

The role of the Arts at Rinpung Centre



In this chapter we share a few different art projects we have done to demonstrate the power of the arts to support children's thinking and learning, preserve cultural treasures and acquire artistic skills.

The first project, about the four friends, demonstrates how we can integrate the traditional arts with contemporary pedagogy. Children learn the meanings underpinning iconic traditional art forms.

Then a contemporary art form, ephemeral art, is explored and we demonstrate how children are able to bring their local knowledge to the art form and integrate it into their creations.

Finally we demonstrate the power of observational drawing and painting and the role it plays in these children's learning.

With these examples we hope to show how the arts can be a powerful tool for learning.





Mandala Guru Dragpo

The arts

The arts embody the culture of a nation and of an era. Art holds a mirror to society and provides a way to pass on values. In Bhutan the arts have been well preserved. They are useful, ennobling, and inspirational. While the aesthetics of the traditional arts is appreciated, the fundamental purpose of the arts in Bhutan is to express Buddhism and act as a guide for life experiences.

Through the establishment of Zorig Chusum and the traditional art school, traditional arts are thriving.

The thirteen arts and crafts include: *yigzo* (calligraphy), */hazo* (painting), *jimzo* (sculpture), *lugzo* (metal casting), *troezo* (gold- and silversmithing), *shingzo* (carpentry), *tshemzo* (tailoring and tapestry), *tsharzo* (bamboo and container work), *shagzo* (wood turning and lacquering), *thagzo* (weaving), *dzazo* (pottery), *chakzo* (blacksmithing), and *dozo* (masonry). *Shogzo* (paper making) and *poezo* (incense-stick making) are closely tied to and often practiced with the traditional arts of *zorig chusum*.

The President of Paro College, Dr Dorji Thinley had the vision to establish the Heritage Centre at Paro College and thus embed the arts in education. Rinpung enjoys a rich relationship with the Heritage Centre and our children benefit from arts projects they participate in.

Traditional Painting

Painting is an old and cherished tradition in Bhutan. It is one of the 13 traditional arts and crafts and is under preservation.

Bhutanese art is based on Vajrayana Buddhism. All sacred images are made to exact specifications that have remained remarkably unchanged for centuries. Artists are expected to copy the model image well and often consult with the Buddhist text. Traditionally artists would make their own pigments from soil and plants. The paintings carried Buddhist teachings. This story is about interdependence, friendship, living in harmony that brings a good outcome for everyone.

This story is based on four friends: once there were four friends; an elephant, a monkey, a rabbit and a bird. They all loved to eat fruit and decided to grow them, together. The bird was asked to fetch a seed. The rabbit watered it while the monkey was assigned to add manure to the sapling. The elephant would guard the sapling from sun by casting its big shadow.



The four harmonious friends



Painting in the traditional way at Rinpung

In the tradition of the Thangka painters we provided models for the children to copy. We began by reading the story several times. We then worked with small groups to encourage discussion about the story and the teachings it illustrated.

First, we started with painting the seedling. While painting the children had lots of questions about how the plant grew. This was the time when we could recollect and think more deeply on the story. We had a long talk about the story and finally Omu came up with an answer. She told me that a seed was fetched by the bird. "Okay Omu that's a good point, but is it enough for seed to grow without doing anything" I asked. She answered, 'yes

but rabbit helped bird to fetch water.' She is always curious to learn new things. She loves to ask many questions and loves painting. Meanwhile Aayou, Kuenzang, Jigme and Chimi were also recollecting things from the story like, how monkey helped to add manure and how elephant gave shade to the plant. Painting together created a calm concentration that supported a more thoughtful analysis of the meanings in the story.



After we completed our painting of plants, we moved on to painting the bird. While painting the bird we are thinking about the characteristics of bird in the story. Again the quiet concentration of painting allowed time for questions.

Jigme asked, 'Where did the bird bring a seed from which grew a big tree?'. 'Jigme did you ever see a seed lying on a ground while going anywhere?. She thought for a while. 'Yes! I always see lots of seeds lying on the ground wherever I go.' 'Great, but did you ever think of planting those seeds in the ground?' She grinned and softly said 'no'. 'That is why a bird is known as a very intelligent creature because it was able to think beyond human thoughts'.





While we are painting we talk. 'Who eats the fruits from your orchard?', I ask. Some answered that they sell the fruit while others told how they eat it themselves. Here I explained to them about how selfish we humans are. We do everything for ourselves not for others. But in case of birds, they will never say that it belongs to them, it can be eaten by every creature in the world. This way they get blessings from every creature in the world. 'Do you know that the angel has wings?'. 'Yes', all replied. 'Where did you see this?'. Some said in the book and some said in the TV. I asked them next why they think angels have wings? It was very silent for a while. In between the silence Tenzin stood up and exclaimed that its because angels share and sharing is loving, and that's why it has wings and why the bird does too. Given our support young children are able to have philosophical discussions. This inspirational story supports the concept of sharing, caring and loving. It is just one of the many ways we ensure our culture is not lost.

