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*Confused by an
Unexpected Moment
of Introspection (detail).*
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New York State Literary Center

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The Baobab Cultural Center

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On the Cover

Floccular Portrait of Ben Fry, image by, and courtesy of, Golan Levin (www.flong.com). Levin has developed a model for "representing the underlying structure of 'physical' lines," which has the effect of "simulating the tensile properties of thin physical filaments, such as hairs or twigs." He has used this model to create a series of reactive drawing systems. According to Levin, "filaments drawn by the user are buffeted by forces derived from a hidden but underlying photograph. The results are wispy, organic and sometimes unsettling transformations: chiaroscuros in hair." Levin is being brought to Rochester this March by RIT's Caroline Werner Gannett Project, as part of its *Visionaries in Motion* speaker series. See story on page 14 and visit www.cwgp.org.

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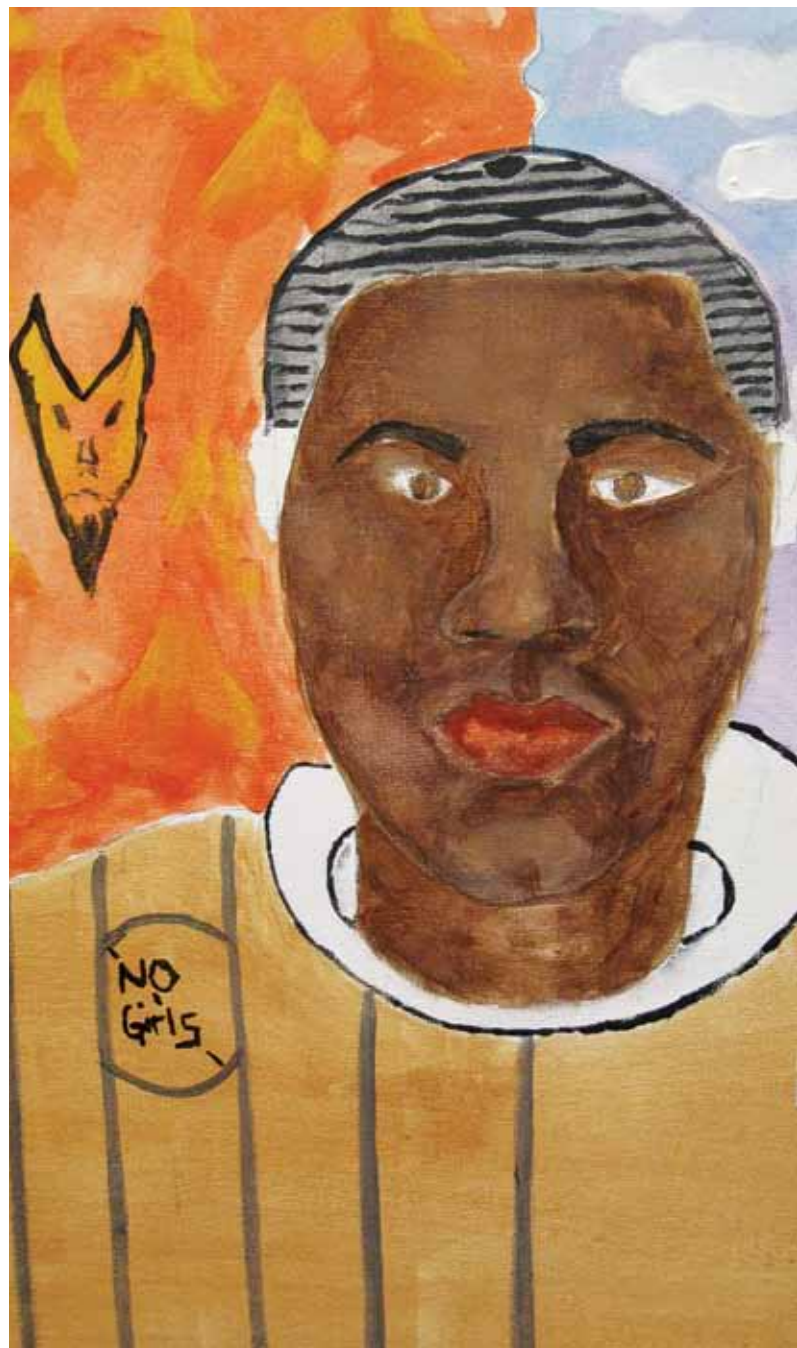
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BREAKING THROUGH DALE DAVIS



By Sarah E. Lentini

"A MOMENT OF GRACE."
I ask her to repeat it—I like it so much and it seems such a lovely distillation.
The words remain in my ears, in my mind, long after all the others in our conversation.
It's interesting how just a few words, out of a veritable tsunami of words that come at us, rush over us, every day—worse now than ever before in human history—arranged in a certain way—sound and shape: lyric metaphor, geometric truth—can break through the torrent of propaganda and rhetoric, sales pitches and clichés; reach us; and, if not change us, make us susceptible to change, prime us for change—for all change, which we tend to think of and measure as external, as action, surely begins internally, with new understanding and thinking.

Dale Tristany Davis, executive director of the New York State Literary Center and the New York State Association of Teaching Artists, works with criminals who are kids, with kids who have committed crimes and been put in jail. She started her career as a noted published poet and as the founding publisher of a limited edition, private press, *The Sigma Foundation*, along with Dr. James Sibley Watson, Jr., avant-garde filmmaker and publisher and editor of *The Dial*, at the time the "leading modernist journal



Dale Davis, Executive Director
New York State Literary Center

of arts and letters.” Sibley Watson was a descendant of Hiram Sibley, the Rochester-based founder of Western Union, the telegraph company that was for many years a communications industry giant.

