

Book review

Berman, KS. 2017. *Finding voice: a visual arts approach to engaging social change*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
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The book *Finding voice: a visual arts approach to engaging social change* by Kim S Berman, focuses on the power of art making to bring about transformation on a sociopolitical level. Berman (2017:5) proposes the notion that a personal voice and its 'organic' emergence, which is made possible through processes of making art, can influence the artist's lifeworld and his/her experience thereof, leading to transformative citizenship.

Finding Voice effectively conveys the author's multifaceted understanding of that which lies at the core of art making and art teaching, an understanding that is supported by her personal experience as a highly esteemed artist and art teacher. As such, the book's unquestionable relevance in the current social, economic, political, and educational dynamics of South Africa – and perhaps therefore also its power to convince – derives from a fertile union between the author's hands-on experience, her own productive actions, and thoroughly researched methodologies and keystone theories. The author achieves this union with consistency throughout the book, never allowing theory to overpower practice, or vice versa. The integration of theory and practice is creditable, and will be useful and edifying reading for art students, educators and researchers.

The most compelling message that *Finding voice* delivers is the notion that the act of art making does not only facilitate the representation of an artist's engagement with their lifeworld, their observations thereof, and their agential empowerment and reach in it. Art making also offers the power to shape the infinite range of possibilities of self-as-present (in the metaphorical form of 'voice'). 'Shape' as a verb – so irrevocably part of the extensive visual art-making field of practice and knowledge – implies a complexity and urgency that the author handles with care, mindful regard, and scrupulous rigour throughout the book. Berman covertly argues for the self-originate capacities of the artist. Being imbued with a personal history, these capacities define the very substance of art works, whether those

of an individual or the collective. The act of making carries these capacities from the inside to the outside in a multi-tiered and innately generative and intimate relationship between artist, art work, and productive act, a relationship that cannot but extend to society.

Finding voice suggests that visual art, and the processes of making that it entails, involves cross-fertilisation between the somatic, mindful, cognitive, affective, psychological, social and environmental spheres of human engagement. In this context, Berman asserts art as a collaboratively productive action that offers the potential for developing a personalised, yet diverse, grapheme that makes sense of a lifeworld and influences it. As such, art making serves to intermediate between artist and co-artists, act, and society. The multiplicity of Berman's stories suggest that the language of art practice is one of individualised identity within the collective. Berman freely and generously speaks of the multi-self and its personal history, the milieu of origin and socialisation, aesthetic, knowledge, understanding and experience. We see that the gift of the visual arts is that of agency, which can, in various ways, effect change within a sociopolitical context.

Discovering multi-self through art making – a process of searching and 'finding' the emblematic yet ever-changing, ever-growing 'voice' – suggests the developmental dynamics and generative modes in which an artist consciously and unconsciously feeds and maintains identity (whether within the collective or as individualised). In *Finding Voice*, this continuous and fluid process of discovery becomes a powerful tool in bringing about societal change not only in terms of personal growth and identity-shaping, but also in terms of sociopolitical effect, change and influence. Art making, then, could indeed bring about, facilitate, or enable transformation or transcendence of institutional formulae, norms, codes or covenants.

Finding Voice carries the voice of a teacher and artist who understands that it is the dispositional reactions and actions of her students that should shape their voices in a realm of multifaceted possibilities. She creates a space that offers a rare and noble dimension of freedom, one that would grant her art students the right to dissent from, compromise in or comply with convention. Convention and its codified edicts, are, after all, arbitrary, and certainly not always ethically or morally justifiable, as South African history has demonstrated with vivid cruelty and singular and enduring obstinacy.

Finding Voice is an actualisation of socially embodied action in the act of making. It posits a generative union between art and society that enables co-productive artistic endeavours in which artists enrich one another in and through collaborative making. Berman's articulations recognise and enact the artist-self as critical yet unifying interface, one that could level the playing fields in the fickle and elitist South African art world.

I cannot but admire Berman's voice. It carries such fierce potency, resilience, and complete dedication to a most worthy cause.



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