While painting the rabbit something occurs to Chimi. She asks, 'See madam, how is it possible for a rabbit to fetch water?'

'Why not?', I asked her.

'But how, Rabbit doesn't have hands?'

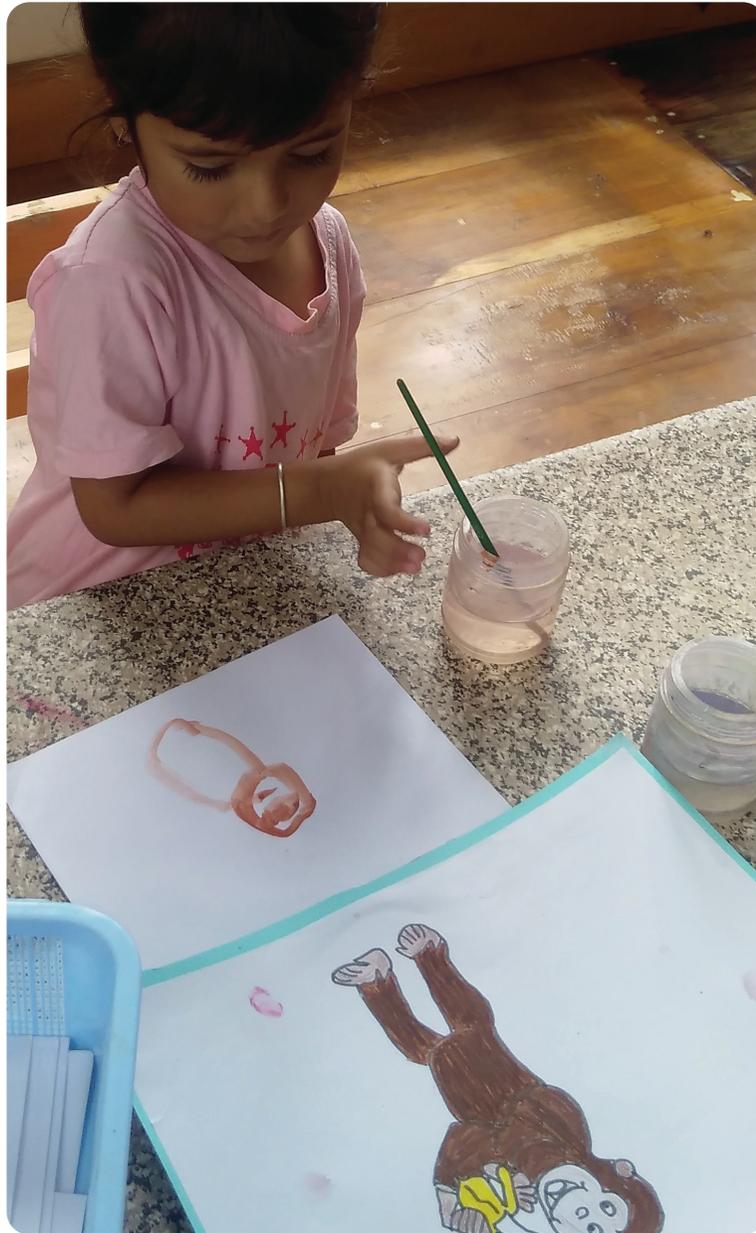
'How do a dog and other animals carry their food to protect from their enemies?', I asked her.

'Now I got it', she answered. 'They carry with their teeth.'

This drawing and painting not only helped her to recollect about the past, it also helped her to slow down and be more reflective.

Chimi is very observant. She is careful when she is painting/drawing. She has her own style of painting. Chimi notices details and makes drawing/painting look very easy.





Monkey was assigned to add manure to the plant. Shanika is young and was not sure how to begin her painting. So I asked her what part she was looking at. She noticed the head first so I talked to her about the shape of the head and the features on it. As I talked she began to paint.

Then I encouraged her to tell me what else she saw and slowly we talked our way through all the parts of the monkey. When she finished there was a look of great satisfaction on her face.



