SUMMER CAMPS

ART IS KID STUFF

BY ALLISON BAGLEY | CORRESPONDENT

When you give kids permission to be messy and use unconventional materials, their creativity explodes.

That's the philosophy of Gerry Melot and Greta Bernitz, the owners of Gerry and Greta's Art Camp Adventures.

At their "Split, Splat, Spatter" weeklong day camp in July, elementary school students will learn to paint in the dripping style employed by artist Jackson Pollock.

It took years of experimentation, says Melot, but she and Bernitz — who founded their business in 2009 — finally mastered the Pollock lesson for kids. They've found a way to teach kids to use spoons to drop paint on canvas in a way that looks more "stunning" than messy, she says.

"Our kids just love doing it," she says. "It's the process of getting to drip the paint, which they probably have never done before."

It's summertime, Melot says, so the teachers don't spend too much time giving lessons on the artists or cultures they highlight, but they do pass on one or two interesting facts that kids can retain while working on their art.

Kids will learn that Pollock departed from conventional styles and got a lot of flack as a result, she says.

"He was really kind of a brave person," Melot says. "He believed he didn't draw well, so he tried to go for nonrepresentational work. Everybody basically hated what he was doing."

KIDS GET TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES THROUGH ART.

Gerry and Gretas Art Camp Adventures

In the same camp, students will build large, three-dimensional felt art that is their own interpretation of Claes Oldenburg's hamburgers. The project is an across-the-board favorite of campers.

"They have a fabulous time walking around and pretending they're eating the hamburger," Melot says.

Recycled objects as art

Construction is an important part of art, Melot says, and in a traditional school-year art class, kids don't always have the time or materials to create 3D projects.

In a new camp theme earlier this summer, students used clay, coffee stirrers and popsicle sticks to build a replica of Vincent van Gogh's bedroom.

In other camps, rotisserie chicken packaging becomes the painted shells of tortoises. Wine corks are used as legs in sculptures.

In "Far East Fun," later this summer, students will use moss to cover the ground of a mini version of the Great Wall of China.

To make a geisha doll, they'll start with a toilet-paper-roll body. After water-coloring their own fabric, they'll tie yarn into hair and paint a music CD to use as a base so the doll stands up.

"When they use unconventional art materials, it sparks their creativity," Melot says. It also builds their self-esteem to realize they can turn objects found at home into a masterpieces, she says.

Museum-inspired learning

Cecilia Pena and her husband, Federico Pena, own a Young Rembrandts franchise. She says when kids are shown an art project at the beginning of camp, they're often skeptical they'll be able to complete the work on their own.

By week's end, they're eagerly showing their parents their project and proud they completed it without the help of teachers.

A new theme this summer will highlight some of the masters, focusing on a new artist each day. Learning about the talents of Impressionists, kids will work on their own "Starry Night" by van Gogh, a still life by Cézanne and a portrait by Matisse.

Other new camp themes include pastel chalk — which Pena describes as a challenging and tactile medium — and anime, during which kids will dream up their own cartoon characters and storylines.

The focus in each camp, Pena says, is step-by-step instruction.

Following skills in order and employing thoughtful repetition teaches time management, organization and observation skills, says Pena.

"It expands their mind in ways that only art can bring," she says, and the skills translate to traditional school-year subjects.

"You can do anything as long as you have a clear goal and you follow through," she says. "There are incredible lessons for them that can be taught in art, if the art is well-planned."

Allison Bagley is a Houston-based writer.

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What: Young Rembrandts
Where: Katy, The Woodlands, Spring and Tomball
Details: For kids 4-13. Locations and dates vary. Starting at $239/week for half-day; youngrembrandts.com/northhouston

What: Gerry and Greta's Art Camp Adventures
Where: 10371 Stella Link (inside The Zone)
Details: For kids entering first through fifth. Dates vary. $350/week, 9 a.m.-3 p.m.; artcampadventures.com