

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE (AIR)

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. HOSPITAL
RECUPERATIVE CARE CENTER

LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

DECEMBER 2017

Residency program

The first Artist in Residence (AIR) placed in a department of Los Angeles County government

Background

Visual artist Sandy Rodriguez was placed as an artist in residence (AIR) at the Recuperative Care Center (RCC) at the Martin Luther King Medical Campus (MLK Hospital) in Willowbrook, CA, in 2016-17. The Civic Art division of the LA County Arts Commission oversaw the process to select the artist and managed the contract.

MLK Hospital originally opened in 1972 in the aftermath of the 1965 Watts Riots, which brought into sharp relief the lack of health services in the community. The hospital was closed in 2007 after years of serious funding challenges that led to problems in patient care. After securing new investments and undertaking major renovations, the hospital reopened in 2015.

The renovations at MLK triggered the County's percent for art policy, which translated into over \$1.6 million in Civic Art investments, including installation of two sculptures, two large scale artworks, a healing garden, 24 two dimensional artworks, and the AIR.

The AIR program took place in phase two of the Civic Art project, running from November 2016 through May 2017.

The RCC at MLK Hospital provides interim housing to homeless patients who would otherwise remain in the hospital because they could not be discharged. The RCC also offers support services designed to assist their clients in achieving independence with the ultimate goal of moving into permanent supportive housing. All programming is voluntary and clients are able to come and go from the facility as they choose.



A painting created by an AIR workshop participant, selected to be exhibited at the RCC.

Artist role and tasks

Sandy Rodriguez is a Los Angeles visual artist whose paintings capture moments of transformation in the social and cultural landscape of LA. Her work focuses on themes of the persistence of place, activism, and physical and cultural regeneration.

Rodriguez is also an independent arts educator and has taught at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

Raised in San Diego, Tijuana and Los Angeles, Rodriguez has a BFA from California Institute of Arts and has exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego; Art+Practice, Los Angeles; and Self Help Graphics, Los Angeles, among other places. She has been featured on CBC Radio *Canada Hour le Monde*, KQED's *Statewide Report*, KPCC's *Off Ramp*, the *Los Angeles Times* and KCET television.

Rodriguez was given the task of developing a “meaningful, sustainable program for the Recuperative Care Center that will engage staff and clients and create artwork to be displayed at the facility.”¹

To achieve this, Rodriguez

- ❖ Loaned 26 artworks for display in hallways, rooms and common areas
- ❖ Led weekly watercolor workshops for clients over a six month period
- ❖ Conducted extensive background research on indigenous plants used for both medicinal purposes and dyes
- ❖ Facilitated the selection of paintings by workshop participants to replace her works

¹ From the contract between the LA County Arts Commission and Sandy Rodriguez

Program goals

- ❖ Create an artist-based program for a care facility that is replicable, meaningful and relevant
- ❖ Build patient confidence and sense of independence through art learning and making
- ❖ Provide patients with positive distractions from ailments and disabilities
- ❖ Teach and foster new skill development
- ❖ Learn what staff and clients of the RCC gain from the AIR

These goals for the residency were set jointly by

- ❖ Managers at the MLK Recuperative Care Center
- ❖ Staff of the Civic Art division of the LA County Arts Commission
- ❖ Artist Sandy Rodriguez

Evaluation

Findings from the residency evaluation

Evaluation methods

This study used qualitative methods:

- ❖ Participant observation of two workshops
- ❖ Focus group with RCC managers and staff
- ❖ Documents review, including
 - ❖ Contract documents
 - ❖ Artist journal and final report

In order to protect confidentiality for a vulnerable population, no data was collected directly from clients, beyond direct observation by the evaluator during two site visits. Other information about client experiences are from the perspective of the artist and from RCC staff.



A painting created by an AIR workshop participant, selected to be exhibited at the RCC.

Evaluation findings – summary

RCC staff and administrators

- ❖ Extremely enthusiastic about the artist
- ❖ Can clearly articulate the program's benefits for clients
- ❖ Enjoyed participating in the workshops
- ❖ Want to continue the workshops but are experiencing barriers

A painting created by an AIR workshop participant, selected to be exhibited at the RCC.