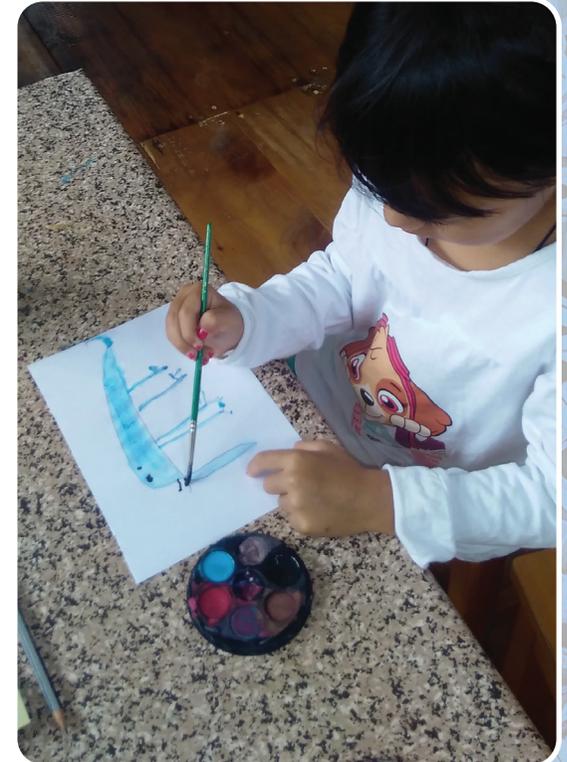
Chimi observed the model of the elephant for a while and then drew very carefully. Even with careful observation she missed one leg. After a while she noticed it was missing and quickly added it. Drawing from observation is quite a challenging task but one that engages and focuses children's attention.

In traditional art practice in Bhutan the objective is make a closely considered replica of the model. Each posture, angle and detail is important because it holds meaning related to the story. The aim is not one of self expression but rather to be able to accurately convey the deep spiritual messages contained in the story. Paintings are religious icons that celebrate the teachings of Buddhism.

I asked her what the work of an elephant was in the story . She told me that an elephant was huge and provided shade to the tree.

Gyendhen was also finding observational drawing quite challenging. But she persevered. Discussing her process with me helped her to see how to begin and keep adding more and more details. She tried very hard to make an accurate representation of what she saw.

The two girls were working together, sharing both their painting strategies and the content of the story. This social context for painting supported a depth of thinking not possible had they worked alone.





Painting each animal one by one they were able to get to know about each animal and so better understand the story. The elephant represents our body, the monkey represents the restless mind, the rabbit represents emotions, and the bird is the soul. Having experience of each character to build upon it was not very hard for them to draw and paint the whole story.