Davis is known nationwide for her massively impressive work over the last three decades as a writer, scholar, and groundbreaking educator. She created the New York State Literary Center in 1979, in partnership with her dear friend and colleague Al Poulin, the now-deceased legendary founder of Rochester-based BOA Editions, which to this day remains a premier publisher of poetry and poetry in translation in this country.

She was already a published poet in the early seventies when the Arts & Cultural Council for Greater Rochester (formerly the Rochester Arts Council) invited her to go into elementary schools to teach poetry. Thus began her work in the classroom. With pivotal funding from the New York State Council on the Arts, since its founding in 1979, the New York State Literary Center has broken new ground in education, ultimately bringing over 300 writers and artists to more than 600 schools to work with 32,000 students. Over time, Davis refined her approach, developing comprehensive interdisciplinary programs that combined visual, theater, and media arts, and, she says with characteristic passion and emphasis, “addressed real, concrete concerns of students and transformed the writing that went on in school from a solitary, mechanical process into vibrant, interactive communications.”

In 2005, she formed a partnership with the Rochester City School District, in collaboration with the Monroe County Sheriff’s Office. *Arts, Literacy, and the Classroom Community* provides incarcerated youth with arts-based instructional programs in writing, visual art, music, and theater at the Monroe County Jail and the Monroe County Correctional Facility.

Over the years, Davis has written and produced countless plays that her imprisoned students have performed. She has also published numerous books of student poetry and writing. And, her work—ultimately viewed through the work of her students—has drawn the attention of national Hip Hop Artists Chris “Kazi” Rolle and Robin “Kheperah” Kearsse of *The Hip Hop Project* in connection with Bruce Willis; Lemon (Andrew Anderson) and Kamilah Forbes of HBO’s *Def Poetry Jam*; and the Anne Frank Center USA in partnership with PEN American Center, which exhibited and read the work of six of her students in New York this past May. Previous national coverage of her work with kids in the juvenile justice system includes a feature story in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on her work with young people in a St. Louis detention center in 2004 and a Fox News documentary in 2005.

Davis has lectured, trained teachers, and consulted with juvenile justice sites throughout the country, including places as far-flung as Portland, Oregon; the Mississippi Delta; Juneau, Alaska; and Honolulu,

“Dale has been able to make connections with these kids, get them some education, and hopefully keep them on a good path.”

lu, Hawaii. She has consulted and partnered with leading educational publisher McGraw-Hill, the ABC Network, and Harvard University’s Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue. In addition, Davis has been featured in *The Iowa Review*, *New York Magazine*, and *The New York Times*.

Central to Davis’ work is a strong, positive working partnership with the Rochester City School District, which is charged with providing education to minors in jail. “In many cases,” says District Youth and Justice Program Administrator Margaret Porter, “because we’ve

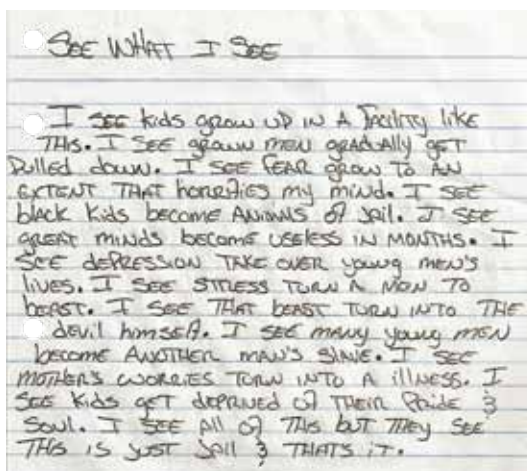
worked towards interdisciplinary integration of the arts into core curriculum, Dale’s work—English language arts, painting, plays—really worked to inspire and motivate kids in core curriculum. Through creative approaches to enhancing skills, she motivated them to succeed.”

Superintendent of the Monroe County Jail Ronald Harley agrees. “Dale is very refreshing. Running a jail, you don’t see a lot of forward-thinking, progressive individuals. Dale has been able to make connections with these kids, get them some education, and hopefully keep them on a good path. We know that as educational levels increase, incarceration

levels decrease, making a positive impact on recidivism and contributing to society—it’s a win for all.”

Another among her many fans is international learning consultant and author Eric Booth, founder of the Juilliard Art and Education Program. “Dale has become something of a legend among teaching artists. The quality of her creative work with incarcerated men, its depth and impact, its complexity and immediacy, is a model of best practice. It is a clear demonstration of the power of arts, particularly in the hands of skilled teaching artists. Dale’s proactive, even visionary, work is advancing the teaching artist field. The Association of Teaching Artists has expanded and become more powerful under her leadership. Dale is an artist, a teaching artist, and a powerful advocate and leader. She changes lives in all the ways the arts can change lives.”

Dale Davis works with youth who are behind bars, she tells me, precisely because it’s difficult, because it’s the most challenging work one could take on as a teacher. And, she tells me, she doesn’t set out to change lives—although of course she does change lives. Instead, she seeks for her young students “a moment of grace.” ©



Examples of work created by students of the New York State Literary Center (left and above).

New York State Literary Center

- For information, call (585) 223-0784 or visit www.nyslc.org