and kills ten children. It comes to load more bombs and it drops more bombs and the plane comes to drop more bombs and kills two children.”*

The next picture shows a Karen family being sent out of their home by the Burmese military. The power relationships are graphic as is the boy’s anger as he describes this time:

*“We lost our home so we lived in the forest for a while. We had a little baby but we didn’t have enough for her. Some were caught and raped by the military. And there was a woman who died because she didn’t have any food to eat. If I grow up I will kill the Burmese military.”*

**2. Special Characteristics of Objects**

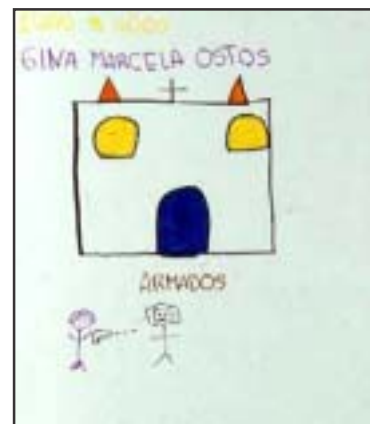
Children will often give human-like characteristics to objects in thier pictures. In the picture below the windows on the church look like eyes watching people being robbed and attacked.

**3. Use of Colour**

Colour is one of the most important tools used by young artists. They use it to describe feelings, establish a mood or to identify groups of people.

For instance, in many paintings children will paint the sun dark red or black, even if all the other colours are available. In the workshop in Rwanda many of the drawings had the whole sky painted black, in keeping with their idea that war is preceded by darkness. Artwork by Burmese refugees often includes a sun that is dark red, the same colour as the fire or blood of victims.

Children also use colour to code or group their drawings. For instance in one drawing a child put pink on all the family who were being killed. She was pictured outside the house, in blue. Pink is often used to depict sadness. In another picture of a massacre all the children and women watching an execution have yellow lines.





*“Most of the Karen people have to hide in the forest. If you don’t the military will come and get you. They burned down our hut and also killed many of us. When they see women, even a young child or an old woman, they rape them first and then they kill them. When they see men and boys they take their things first and then they kill them after that. They even kill babies, they even also kill them.”*



*“They came into our village and separated out the men from the women and children. Then they put the men together and shot them.”*

Guatemalan refugee, aged 11.



No text



*“The man is carrying the club that he used to kill people during the war. The black in the sky is to show about the war. And the red represents the bad things, the bad things of the war.*

*I put a tree there to represent the people who were here before the war. Now you can see that it is bare in the front. That is because there are no people left. Many people died in the war. So the tree is barren, our life is barren.”*

Boy from Nyamata, Rwanda

#### 4. Use of Patriotic Symbols

Children's art often contains flags or patriotic symbols. They are usually included to show a child's connection and loyalty to something outside his immediate family. Not surprisingly, these sorts of symbols are most common in art work by refugees, as in this picture by a refugee from Burma.

The picture shown here contains several of the features we have already described. The sun is coloured red, the same colour as the blood coming from the woman being killed. The flag is being carried by the people who are leaving. Note the huge size of the soldier. The text accompanying this picture is:

*"The Burmese military took our chickens. When the woman went to ask for her chickens back, they cut her throat. So she was killed for three chickens."*

#### 5. Use of Metaphors

Children will often represent their experiences and feelings through animals. The three pictures opposite illustrate this point in different ways.

In the first picture the artist makes a visual comparison between poor children and the cats of rich people. As she notes, "Rich cats eat off plates."

The next two pictures are by young people from Nyamata, Rwanda. Both use birds as messengers but in quite different ways.

In the first picture the sun is a dark colour and along side it is a black bird. In explaining her picture the young artist said that this was to represent how death and war came to the whole area. In the second picture the bird has a different message, that of peace:

*"The man in this picture is like you and me. Except he kills, he kills people with the mahete that he has in his hand.*

*You can see that next to him there is a bird. The bird is pleading with him, saying, "Don't kill, don't kill the baby."*



## 6. Juxtaposition of Objects in a Picture

Children's drawings often contain unusual juxtapositions and objects not normally associated with war. For example, this picture shows a bowl of flowers in a house that is being bombed. Young people want to maintain these connections to normal life. They are often indignant at the rough way that soldiers treat the natural world. This is the text accompanying Maria's picture:

*"I am an orphan because they killed my papa and mama. They killed my mother because they felt like it. We came here to the refugee centre. I miss my parents. My little brothers are not here either. They killed two of my brothes and my sister-in-law and I miss them all. They burned my house. We used to have three sugar cane fields. Papa was beginning to grind corn when they saw him and killed him. Then they killed my mama."*



## 7. Clues

Children will often provide clues for things that they want you to notice. These can be both positive and negative. For example, in this picture by Maria she shows just how important family is to her. She began her text by saying, "We were walking holding hands." Flowers, chickens and trees are dispersed throughout the picture. People who were killed are represented by coffin like boxes.

Girls rarely discuss rape or sexual violence directly but they will give clues. Twelve year old Marian wrote the number "12" all over the back of her picture. When she described the military she said, "The soldiers and police raped 12 year old girls whenever they felt like it."

A former girl soldier used the symbol of her blouse - and the removal of her blouse when describing her abduction. Note that her arms are gone along with her blouse.