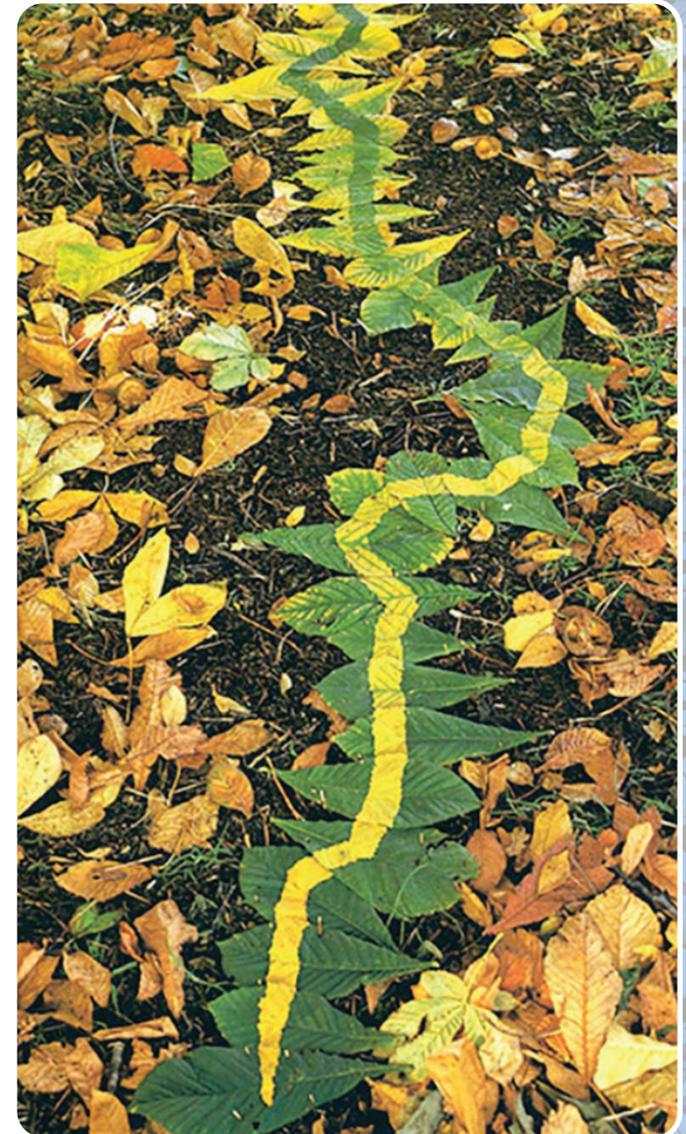
Exploring Ephemeral art ▪ With Yeshi

Ephemeral art is a temporary art form created in the environment and designed to naturally erode, therefore, only lasting for a short period of time. The ephemeral nature of life is portrayed in this art form and resonates with Buddhist philosophies, upholding the value of faith and destiny in our program. Andy Goldsworthy is a well known ephemeral artist who creates large-scale outdoor sculptures and artworks out of natural materials like mud, wood, ice and stone in an attempt to imbue the physical world with a spiritual, ephemeral element. This kind of art is appreciated by children.

In his collaborations with nature, Andy works with whatever comes to hand: twigs, leaves, stones, snow and ice, reeds and thorns, creating site specific installations, exploring the very essences of these materials. In his process, he first must become attuned to his environment mentally, physically, and emotionally. He listens, he observes, and then when he seems to be drawn to the way the materials express themselves he creates. He takes these very materials and reweaves them back into the environment in a deliberate manner then lets the effects of the natural conditions have their way with them.

Here is what the artist Andy Goldsworthy says about his work:

“Movement, change, light, growth and decay are the lifeblood of nature, the energies that I try to tap through my work. I need the shock of touch, the resistance of place, materials and weather, the earth as my source. Nature is in a state of change and that change is the key to understanding. I want my art to be sensitive and alert to changes in material, season and weather. Each work grows, stays, decays. Process and decay are implicit. Transience in my work reflects what I find in nature.”





The materials were carefully chosen for colour, texture, shape and variety and were displayed in an aesthetic and enticing manner which invited the children to touch, feel, discover, manipulate and create. We selected beautiful seeds, twigs, different coloured leaves and different shaped and coloured stones.



Traditional baskets were chosen for the larger materials and we made paper origami boxes for the smaller pieces. Black fabric or felt is used as a canvas for the small pieces. Black provides a good contrast for the materials. The larger materials were explored on the floor.



Initially, the children made a simple designs. They brought some of their past experiences from the environment into their creation through lining up, stacking, and piling up. Sometimes they brought play to the task. Aayou was pretending a doll was walking on the stone footpath towards the bridge. She said that it's when she was coming to the centre. Our children had to cross a traditional bridge while coming to the centre. Jigme was organizing the trees and steps around the bridge with pine cone and other materials.





The children approached the open-ended materials with enthusiasm and a sense of wonder.
The natural materials had a thoughtful and calming influence.



Some jumped in with complex ideas. Chimmi was trying to stack small thin sticks on each other. She found it quite challenging but she persevered for a long time until the balance was just right.





Aayou used a cardboard box to represent a house. She arranged furniture inside the house in a conventional setting. Familiar things from Aayuo's cultural context like the stone foot paths around the monasteries, stupas, bridges, steps, prayer flag, and prayer wheels all came into her play and representations in a variety of ways.



Children's innovation increased day by day. They used the materials creatively in other areas of the program.

Aayou used wood slices to represent chilies drying on the roof of a traditional house. In Bhutan, drying red chilies on the roof is a way of living. The red color on the roof looks beautiful when the chili gets dried.



Children will master the necessary skills if we provide them with the right tools, support, environment and time.

The possibilities for the materials in this space begins to open up, new worlds are entered into and the children's explorations begin to have more imagination and creativity. Sliced branches became steps arranged it in such a way that the spaces between the steps were even and so beautiful that it looked like flowing river. The natural materials were combined with blocks and the possibilities become endless. Art and play become one.



Like a lot of art, play and investigation are part of the process. Children made a slide from the bark and began investigating how things roll or slide down. Kuenga and Kelden were using small figure dolls to slide down the bark and it worked well. Next they tried with a small rectangular block which got stopped in the middle, after that they discussed and tried with different shapes of stones. This play provided them with the opportunity to collectively solve the problem encountered. Next day Ugyen, Ajay and Sonam again made new slides to explore more. This way their exploration with materials and ideas was sustained. They worked together sharing ideas, testing hypotheses, co-operating and negotiating with friends.





We believe that children enjoy and learn more effectively when we engage them in everyday activities that are based on their local funds of knowledge. We build upon their natural play habits.

As is our custom in Bhutan the children like to work collaboratively. They share ideas, make plans and get help from each other while working together to form the patterns. Through this activity the children learn the value of interdependence and reciprocity.





