

Making A Great Exhibition

Reviewed by Hana Elwell

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Written by Doro Globus

Illustrated by Rose Blake

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37 pages

Making A Great Exhibition by Doro Globus and Rose Blake shines a colorful and playful light on the process of making an art exhibition, from artist's studio to public presentation. In a field where there are few children's books that reveal the extensive, behind-the-scenes work that results in the magic of a museum exhibition experience, I was eager to read this book. Released in October 2021, its beautiful design and detailed illustrations offer a visually engaging and informative read. They also sparked some questions and curiosities about the way that this book fits into the narrative of understanding art museums and reflects on their processes at a time when museums of all types are under scrutiny for their ways and modes of representation and assumption of agency.

The book is intended for young audiences, though the text and content can be dense and detailed, making the book most appropriate for children six and up. The narrative arc is framed through a series of introductions to the diverse cast of characters who contribute to creating exhibitions, with two artists, sculptor Viola and painter Sebastian, featured as the central characters. The range of the professional identities presented is one of the strengths of the book, not only in the breadth of museum jobs represented – from lighting designers to book editors to curators – but in the racial diversity intentionally represented. Superficial as this representation may be, it is a visual dismantling of the historical representation of museum workers and visitors as being from a white-centered perspective and experience.

My favorite aspect of the book is the description of Viola's and Sebastian's artistic processes. The text describes how they derive their respective inspiration from everyday things: candy, seashells, books, "Cycladic figures and brutalist buildings" among them, as well as close observation: seeing shapes, breaking them apart, and translating them into different art forms. While these details aren't all familiar to young readers, the description of the way Viola translates the shape of a snail observed in nature into a gigantic abstract sculpture is relayed in a way that children can connect to, and understand, through the descriptive illustrations. The illustrations are presented with vibrant, saturated colors, created with crisp lines and encyclopedic labels. Like a successful infographic or visual dictionary, the illustrations deepen the written narrative and create an additional layer to the story.

In an attempt to apply best practices as an educator, I sought to expand an interpretation of the book beyond my own reading and included a small sample size of children – admittedly my own – ages three and a half and nine and a half. Their interpretations of the book both affirmed my expectations as well as presented some surprises. Both readers sought a point of connection into the story based on their own experiences. The three and a half year old's first question was "What's an exhibition?" – which might have been a helpful starting point. Knowing that children's closest relationships, encounters, and associations inform understandings of the world around them, this foundational question led me to wonder what other assumptions the author may have made of their audience and their exposure to museums, exhibitions, and related experiences. There is a cool, insidersness in the tone of the book that may reflect the art and publishing world the author represents. The author might have asked if readers had been to an exhibition and what kind, or created their own exhibits of artwork or collections, which so many children, and adults, do on a

regular basis. While exhibitions can be based on a diverse variety of subject matter and content areas, the assumption of the type of "Exhibition" that the book's title refers to, though not explicit, is an art exhibition. "Making a Great Exhibition" is assumed to be about art, which reflects a narrow, if popular, widely shared perception.

The narrative was somewhat lost on the three-and-a-half-year-old reader, but she was very intrigued by the detailed illustrations on each page, and made up her own story, inspired by these visual cues. The nine-and-a-half-year-old reader expressed surprise that so many people and types of work went into making an exhibition. He said that he had never thought about some of the jobs, like writing title cards, handling the art, and planning out where the artwork would be situated in the space. If the author's hope was to introduce some of the different career paths that comprise exhibition making, and make them sound exciting and intriguing, the book succeeded.

While I appreciate the intention and message of the book, I felt that not addressing the provocative power of art in its creation and presentation was a missed opportunity. Alongside a more expansive understanding of what goes into creating an exhibition, this seemed like an opportune chance to present the potential of art to raise questions, start conversations, and most importantly, provide a platform for the multiple perspectives through which art is experienced. In the final pages of the book, when the exhibition opens, the visitor is positioned as having an active role in the process: "It also takes you, the visitor, to make a great exhibition." Though it takes the visitor to complete the experience of the show, our participation is situated passively. At the close of this vibrant book, I hoped for a more explicit invitation to children as art makers, being encouraged to think about the ways that they will share their ideas with the world and what those ideas will be. ■