Artist and programming

- ❖ Created a workshop structure that staff found relevant to the needs of the RCC and its clients
- ❖ Brought specific skills needed to serve the public in this type of setting
- ❖ Provided all materials needed, including storage
- ❖ Conducted additional research during the AIR and learned new skills in order to improve the program
- ❖ Launched an unexpected new personal art project exploring the intersections of art and medicine as a result of the residency

Evaluation findings – in detail

Design Rodriguez set up residency as “a series of artist-led conversations, painting demonstrations and drop-in, hands-on workshops.”² Everyone who attended was treated as equal: clients, nurses, administrators and other County staff. Each workshop included a demonstration of a painting technique, a suggestion for a subject to paint, and ample unstructured time for painting.

Rodriguez circulated throughout the room while participants painted to answer questions and offer encouragement, switching back and forth between English and Spanish as needed. Participants could come and go as they wanted. Patients sometimes left to access other services. Staff would leave to attend to other clients or duties. Whenever a new person joined in, without missing a beat Rodriguez would put paper, paint and brushes in front of them and explain the day’s focus.

Because of the diversity of RCC clients in terms of demographics, learning styles and experience making art, Rodriguez used an organoleptic approach to teaching historic methods and materials. Participants could see, feel, smell, touch and sometimes taste the organic materials – primarily plants – as she taught how to process them into paints.

Communicating these complex concepts and skills to a general audience is extremely challenging. Helping a person put those ideas into action using watercolors and paper is even more difficult. Rodriguez met the participants at their knowledge and skill level and helped lift them up. The success of this AIR can be measured in part in the number and quality of paintings created by the participants.

There were so many high quality paintings that selection of the final 14 to be printed on canvas and exhibited on RCC walls was competitive.

² From Rodriguez’s final report

“I was real sick when I started, and this art workshop is the thing that really helped me start recuperating.”³

Attendance The RCC offers a variety of programs to clients, which they refer to as “groups.” Some focus on skill building (substance abuse, housing) while others are more recreational (karaoke, *loteria*, arts and crafts). In the past, all groups were led by staff. Rodriguez’s watercolor group was the first provided by an outside organization. The success of this led to the RCC partnering with a local Buddhist organization that now runs a meditation group for clients.

Due to the transitional nature of the RCC, the first half of each month the workshops were attended primarily by staff, with clients returning in the second half of the month. This created challenges for teaching, but Rodriguez adjusted her plan so that in first half of each month she focused on teaching staff how to replicate the program after the AIR ended.



A painting created by an AIR workshop participant, selected to be exhibited at the RCC.

Staff remarked that clients attended Rodriguez’s watercolor group more regularly than they attended the others. They said some clients would stay on site rather than leave for the day when they knew Rodriguez would be teaching her workshop. Some clients who have left the facility have asked if they could return to take her class.

³ RCC client, observed by the evaluator

“It served as a reintroduction to what you can do in your spare time. When you’re homeless you don’t have that luxury.”⁴

Benefits RCC staff observed clients who “came out of their shell” during the workshops, including nonverbal clients who discovered a new way to communicate through painting. Clients gained new skills and, as a result, new confidence. Some painted what they imagined their future permanent housing would look like.

Rodriguez discovered through the workshop that one of the clients with serious injuries that made it difficult for him to paint and to speak had worked as a muralist in the past. She shared this with RCC staff, who had not been aware of his talents. Other clients and some RCC staff renewed their love of painting during the AIR, often for the first time in many years.

In the end, more than 150 paintings were created by participants. Rodriguez created high-resolution images of each using a top-of-the-line scanner.

The workshops gave the nurses an opportunity to spend time with clients in a different environment and develop mutual respect. The workshops were a neutral space where clients could talk about their background and tell their stories, helping the staff get to know them and their needs better. Staff enjoyed their time painting and learning new techniques, some reporting that it helped relieve stress.

Staff participants also gained perspectives and skills they are able to use on the job. For example, one staff member said Rodriguez’s enthusiasm was a model for staff, noting that she was as engaged when only one or two clients attended as when the room was full.

⁴ RCC staff member during the focus group

Why it worked: the artist Rodriguez brought a set of skills and knowledge relevant to the needs of the institution, clients and staff. Through her artistic practice she has explored social and cultural issues and how they play out in LA.

Because she had prior teaching experience she knew how to manage a classroom. Because she understood the clients’ needs through her artistic practice, she structured her workshops in a way that offered flexibility for participants and treated them as equals, whether staff or clients.