Providing children with organized selection of nature materials for ephemeral art making is an effective way to encourage children to reuse materials, incorporating the concept of sustainability.



Exploring the world with all of their senses, through hands on experience they see the colour, the patterns, they feel the texture of materials, the soft and smooth leaves and the rough bark. Rich sensory experiences like this will build more nerve connections in the brain's pathways. Through manipulating these natural materials with all their complexity the children will better learn to sort, match, classify, and order. Natural materials provide a richer experience than the simple three colored plastic counters often used for math.





Active exploration of natural materials enhances children's appreciation of nature's beauty in our world and deepens their respect for the environment. It teaches children that art is not just about drawing things on purchased paper and products, but that art can be created anytime with anything.



Here is Yeshi's story about a culturally inspired ephemeral art project at Rinpung





In Bhutan we are fortunate to have a rich supply of natural materials for children to play with. Children collect these materials for their dramatic play and constructions.

With time and encouragement they also use them to make patterns.

Their inspiration for the more contemporary art form, 'ephemeral art' comes from the many rich patterns, designs and artifacts we have in Bhutan.



Representing traditional patterns

The children used small sticks, small pebbles, and seed pods they had collected and sorted, to form the design. The way they organized the loose parts and the spacing between each item was beautifully done. Their creation represented the patterns on our traditional attire (Gho and Kira) and paintings on the Bhutanese buildings.

Rinchen said that it's the design on her dress she wore while she was witnessing the Tshechu (mask dance) in the Dzong.





Children became so artistic that they could easily choose the materials that lent themselves to depicting the real image in their imagination. They chose colors, textures, shapes, and material combination in an enticing manner to closely approximate a real image of their creation. They remembered making beautiful



effigy to make back at home during rituals. Most butter decorations are floral designs although there are other motifs such as rainbows and flames. In elaborate ceremonies, sacred figures such as Buddhas or lamas are also sculpted with butter.

With this rich fund of knowledge, the children were representing dough as a rectangular unit block, with sliced twig and pebbles, small sticks, seed pots as a floral, rainbows and flames designs. Here Chimmi formed the effigy structure by stacking unit blocks on each other. She followed the design using other small materials such as sticks and pebbles.



Mandala's

The children used natural materials to create mandalas, which they had seen in Thankas (scrolls), wall painting in the monasteries, and even in the altar room of a Bhutanese house.

This mandala was led by Kuenga. He said that he had a mandala scroll at his house and it was used during the annual ritual. He told us that during the annual ritual, the mandala scroll was kept under a square table, which was decorated with silk cloth over it in the altar room while reciting the mantra. Kuenzang said that the outer line of the mandala should be in a circle as she had seen the mandala on the walls of monasteries and she integrated various shaped loose parts to form a circle.

Mandalas are made with colored limestone powder but children represent it with their own choice of natural materials. The mandala



represents an imaginary palace that is contemplated during meditation. They include the presence of Buddha's mind in an abstract form, most commonly represented as a wheel, tree, flower, or jewel. The centre is a dot, which is a symbol considered free of dimensions. It is interpreted as the starting point. From there, the dot is surrounded by lines and geometrical patterns that symbolize the universe. It is then destroyed. The process of destroying the exquisitely crafted mandala symbolizes the Buddhist concept of impermanence.





Mask dances are considered to be moving mandalas which embody representations of divine inhabitants. The dancers replicate this through movement and spatial design. While creating the art, the children were working in a group to form a design. They did a mask dance by forming a circle with one in the middle and some around the circle.

Later they incorporated their spatial design into a pattern by using materials of their choice. They formed a line with pebbles connecting from a circle outwards to indicate that the dancer keeps moving like sun rays. From their strong repository of knowledge of the environment, art forms such as mandalas underpin and are incorporated into their designs.

Through these activities, children learn to respect, honor and take an interest in their culture, history, traditions, and values which otherwise are fading fast in the present century. This rich culture creates a sense of belonging which allows children to be their authentic selves.



Observational drawing

'Observational drawing is the careful and intense looking at a real life object and rendering it as accurately as possible. Close attention is required in order to get information and record the fine details. Observational drawing requires us to first approximate and then refine. Drawing trains our minds to work with our mistakes and use the approximations as a stepping stone towards something more satisfying. The tug and pull of risk taking in this process is fundamental to any art project. Working with mistakes is also an essential life skill.

Drawing from observation requires much practice to become confident and competent. Drawing brings together imagination, memory and observation. These three things engage the emotions, the mind and body. Using these three essential elements simultaneously makes drawing a powerful learning tool.

