

# Interview with Sarah Scott

*Sarah Scott is the Arts Coordinator at Heartside Ministry and Gallery. She is clearly one of the 'shining stars' of our staff that helps make Heartside a place of extraordinary grace for the Neighbors who we serve.*

Charlotte: Sarah, you first worked for Heartside when you were an AmeriCorps Volunteer, is that right?

Sarah: I finished my BFA in 1998 from the University of Toledo, with a Photo major and Printmaking minor. During college, I worked for the Toledo Museum of Art, helped run its art supply store, the photo gallery and lab. I showed in about a dozen exhibits then, too. I expected to come to Grand Rapids to work for AmeriCorps (I was a little burned out on 'fine artists') for 1-2 years, pay off some student loans, then move on to grad school in another state.

C: How did you first come to know about Heartside and what did you find here that 'stuck' with you?

S: I worked with The Dwelling Place, which sent AmeriCorps/VISTA volunteers to work within the Heartside area. I worked with the neighborhood association, the community garden and then stumbled upon the



art program at Heartside Ministry. I met Vicki Hiar (a weaver) when I first started and she made quite an impression on me. She let me know that people in Heartside were real, for better or for worse, and this was not some college class. I decided to stay.

C: What was the art program like?

S: The program was in the janky basement (this was 1999), and they would have holiday shows in the chapel. I recall there being a lot of drawing and painting going on. There was one loom that Vicki and a few others would use occasionally, and there was no pottery program or formal exhibit space yet. We got a small grant to have an arts market in the parking lot of United Way [now *The Aveda Institute*] and set up there every Saturday for a few years. Usually two or three customers would show up.

C: Were there some artists who have been around a long time?

S: There were a tight-knit group of artists: Anthony Harrell, Ed & Carol Bandy, Carol Gabbert, Linda Bessey, Giovanni, Black Feather, Beverly, Chris and Cathy Bouwsma, Linda Williams, Katalina, Walter Pinder. Most of the artists had already been at Heartside when I arrived, so I didn't know how or why they got here.

C: How do artists usually connect with the studio the first time?

S: Artists seem to hear about us on the street and occasionally through art sales. Seems like they all connect slowly, though most artists seem to feel a deep connection right away.

C: Do most of them have some experience in art?

S: I would say less than 1/6 have had any formal art training, but a lot of the folks report having made artwork a lot when they were younger. Only a very few who come in are 'practicing artists.'

C: So, do you give them lessons?

S: I will show new folks where supplies are, explain the display policy we have (they must work in the gallery 4-5 months before we will display their work) and remind them that it is a community space that we all help to take care of/clean up. I show them the art room schedule (with classes and programs), but I do not give lessons unless someone specifically asks for help or is strugg-

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gling quite a bit with their art. I feel that there is a lot of power behind someone who is genuinely and honestly creating art (out of need, boredom, curiosity) and do not like to alter that by offering suggestions & classes right away. The artists are told that most of the folks using the facilities are untrained and therefore we have a wide array of talents, interests & skill, and this seems to take away some of the pressure behind letting loose and creating. For me, this is a huge part of Intuitive art-making: when we facilitate the creative process without demanding or hindering an honest emotion or desire to create.

C: What exactly is Intuitive Art?

S: I like this definition that I once read by a Swiss curator:

*"Art Brut," or "outsider art," consists of works produced by people who for various reasons have not been culturally indoctrinated or socially conditioned. They are all kinds of dwellers on the fringes of society. Working outside fine art "system" (schools, galleries, museums and so on), these people have produced, from the depths of their own personalities and for themselves and no one else, works of outstanding originality in concept, subject and techniques. They are works which owe nothing to tradition or fashion.*