*"I was 13. You can see in the picture that I was coming home from school. There I am with my schoolbag. The rebels were hiding in the bushes. When I got closer they shouted, "Hey you, come over here." I did that. Then one pointed his gun at me and said, "Take off your blouse." I did that. Then all I had was my skirt. They tied my hands behind my back. They said, "Walk". I did that.*

*There was a man carrying a RPG in front, and another one behind me. I was all by myself, just me and these two soldiers, just me and them. I was so scared. I thought they were going to kill me. Instead they took me to a camp where there were other girls and boys. They never gave me back my blouse."*



## 8. Collective Memories

Children's descriptive drawings often show a collective memory or impression of an event. Children will draw scenes of massacres they did not witness. They have heard about these events so often that they feel like they were actually there. In working with children it is important to understand that they are not lying. Instead these drawings represent a child's connection to the collective suffering of their people.

The picture opposite is of birds eating corpses - a very common theme in children's art work. The unusual combination of scenes in her picture - especially the smiling corpse - may indicate that this is not a factual account but rather is an emotionally accurate description of what she saw.

## 9. The eye of the beholder

This characteristic follows from the previous one. Children will depict places according to their feelings about these things rather than how they actually look.

Here are two pictures by a displaced boy from Colombia. The first picture depicts his former home while the second describes his living situation in a displaced settlement outside Bogotá. It looks very much like a prison. There are no buildings that resemble this in Usme. Perhaps there are no houses like his first home either. The text:

*"I like nature. The place I lived before was very pretty, there were pretty houses. There wasn't very much noise, the weather was warm. I lived on a farm. Then the guerrilla were surrounding us and we got very scared so we decided to leave. The guerrilla were murdering a lot of people. I was afraid of them and also the soldiers.*

*My little brother was asleep on the bus ride coming here. He didn't understand. He didn't say anything. My father doesn't live with us now. He went. My mother is just in the house. Some people say my father was murdered. I like playing basketball. My favourite colour is red."*



## INTERPRETIVE PAINTINGS

In CAP workshops we prefer interpretive art activities because they allow young people to reflect on their lives. A favourite activity is the colour self-portrait exercise, both because young people seem to enjoy it so much and also for the wealth of information it provides. Examples of these portraits are provided here. With the exception of some explanatory notes, the interpretation is provided by the young artists.



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1. Self-Portrait, young person from Sri Lanka.

*“The blue is for the feelings inside myself. It represents my feeling of contentment. The black mixed with yellow behind me is for my feelings in the past, when I was more worried about the war. The yellow in front of me is for my feelings of anxiety. The orange above me is for the worries that are everywhere in my world.”*

2. Self-Portrait, young person from Colombia

*“The black on my head is just for my hair - I have black hair. The red around my outline is for the violence of the war - because it surrounds me, it is everywhere. The colours going outward are the different feelings that I push out to the world and also the ones they give back to me. The yellow is for hatred because there is so much hate around. The red, as I said before, is for the violence. The blue is for purity, for the hopes for the future and peace.”*

3. Self-portrait, young person from Colombia

*“In my picture I have put many colours around me and only as lines because there is no one feeling that I have all the time. I have painted my outline mostly green because green signifies peace and the love for the natural world. These are my biggest feelings. The lines around me are red, grey, and blue. The red is for the blood and the violence that you see around you. The blue is for wisdom. The grey is for sadness because there is always sadness in my life.”*

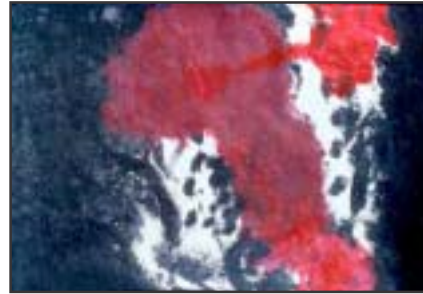
4. Self- portrait, young person from Colombia

*“In my picture you can see that I have only done colours inside myself. That is because I decided to concentrate on that. In the picture about my feelings I have put a big circle of white in the middle. That is for peace, my feelings of peace which are deep inside me. The blue colour right next to them is for goodness. Next to that there is a big strip of black - it is for the war and the pain of the war. Next is the green - this is for the natural world. The last line which is on my outline, is black again. This is for the pain that the world pushes on me.”*

5. Self - Portrait, boy, Rwanda.

*"This is the darkness before the war, during the war and after the war. The dark red is the blood of the war. I am under the blood, inside the red."*

*(Note: This self portrait was done in the late summer, 1999. The picture at the bottom, no. 8, was done two years later by the same person.)*



5.

6. Self-Portrait, boy, Rwanda.

*"This is a black person. But he wanted to be a white person so he would not be killed in the war. So he put something on his face. Now he is very sad because he wants to change back to himself, to be a black person again. But it is impossible."*



6.

7. Self- Portrait, girl, Cambodia.

*"The pink is for me. The yellow is for happiness, for a good heart. I have a good heart. I am happy when I can meet my friends and my family. The black is for worry and fright. I worry about war. I worry about the income of my family. The blue stands for the forest of Cambodia. I am getting to know it better. It makes me happy."*



7.

8. Self-Portrait, boy, Rwanda.

*"Inside I have put green, red and yellow. This represents peace, war and happiness. For the past I have red and black: Red for the war and black for my feelings of loneliness. For the future I have put green, for peace."*



8.