Observational drawing slows us down. It makes us take our time. It moves us beyond the superficial. When we are drawing from observation we are also learning how to see. We are noticing details. We are analyzing what we are drawing. We gain confidence to try new ideas and approaches. Drawing is a tool to tap into our imagination and draw out ideas to be further developed. Drawing puts us in a space where we can access the creative parts of our brain.

There are important cognitive benefits to drawing. When we draw, we engage with the subject in a very rich way. When we engage with drawing in a meaning-making manner we put together our visual knowledge of the image, our kinesthetic understanding of our hand drawing the image and our semantic memory. In combination, this greatly increases the likelihood of a deeper understanding of the concept being drawn and allows for clearer recall later.

It has been demonstrated that drawing improves memory by promoting the integration of elaborative, pictorial and motor codes, thus facilitating creation of a context-rich representation. What about those who say they cannot draw? They will be happy to know that drawing is not an innate skill that we are born with, it can be taught.'

(Brooks, 2021)





Children learn through exploring and experimenting with their environment. It is very important for children to engage in genre of art as this will not only influence the achievement of present learning outcomes but also enable behaviors and attitudes that will support future learning in children. Art education is a site for creativity, where children can explore their identities and understandings of the world while continuously advancing their holistic development.

Lalita's story about observational painting.

I set a table in the art room where children were able to view the landscape and nature through the window. Rinchen was very inquisitive about the environment around her. She described as she drew. Firstly she started describing and painting mountains. She observed many big mountains. Those which were in the far distance looked darker and those which were nearer looked lighter.

She was curious why this was so. I

explained her that things far away place usually are not so clear and so seems darker. She observed that the sky looked blue with few clouds which were pure white. She could see so many buildings in the base of the mountain. Within the environment of our Centre, she observed that our Centre was fenced with metal railings. She saw that the fountain looked like a mini mountain which was surrounded by wheels. She told me that our Centre was surrounded by many trees and looked very beautiful. She observed there were four swings and two monkey bars which were inside the sand pit. She had something to say about everything she drew. The drawing gained meaning through this dialogue.







Other children became interested in this painting activity so I put some tables on the deck. Children were able to do observational drawing and painting looking at the play yard



When I set table outside, Rinchen had a clearer view of the things around her. She was able to observe even the smaller details. She observed four balancing wooden planks just beside the swings and it was kept on the five wooden logs. The poles of swings had structure which looked like letter "A". She saw five water taps which were attached to the wall. She told me that the sky didn't look so clear since it was covered with clouds. The most surprising thing about her observation was that she asked me how mountains were formed.



I was not sure how to explain to her about tectonic forces. I took two pieces of paper plates and talked about the many plate like structure under the earth. They keep on moving and sometimes they hit each other. When they hit each other sometime it forms mountains and sometime a big hole. "But I never felt the movement." she said. It's because it happens down below the earth that is why we don't feel the movements. I was happy that a simple painting activity could create so much discussion and so many questions.





The children wanted to do more observational drawing outside so after discussion we decided to draw the garden and the plants.

Small groups would take their clipboards, pencils and paint outside into the garden.

Ajay, Rinchen and Jigme Choki were given an opportunity to see, feel, smell and then to choose their garden. Ajay chose the garden with soya beans, Jigme chose the maize garden and Rinchen chose the beans garden.



As Jigme Choki felt the maize she found that the maize plant was rough with small pricking structure on it. She observed rice like seeds (Tassel Floret) on the tip of the maize which was yellowish in colour. She saw the maize plant bore just one maize which had brown hairs (silks) in its openings. It also had many big leaves which were like flags. She observed that the stem (Tassel Internode) of a maize plant looked like a sugarcane and there were only three maize plants in a garden. She also drew a small wall behind the garden. Finally she completed her art by painting many green grasses in the garden.