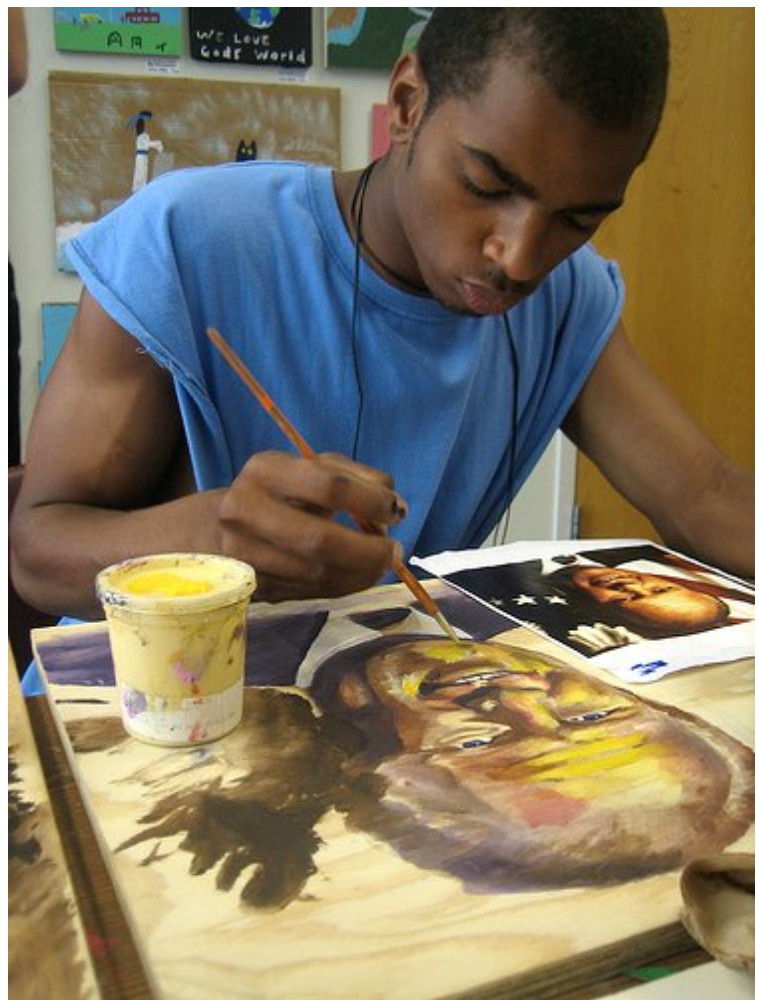
We have a wide variety of artists and terms in our space, including Intuitive/Visionary Artists (artists feel a true need to make work, see images in wood grain/feel a compulsion to make certain images), Outsider Artists (those whose style, or lack thereof, are not included in mainstream art history books, museums or even popular art movements, and who may not even consider themselves artists at all), Folk Artists (largely untrained, creating more craft-style objects/images). Many of these definitions came about between the mid-1940's to the early 1970's by historians and artists themselves.

Some examples of artists who fall within these various realms are: Adolf Wolfli, Aloise, Nek Chand, Reverend Howard Finster, Henry Darger, St EOM, Simon Rodia (Watts Towers) and Grandma Moses. Locally we might

see Reb Roberts (Sanctuary Folk Art), Tom D, Jeff VandenBerg, Donna Munro, Carmella and our own Heartside artists.

C: How exactly does the studio work? Do artists come in at a set time or come and go? What do they work on and how do they come up with their ideas? What do they use for supplies?

S: The studio has open hours from 9:00am to 3:30pm, Monday through Friday. Artists are welcome to come and go as they please, and they can work on anything that moves them. I do help with ideas, if need be, but usually let the artist remain independent in their creative process. Sometimes I just make the coffee, wash the brushes and refill the paints, while other times I help document their images, help them through a technical problem, hang work, send press releases, buy supplies



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or handle conflicts great and small.

Our supplies are purchased, donated and gleaned. We dumpster-dive if need be, ask lumber yards for scraps, collect supplies at the end of the art school semesters, etc. When we are completely broke, we paint on cardboard and the backs of misprints from the publishing houses in town. We buy paint from the 'bone pile' (mis-tints) for \$5 a gallon or collect it from X-Rite paint supply in town. In our sales, we only take a 10% commission, so we use that small amount to buy special glues, canvas, hardware, chinks, brushes, wire, etc. In some ways it is fun to work with what we have, because we get a lot of creative images this way.

C: A lot of the Heartside Neighbors have several challenges, like being homeless or having some mental or emotional or physical challenges, isn't that right?

S: Correct. I would say that all of the artists have one or more of these issues going on and cannot afford a studio of their own or even supplies to get started. Sometimes the artists tell me that they are so pleased to be accepted into an open environment where we don't ask a lot of questions of make them give us their Social Security number in order to participate.

C: So is this sort of *art therapy*?

S: It is in some ways. This program allows folks an opportunity to express themselves and try new things. We have some folks who are high-functioning, but cannot hold a paying job, so this is a way for them to stay occupied during the day. Other folks have had extreme trauma—loss of a child, job or they have been abused, struggle with addiction, etc.—and our programs give them an outlet for their emotions. We even have some folks who were/are considered criminals and they tell me that it's good for them to have a place to make art, or else they'd likely be causing trouble anywhere they can find it.

C: So the artists have sort of a 'collective?' How does that work? Do you have artist meetings?

