

Lifeworks

The tattered map of childhood

"Every child shall have the right to freedom of expression ..."

Freedom of expression might not be the most fundamental need asserted by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), but it is the one that opens a window on all the others. This is the premise behind *Children of the Wind*, an exhibition of 100 works by 10- to 15-year-olds from nine countries currently touring in British Columbia. The exhibition grew out of the Mapping our World Children's Rights Project (www.mappingourworld.org), a multi-agency initiative conceived and coordinated by Linda Dale. Born in Newfoundland and now based in Ottawa, Dale describes herself as "freelance curator" with a background in child psychology and an interest in social justice. She became interested in children's art in the 1980s, when she was asked to create an exhibit of drawings by refugee children in Central America: "In working with these pictures I became very impressed with children's capacity to understand and represent their lives in a way which allowed others to step inside their perspective."

For the Mapping our World project, Dale worked with schools and local support agencies to conduct 5-day workshops over the course of eight months



Sohel, child of the street, Bangladesh, in a Mapping our World workshop

with children in Bangladesh, Canada, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, India, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Uganda and Zambia. She encouraged the participants to use drawings, painting, writing, photography and video to "map out" what was important in their lives. Many of these children live in difficult and hazardous circumstances; some are factory workers; others are agricultural labourers. Some are former child soldiers; some live on the streets; others have been displaced by civil war. Dale notes that the preoccupations of children living in relative security can appear to be universal, but under the pressures of violence and poverty profound differences emerge. Paintings and commentaries by former child soldiers in a rehabilitation project in Uganda express a preoccupation with memory; for brick workers in India, time is a more important theme; for street kids in Bangladesh, the most urgent issue is

security. As for the preoccupations of Canadian participants, Dale got the impression that many young adolescents in this country seem to feel "that they don't count for anything" and lack a sense "of connection, of belonging."

Although the project was initially intended to give Canadian children "a first hand view of children's lives in other countries," it soon became a means for local field workers to assess the needs of children and the

success of support programs. The workshops also became a form of therapy, especially for children traumatized by war.



Acen Paska, child soldier, Uganda. *My soldier husband.* "This is the man who was my husband. It is the face of death."

The exhibition press kit gives UNICEF estimates of the impact of armed conflict in the last ten years on the world's children: approximately two million have been killed, four to five million disabled, one million orphaned and 12 million left homeless. The Save the Children Alliance estimates that 300 000 children world wide under the age of 18 are currently

taking part in armed conflict.

Dale hopes that *Children of the Wind* will convey the diversity of children's lives, allowing a response that is engaged by the particularity of experience rather than dulled by depressing statistics. She gives the example of a Canadian child who asked, when looking at the artwork of former child soldiers, "But how do they go to school?" She takes an optimistic view of such a question: if it reflects a vast gulf in life experience, it also expresses a desire to understand. And this is a valuable beginning.

Children of the Wind continues until May 21 at the Surrey Art Gallery in Surrey, BC, and travels to the Nanaimo Art Gallery in the summer. It will then be on view at the Prince of Wales Heritage Centre in Yellowknife beginning in early October.

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