En Plein Air: Examining Child Art in Our Open Field

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Some things have changed since I presented on the "Working Definitions" panel at the 2025 Juvenilia Symposium in Chapel Hill and Lesley Peterson invited me to contribute to this editor's column. Revisions are typical, but I find the task of defining our field particularly slippery, leading to what I like to think of as productive waffling. During my editing, I've felt grateful that Lesley, like many scholars in our field, seems to delight in the rich possibilities of proliferation. In other words, she seems more interested in the present participle "working" and its sense of ongoing conversation than in the stability of "definition." We are at work. We continue to our work. Our definitions will always be works in progress.

I observed that present participle in action during the 2025 symposium. Scholars arrived from across the continent and from different disciplines, and more than one was uncertain they could (or wanted to) define themselves as a scholar of juvenilia. However, their hesitancy dissipated as they listened to their fellow presenters, considered their own encounters with child creators, and realised how flexible and generative our field can be. We are, in a sense, in an open field. We deploy a spectrum of terms to describe our practices: juvenilia studies, childhood studies, studies of child-produced culture. We work in libraries and museums and archives, earned our degrees in History and English and Information Science departments, and teach in high school classrooms, university lecture halls, and archival reading rooms. Perhaps most compellingly, we communicate the value of what we do in different and even contradictory ways. Children's work is most revealing when it is exceptional, leading to later genius, or it's the mundane examples that are revelatory, communicating vital information about a cultural or historical moment. Some of us look for children's work that is as free as possible from adult influence, while others see young people's creative productions as documentation of the inescapable and often dynamic collaborations between adults and young people.

Listening to my colleagues approach children's creative work from so many perspectives, I began feeling protective of the openness of our field and the present participle of our working definitions. While I primarily consider myself a childhood

studies scholar, I've learned to embrace the ambiguity of what we do. Sadly, we're rarely in the rare air of a conference. How can we preserve the openness of our field, the present participle of our working, in more enclosed spaces and solo endeavours?

I was recently challenged to do so during a trip to Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. I visited the Beinecke to examine the Alfred Stieglitz/Georgia O'Keeffe Archive, because it includes, among many other things, artifacts related to four exhibits of child art that Stieglitz staged in his famous 291 gallery in New York City between 1912 and 1916. I'll use that experience to think through how the openness of our field has allowed me to grow—to continue growing—into an adaptable scholar, nimble enough to discover evidence of young people in archives that don't always announce those traces.

I wouldn't have located this archive as a site of interest for my work or even landed on exhibits of child art as a topic worthy of critical consideration were it not for the interdisciplinary and flexible methods of scholars who study child-produced culture. For the most part, the 291 exhibits of child art are referenced only in a footnote or included as a brief, trivial aside in longer histories of radical art movements, but there are a handful of researchers—such as Jonathan Fineberg, an art historian and critic—who invite us to think about the child art that fascinated adult artists as culturally significant. I discovered that accepting that invitation leads to a rich research rabbit warren through world history, art education, modernism, and art history. While none of the scholars I read were, really, talking with one another, I could imagine them in conversation in our open field and begin building a nuanced idea of how these galleries of child art functioned for curators, modernists, and the child artists themselves.

I arrived at the Beinecke ready to look at some child art, but navigating the materials delivered to my table was another matter. The young people in this archive are complex creatures. Each file box I ordered contained materials that mingled powerful cultural *constructs* of childhood with evidence of *real* children's experiences and artistic expression. For example, reflections on children's purported naiveté and primitivism as well as analyses of the childlike *elements* in paintings by artists such as Picasso and Klee were filed alongside examples of the child art Stieglitz hung in his gallery. This archive makes material the challenge of reading side by side the artistic contributions of living children and stubborn idealizations of childhood that inflect adults' views of real kids.

To begin untangling this problem, I found myself turning again to the flexible methods, the always-working definitions, of studying child-produced culture. I began with my training in literary studies, especially children's literature studies, which harbours a healthy skepticism about our ability to discern "real" children through the mediations of adults. For example, that background attuned me to the influence of Romantic childhood in an article included in Stieglitz's papers: a clipping from *The Evening Sun* published in 1912 titled "Some Remarkable Work by Very Young Artists: Convention-Bound Painters and Draughtsmen (the Enthusiasts Say)

Might Learn Much From the Pictures of These Youthful Futurists of Four and Post-Impressionists of Two" (9). The journalist muses that "every one of us has felt the nascent artist within him at some period between the ages of rattles and mud pies," and Stieglitz, quoted in the article, insists that "a child has a vision ... and this should be stimulated and not confined within a standard limit, or a young artist that might have infinite possibilities will become a clever designer of book covers or an academician, 'another tombstone'" (9).