S: It is a collective, of sorts. We use 10% of their sales to buy supplies. Artists all help cleanup, organize, brew coffee and make decisions together. We have artists meetings roughly once a month to discuss shows, gallery ideas, themes, new & old rules, the radio, etc. It feels good to be a part of a collective group, and not to make top-down decisions—and yes, sometimes it is frustrating, but I'd rather it this way! Ha.

C: How does the gallery work?

S: We have folks work in the space for four to five months before we consider hanging their work. If it works out (usually that means that the artist has stuck around and kept some momentum/focus), then we try and hang their work on the wall in a roughly 3' x 5' section. If they are potters, they can get a space on our



shelves, and jewelry-makers get a space in our case.

We make everything in the gallery available for purchase, and take 10% of the sales to help buy supplies. During the summer months, we participate in the Avenue for the Arts markets and have sales/exhibits once a month. In the winter we try and have our own sale every other month, usually with themes. We hang work from floor to ceiling, because frankly we have so many artists and we just have to do it that way. And, you know, it looks amazing that way. No typical 'museum-style' hanging here. Salon style!

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C: Where do the supplies come from?

S: We buy some of them, dumpster dive/glean some from the side of the road, get donations from lumber yards/friends/art students/retired artists/churches/pack-rats.

C: How many people know about the gallery? Do people come and buy things from the artists?

S: Seems like not enough people know about the gallery. We certainly get more traffic from the Avenue for the Arts market events, which is when most of our sales happen. Otherwise, we generally only have a small handful of sales each week. I feel slightly frustrated



about the lack of traffic to the gallery, and feel like that's partially due to the 'questionable nature' of the *Old Division Avenue*, partially due to the lack of education on the importance, significance & excitement of outsider art, and partially because people just don't know we're here. When they finally do find us, people always remark at how amazing and unique our space is. And we almost always see them again.

C: How does that help the Neighbors? How does it make the Neighbors feel—about their work, about themselves and about...well...hopefulness?

S: Neighbors seem to respond very well to customers/gallery patrons. They express to me that they are glad/flattered when folks come in to look around, and of course they are jazzed when they sell something. Artists also get frustrated when patrons don't always buy things, but I don't know *any* artists who don't feel this way on a regular basis.

C: What have you learned since you have begun developing the studio in this way?

S: I have learned that I need to do more advertising and make sure everything is clearly labeled (titles/prices) at all times. I have also learned that people will find something they like, even if it's hanging up high in the corner near the ceiling or in the bathroom.

C: What have you seen that has surprised you the most?

S: Everyone has some sort of emotional issue and we are not all so different after all. The most difficult of artists may have the most severe mental health issues, but they can be the most prolific and helpful artists of the bunch. Ebbs and flows. And patience.

C: What has moved you or inspired you the most?

S: Artists who face daily issues/trauma/stress and can still make it in for a cup of coffee and some painting. To see this helps me to get through the hard stuff in my own life.

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C: What one thing would you wish for in the coming year, for the Neighbors, for the art program and for the ministry?

S: I hope we can get a little feature in Raw Vision magazine, the leading outsider art publication. We are so unique, and I feel like it would give us a good leap to be featured there. I'd like to have five more hours to work each week, so I can get more things accomplished and I'd love an assistant to help me with tasks. I'd love



for the neighbors to keep making work, for the art program to thrive and for the Ministry to get some funding. And maybe some new flooring.

C: Would you say that healing happens here? Can you give an example?

S: Every day, I experience it in myself when I see the patience it takes to finish a painting or a quilt and when I see folks finish a project amidst tremendous struggle. There is one woman who is a sexual abuse survivor and had never made art before. She wandered into Heartside and found our art program, never having made art much in her life before. She started creating work, and there came a sense of self-worth with that. She's now made leaps and bounds in her artwork, and in her personal life. It's really tremendous to see.

C: Finally, why do you believe in Heartside and what this place offers the neighbors? Why is it important to keep it around and growing?

S: Heartside is one of the only places I know of that allows people to just be who they are. We give people chances who sometimes are not allowed the same respect at other places. We also hold folks accountable and don't just give hand-outs. We work together with people, we have creative & needed programming and we all love what we are doing. If we weren't around, I feel like the lives of Heartside Neighbors wouldn't be nearly as rich, fulfilling or hopeful.

C: Sarah, thank you so very much.

Heartside Gallery is open Monday through Friday from 9:30am until 3:30pm.

The gallery is located immediately north of the ministry's main door at 54 S. Division Avenue.

Visitors are always welcome. Volunteer opportunities are available. Donations are gratefully received

*Note:* Because some Neighbors struggle with substance issues, Heartside Studio does not use oil based, aerosol paints or solvents. Gifts of acrylics, watercolors, and pastels are welcome, as well as canvas, frames & paper, etc.

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