



Vermont
College of
Fine Arts

Endless Possibilities with Limited Means: Denise Karabinus' Artistic Collaborations in India

Artist Denise Karabinus, a 2009 graduate of the MFA in Visual Art at Vermont College of Fine Arts, recently returned from a powerful experience at Project Gram in Paradsinga, India, as one of ten artists collaborating the GRAM International Artist Residency in Community Projects.

VCFA recently interviewed Denise Karabinus about her experience in the GRAM residency, what it was like to work cross-culturally, and her experiences in the MFA in Visual Art.

What lead you to the GRAM Residency?



I began emailing with a few artists I found via Facebook few years ago and expressed my desire to make lasting connections with the community. My husband is from Nagpur, India so I spend a lot of time there. I wanted to expand my practice by collaborating with artists and communities in India. I proposed teaching a printmaking workshop or creating a lecture specifically for the artists in Nagpur. Our communications continued for a few years. The artists invited me to apply and come as one of ten collaborating artists for the

GRAM International Artist Residency in Community Projects.

Can you describe briefly the residency and how you spent your time?

GRAM means ‘village’ and the residency put the community at the heart of the residency. The organizer asked us to work side by side with the community to develop creative solutions for everyday problems that exist in the village. Sanitation, destruction due to boredom among youth, oppression and seclusion of women, sexual violence and promoting organic farming practices were presented as possible problems to be addressed.

Our solutions were to create lasting positive change within the community.

I worked with about ten families that make a living by creating brooms out of palm leave and selling them in the market place. The broom design had become outdated and was no longer marketable. We worked together to create many new designs using materials that could be found



among discarded materials in the village. The families sold the brooms for more money and began opening up new streams of revenue to improve the lives of their families.



I also taught many woodblock printing workshops to the young people in the village. The prints they created were, in many cases, the first pieces of art they ever displayed in their home.

How has this experience influenced the way you approach your own work?

The artists had to work only with materials we could find in the village. My printmaking workshops were taught

using recycled newsprint paper; I began coloring the paper with turmeric and other natural dyes. I find that within limited means, I can create endless possibilities. In my own practice, I will be less apt to go out and buy new material, but will first look around and see what is already available, free, and connects meaningfully to the work.



Are there any corollaries between your experience in the MFA in Visual Art and the GRAM Residency experience?



The faculty at VCFA awakened my interest in using art as a form of social activism. I have continued to follow that thread. I find deeper meaning and possibilities through my collaborative work within communities. Currently, I am collaborating with other artists who share my interest in promoting organic farming practices and encouraging reformers within oppressed communities. Our work will be on display as part of the Vancouver Biennale Project 2014-15 as part of the 'I Have a Dream' project lead by artist Shweta Bhattad (organizer of the GRAM residency).

Do you have any recommendations or thoughts for those artists seeking to do cross-cultural work?

Reach out to the communities and artists you are interested in working in/with. Let them know what your skill set is, and what you have to offer. Aim to form a lasting connection.

Once your awareness becomes a flame, it burns up the whole slavery that mind has created... -
Proverb

Denise Karabinus is a visual artist based in Honolulu, Hawaii. She graduated in 2009 from the MFA in Visual Art. [Learn more about the program here](#). Project Gram aims to work in rural India, on different important issues related to village, mainly focusing on art activities, working with community, issues related to women upliftment and farmer exchange programs. The [Gram \(Village\) Art Residency](#) aimed to promote cross-cultural exchanges by providing a meeting point for artists in diverse fields to work side by side with artisans, children and residents in rural India with the purpose of creating small lasting changes in the community.