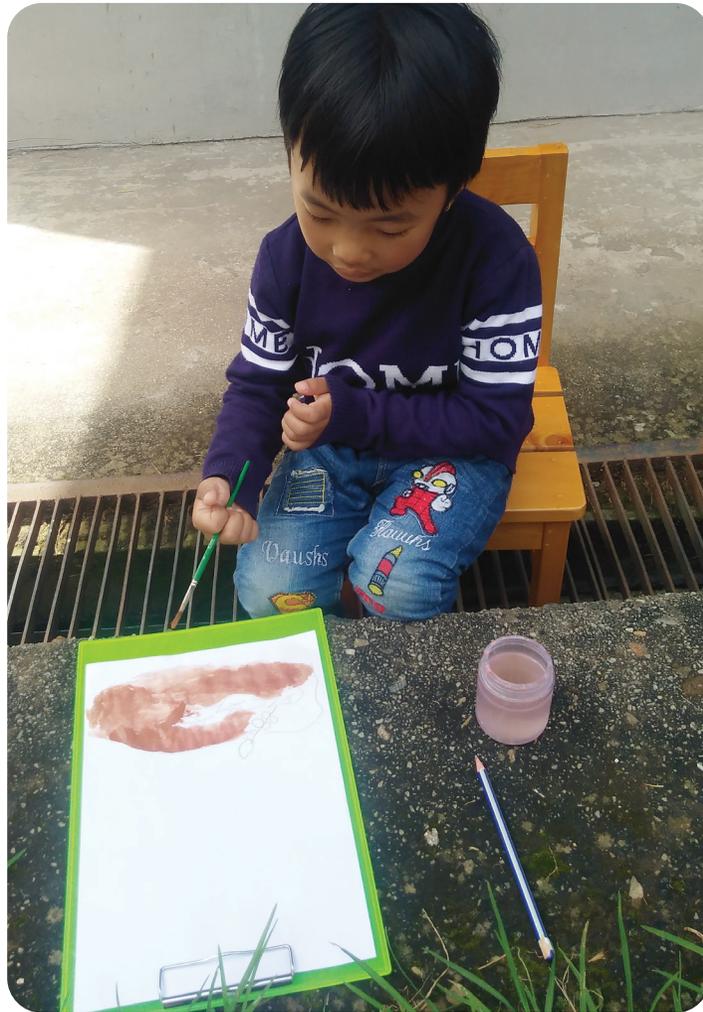
Painting a bean garden

Rinchen observed that a bean plant had many leaves which were green and brown and looked like a bush. It also bore many red pods. She observed that the pods looked like braided hair and the leaves looked like hearts.



Painting of a soya garden

Ajay observed that the soya bean plant had many green and yellow leaves but didn't have any pods in it. It looked like a jungle. He also observed that the soya bean plants and the bean plants looked similar.



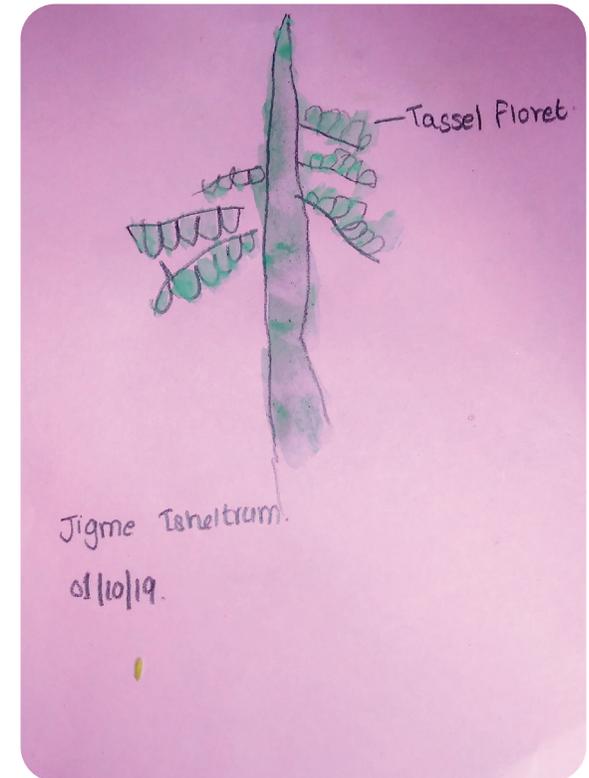


The novelty of painting outside was like a magnet and many other children wanted to try it. Jigme Tsheltrum drew a tassel floret using pencil and later she painted. She used just one color. While drawing she talked to me about her observation. She observed that the tassel floret looked like a rice plant.



On the other hand Chimi Tobgyal used two different colors to paint a tassel floret. She painted its stem with green and made small dots on the stem with yellow. It looked so beautiful.

