

The New York Times



May 10, 2012

A Home for Sketchbooks of the World

By LIZ ROBBINS

SHE remembers crashing into the chicken coop and seeing feathers flying, one of her adventures growing up on the island of Cebu in the Philippines. There, she built lonely castles of sand, played hide-and-seek through cornfields and slept in a hammock hung by her grandfather.

But it was not until Sheilla Sumayang, 28, went jogging through Williamsburg, Brooklyn, last fall that it occurred to her to document her childhood. Ducking into the Brooklyn Art Library one day — a storefront on North Third Street that she had always assumed was a regular library — Ms. Sumayang found the Sketchbook Project.

For \$25, any doodler, student, parent, graphic designer, architect (like Ms. Sumayang) or would-be artist with an idea can fill a 32-page sketchbook and add it to the collection. Some, like Ms. Sumayang, drop in; others sign up online. “I thought, ‘Why not?’ ” Ms. Sumayang said on a recent visit. “It’s down the road.”

For six years, the Sketchbook Project has been offering intimate glimpses into the imaginations of its worldwide contributors. Steven Peterman, a printmaker, and Shane Zucker, a Web developer, founded the project in Atlanta in 2006. They moved it to Brooklyn in 2009: first to Red Hook, then to Williamsburg in late 2010.

The space also houses shops for art supplies and vintage goods, but the library, opposite them, is the main attraction.

Its shelves now feature approximately 12,500 sketchbooks from more than 130 countries. An additional 7,502 sketchbooks, including Ms. Sumayang’s drawn memoir of her past, will join the permanent collection when they return from a

14-city tour, currently in Chicago and ending in Melbourne, Australia, in November.

On a recent Tuesday afternoon, the library drew locals and tourists like Thanassis Petropoulos, a professional comic-book artist visiting from Athens, who said he was so moved by the books that he thought he might submit his own next year.

“This is personal, this is someone, these are moments,” Mr. Petropoulos said after leafing through several sketchbooks with his friend George Athanasiu at one of the library’s long wooden tables. “It’s like you’re having coffee with your girlfriend and you’re going to do a sketch of her. When you’re done, this ends up here and someone from around the world can see moments from your life.”

On weekdays, school groups make field trips and freelance artists linger for hours, hoping for inspiration. Local people, like Mariana Ridgell, 34, an illustrator from Greenpoint, stop in to buy art supplies. Glass cases display flea market ephemera for sale, old-time baseball gloves mixing with vintage airline training books. On weekends, there is more foot traffic.

Merlin Whitehawk, an actor who lives in Williamsburg, wandered in because he wanted a New York Public Library card. Access to the Art Library is even easier to get: scan a preprinted card, then request two sketchbooks at a time, cataloged by themes as diverse as “dirigibles and submersibles” and “It’s raining cats or dogs.” A large portion of the collection is also available online.

The library fits neatly on its block, an upscale artistic corridor with an architectural studio across the street from apartment lofts, an art gallery, a bar, a barbershop and a used-book store. The Mast Brothers artisanal chocolate factory is also down the street. (The Art Library sells its dark chocolate bars, with custom wrappers that match the library cards, for \$9.)

Unlike the hush-hush of an actual library, a lively soundtrack hums, created by the head librarian, Chris Heuberger. He seems to know nearly every volume of the library’s collection and is eager to pull the crowd-pleasers, like intricate ink sketches suggestive of Jules Verne, or a clown pop-up book.

“This is just a great place to hang out if you lived nearby,” Mr. Athanasiu said. “We don’t have these kinds of things in Athens. We don’t have a place to hang out with total strangers.”

Or the art they create.