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Raku Kilns and Easels on the Grass: It's En Plein Air Day at New Rochelle High School

NEW ROCHELLE, N.Y. (May 21, 2019) – By Huguenot Lake, students painted the scenery they are lucky to call their school campus, while not far away, their schoolmates used tongs to carefully lift pottery that been fired in the 1,850-degree heat of raku kilns.

The occasion was *En Plein Air* day at New Rochelle High School, when students from six art classes practice their painting, pottery firing or photography outdoors.

“It’s such a wonderful opportunity to be out here, to be able to look at nature and paint what you see,” said senior Adam Jones, who has participated in *en plein air* all four years at the school. He was painting a gnarled tree across the lake from the French Norman-style school building that overlooks it.

“We have the most gorgeous campus in Westchester County,” said art teacher Alexi Brock.

“Why not take advantage of it?”

The annual day of outdoor art engages students of painting, pottery and photography. The raku pottery is a unique treat, firing the ceramic jars, bowls, even rings in Japanese-style kilns that burn so hot, the air inside is an orange shimmer. Once the pieces were done, students removed them carefully, with arm-length tongs, and placed in drums with newspaper and other combustible materials to draw out surprising hues from the glaze with the flames. Finally, the works are “quenched” in water from the lake.

“This process is special because it brings out these metallic colors,” said teacher Joanna Schomber.

Other pieces are left white, without glaze, but then are touched with strands of horse hair that singe into unpredictable, random curlicue marks.

“We put the horse hair on it and let nature take its course,” said Julia Alvarado, a senior.

The painting students’ challenge was to create their landscape of the high school building overlooking the lake, or trees, using only tertiary colors. No pure blue, red, yellow and so on. The half-joking rule of thumb was, if you could name the color, it didn’t count.

It was a challenge, but for freshman Amanda Cao, it was ultimately liberating to discover the range of colors that could be created.

“It’s a lot easier to make more accurate colors,” she said. “I think it gives you more freedom.”

The day gives them an opportunity to relax as they work, giving them six and a half hours to work on a piece instead of creating it one school period at a time.

In the end, it is a day like no other.

“It’s the culmination of everything they’ve learned,” Brock said. “It’s fun, but it’s a serious project.”

About the City School District of New Rochelle

With nearly 11,000 students in 10 schools, the City School District of New Rochelle, through an active partnership amongst community, parents, staff and students, provides a high-quality and challenging education for every child, in a safe, nurturing environment that embraces rich diversity and drives success.

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