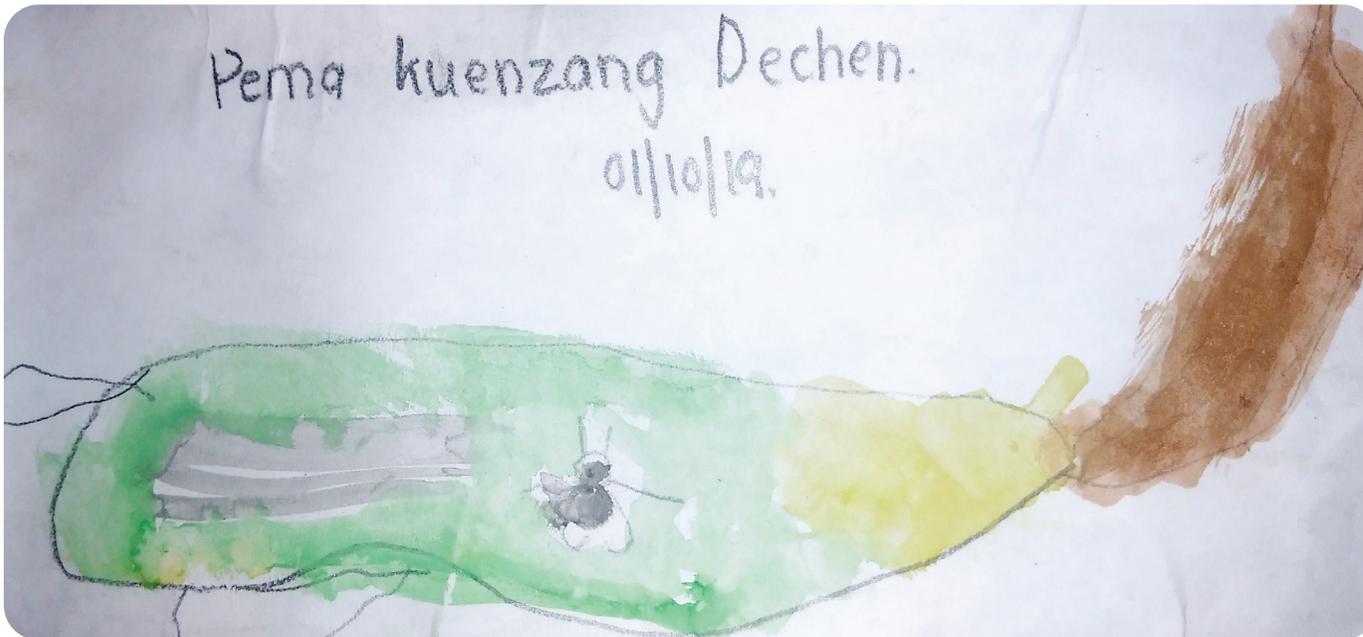
Drawing and painting outside was taken seriously and many interesting conversations resulted.





While Pema was making observational drawing of maize, she observed a small insect on the ear of the maize. "Can I draw that insect as well?" she asked me. "Why not. You can draw everything you see while observing the maize." I responded to her.

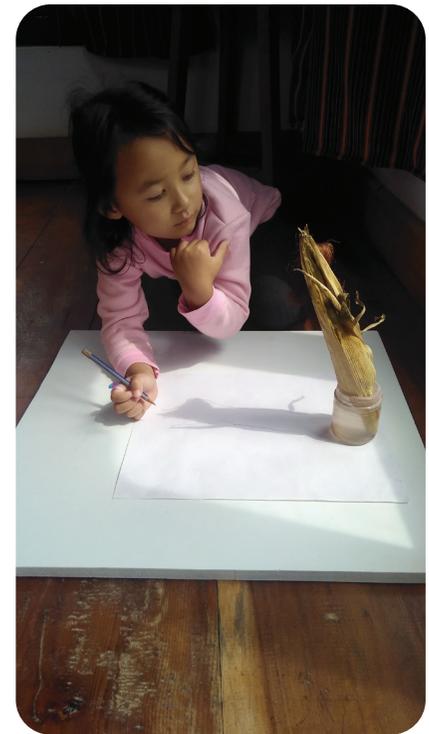
We can see that children observe so carefully.





Shadow tracing of maize,
bean leaves and maize silk

We started with shadow tracing of the things they collected from our garden, maize, silk and bean leaf. I set the area for the tracing near a window where sunlight entered. I put the maize and bean leaf in a jar with water.



While tracing they had many things to say about the shadows. Rinchen told me that the shadow she traced looked like someone dancing, whereas for the same object Aayou felt that her tracing looked like a horse. Omu was tracing the shadow of the bean leaves and she observed that it exactly looked like a bean's leaf but larger than the real leaf. She also observed that light entered through the holes in a bean leaf. Sonam felt that his tracing looked like a flower.





At Rinpung children draw and paint every day. We believe that, like many other things, practice increases their ability.

We put clip boards, paper and pencils at every activity. Children like to use these official looking tools. In the block room they plan their construction and record what they have done. In the literacy room they illustrate their books with them. In the science room they make observations of objects and natural phenomena to better understand them. In the dramatic play set up they draw what they might do there to share with others. When we go for walks we take our clipboards and pencils to record what we see.

Like play, we consider drawing and painting an essential part of children's learning.

Drawing, painting and model making help children make sense of the world they live in. Through these media they are able to share their ideas and feelings. When children are able to put their thoughts out in a concrete form they are able to stand back and discuss and evaluate them. Art becomes a tool for learning.