Staff described Rodriguez’s presence from the very beginning as “familiar,” “natural,” and “She came in like she’d been here forever.”⁶

Over the course of the residency Rodriguez did additional research on regional plants traditionally used for colorants and medicine. She used what she learned to improve her RCC workshops. She also began a new personal art project that she is continuing after the residency.

There were more mundane logistics that contributed to the success of the residency. Rodriguez arrived with all the materials necessary to do her work. The basics she brought were paper, paint and brushes. In addition, each week she brought in the organic materials needed to demonstrate techniques.

Storage of materials was a significant concern for staff. One RCC staff member remarked that the fact that Rodriguez provided a wheeled cart where the materials could be easily stored and accessed made a difference in a facility where space is at a premium. Housekeeping staff had worried in the beginning that the painting would create additional cleanup work, but Rodriguez and RCC staff cleaned up after every session.

⁵ RCC staff member during the focus group

⁶ From the focus group with RCC staff

“Clients and staff invented new techniques and shared stories to inspire compositions in other clients’ work.”⁷

Why it worked: the staff Rodriguez says that one key to the residency’s success was the fact that the RCC director painted with clients and staff. He even requested a reading list so he could learn more. When staff saw the director participating as an equal, they felt empowered to join in. For clients, Rodriguez referred to the director’s participation as “a powerful part of the recuperative process.”⁸

Staff also brought other talents to the workshop, such as demonstrating how to use a mortar and pestle, or creating a playlist of music to accompany their painting sessions.

RCC staff have asked whether Rodriguez could be brought back to continue this group. They saw strong benefits to their clients and to themselves.

Improving the residency Staff offered two suggestions for improvement. First, invite more input from the clients on subjects to paint, to give them a greater sense of agency. Second, provide more instruction in painting techniques.

At Rodriguez’s final workshop in May, staff discussed how they could take turns teaching the workshop in order to keep it going after the AIR ended.⁹ Despite their clear enthusiasm and the training Rodriguez gave them, staff are struggling to continue it. The cause is two-fold. First, adding another group to someone’s already heavy workload is difficult. By mid-July they had not yet developed a regular schedule and client attendance had dropped. Second, staff expressed trepidation about leading a group in an area where they are not skilled. As one staff person said, “We’re amateurs and she’s not!”

^{7, 8} From Rodriguez’s final report

⁹ From participant observation by the evaluator

Lessons learned

What to consider when placing artists as creative strategists in County departments

Define the department's needs first

Clearly define the **type** of need(s).

For example, this could be

- ❖ Administration
- ❖ Customer service
- ❖ Program design
- ❖ Policymaking
- ❖ Communications

Then use that to help the department articulate a specific **project** or **tasks** the artist can do

Use arts and non-arts criteria to select the artist

A successful creative strategist needs to bring or develop both

Artistic practice

- ❖ Discipline
- ❖ Materials
- ❖ Time commitment and availability
- ❖ Research capacity
- ❖ Public engagement skills

Non-arts skills

- ❖ Subject matter knowledge specific to the department
- ❖ Skills specific to the department project
- ❖ Ability to learn new knowledge and skills
- ❖ Self-reliance; ability to solve problems
- ❖ Willingness to listen and adapt
- ❖ Commitment to public service
- ❖ Understanding of how government works

Provide all materials and equipment

Lack of materials may be an ongoing issue for any government agency

Arts Commission/Artist

- ❖ Art supplies
- ❖ Materials storage plan
- ❖ Tools and materials to archive or replicate as needed
- ❖ Budget for emerging supplies needs

Host Department

- ❖ Access to a location to work
- ❖ Staff liaison
- ❖ Phone, email & internet access
- ❖ Department-specific equipment
- ❖ Office supplies
- ❖ Security clearance
- ❖ Parking

Shared project management

Coordination and shared agreement on responsibilities is critical

Arts Commission/Artist

Host Department

- ❖ Clear goals and milestones established in writing and agreed to by both departments and the artist
- ❖ Orientation to host department and project
- ❖ Regular meetings with relevant department staff
- ❖ Evaluation plan
- ❖ Open lines of communication between Arts Commission and host department
- ❖ Checkpoints to review progress and adapt to emerging needs and issues

For more information

Evaluation

Bronwyn Mauldin

Director of Research and Evaluation

LA County Arts Commission

bmauldin@arts.lacounty.gov

Project Manager

Pauline Kanako Kamiyama

Deputy Director of Civic Art

LA County Arts Commission

pkamiyama@arts.lacounty.gov

