

**4am-3  
December 16, 2008**

There's a small collection of paintings now posted on one of the bulletin boards outside of our classroom. There isn't really much special or spectacular about them—they are pretty typical examples of the type of art activity we offer children, in this case tempera cakes, and what children do with the materials. To be honest, we hadn't intended to display them and were just going to send the named ones home and discard the ones without names on them. But as we were sorting the pictures and they were spread across the table, we began to comment to each other about how nice and colorful they were, and how we could tell that the children had invested a little more time in doing them.

This stuck us because we have had these tempera cakes out for awhile and had thought interest had been waning in using them. We were about to put them away when one morning a teacher sitting with the painters noticed how quickly children did their paintings and then moved on. It seemed that one reason why the activity didn't seem very satisfying was because they really were not able to get much paint on their brushes. If you aren't familiar with tempera cakes, they work just like watercolors, so the process of dipping, swirling, and rinsing to change colors is a multi-step one and can be a good challenge for young children to grapple with. So, after noticing the prevalence of papers being done with one muddy streak on them, we took some time during group time to do a little more demonstrating about watercolor/tempera cake painting techniques.

To do this, we simply brought over a tray set up with paints, paper and a brush and asked children if they had noticed how they could make the paints lighter or darker depending upon how much they swirled the brush around in the paint before putting it on the paper. This seems like such a basic thing, perhaps sounds even a little boring to us as adults, but the children were rapt. You might have thought we were showing them how to turn sand into gold, or some other such fantastical thing. It is a good reminder to all of us of how the ordinary can be extraordinary to children. Many children had probably never stopped to think about the correlation between the number of swirls of the paintbrush and the intensity of the color on the paper, or the fact that this was something that they could control. The demonstration didn't last very long—maybe a couple of minutes at the most—and we then quickly moved on to another song and then got ready to wash hands for snack.

The act of highlighting the paints at group time definitely sparked renewed interest in the tempera cakes the next day. Whereas the day before, the four trays sat mostly unused, now there was a lot of traffic in that area and children were staying longer to experiment and producing multiple paintings at a sitting. That day, we had also put out a new set of colored drawing pencils on a different table nearby. At some point during the morning, the cup of colored pencils found its way onto the painting table and one girl in particular became engrossed in trying out the effect of using the pencils *and* painting at the same time. Well, this was a new twist, one the teachers hadn't really planned to introduce, but it produced some interesting results and so we showed this possibility to the group during group time as well. Again, highlighting this technique and making the suggestion that this might be something different to try seemed to have the effect of generating a lot more interest in the tempera cakes and further experimentation: what happens if you paint over crayon, or silky-sticks, or marker.

The collection of paintings now displayed in the hallway serves as a good reminder (even to us teachers) about how using group times to demonstrate a project or an activity, and highlighting some of its attributes can often prompt children to explore something on a deeper level or approach it from a new angle. Until we ourselves paused to look more closely at the collection of artwork, we hadn't realized how much our taking a couple of minutes to talk about how to use the tempera cakes at group time impacted the children's experience with this material. Stop by and take a look sometime.

Keratin and Anita