Figure 1. [Crayon drawing of crowd in black hats,] by an anonymous child, [1912] (Alfred Stieglitz/Georgia O'Keeffe Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library).

Such heavy-handed language, compelling as it is—"another tombstone"!—was a little demoralising to someone interested in child artists. Are the real kids in there anywhere, among all that theorising about childhood on the part of adults? But as a scholar in our open field, I had a range of critical resources at the ready. I could draw on methods from art education and sociology and history that help me begin to discern the embodied child. That child, as Rachel Conrad suggests, can exert creative agency *through* and *alongside* and *in collaboration with* adult expectations and ideologies rather than simply *against* them. Adults can, in her words, "recognize, acknowledge, facilitate, preserve, ignore, obscure, erode or obstruct the agency that children claim, practice, or express" (9). I could temper Stieglitz's romanticisations through close examination of the actual art children produced, and I can witness that art's diversity, idiosyncrasies, and interactions with the adults' ideas of child art.

Looking at those drawings and paintings wasn't without its challenges. The "Works by Children" box in the Stieglitz/O'Keeffe archive—notably, a box separate

from "Works by Stieglitz's Contemporaries," because assumedly only adults were considered contemporaries—is divided into work by named children and work by unknown young people. I was particularly interested, frustratingly, in the unnamed children: the anonymous child, for example, who created a bustling city scene full of bowler-hatted commuters, subway tiles, and a train station floor teeming with rats (Fig. 1). *That* image, I thought, is *modernist*. I was less excited, on the other hand, by the work of Kitty Stieglitz, whose still lifes, painted when she was twelve, were rather traditional. The named children are all related to Stieglitz or associated with the modernist art scene in New York; they include his daughter, Kitty Stieglitz, as well as Georgia Engelhard, his niece. These are children whose histories and social contexts are relatively easy to trace. How could I read these two types of work together?

To make sense of what I found, I recalled how some scholars in juvenilia studies emphasise the value of examining child creations as clues to the later work of accomplished artists while others see the works of everyday children, or anonymous children like those in this archive, as culturally significant and informative in their own right. Could I use Kitty's story, which I have access to due to her privileged status, to frame questions that might illuminate the work of *all* child artists associated with modernism, even the anonymous creators?

Even in the limited time I'd known Kitty in the archive's reading room, I'd learned a little about her. On a dark brown piece of paper accompanying one of her paintings in its file box is a note from Stieglitz, contributed thirteen years later: "Never had painted before. Max Weber had given her six lessons at Deal Beach .... Arranged the still-lifes unaided. Weber was staggered when he saw the work—could hardly believe his eyes. He had the two pictures framed the following day, Kitty virtually painted little ever since" ("Stearns"). I love that Kitty is remembered as independent and, perhaps, dismissive of adult attention. She wasn't very interested in playing along. The fact that Weber, recently returned from five years among the Paris avant-garde, was impressed made me reconsider my own disappointment at the less-experimental qualities of Kitty's image. I considered that her work could be a reminder that the surprising child art we associate with modernism—the paintings of bowler hats and rats—circulated alongside more traditional examples. What happens when I abandon my assumptions about the innocent eye and look at what kids actually created, which Kitty's paintings encourage me to do? That might help me develop a more complex understanding of how child artists shaped the work of modernist projects. And examining Kitty alongside her anonymous counterparts, thinking about her still lifes beside the riotous rats that initially caught my attention, helps soften the boundary between juvenilia studies that focuses on the output of remarkable or well-known children and the works of less celebrated young people.

The nature of our work, the continuous working and reworking of our definitions, provides the tools I need (and the curiosity, and the confidence) to move through an archive like this one. My experiences have made me even more eager to invite in those scholars who don't yet know they are in conversation with us. I look

forward to meeting more scholars who see themselves as maybes, perhapses, and trying-it-outs in our open field.

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