

# Using comics to create change

*The Miss Anthology project disrupts homogeneity with a platform for female and genderqueer youth comic artists*

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Nearly a century has passed since the foundation for modern-day comic books was created in the United States.

Although comics had existed within newspapers and magazines, "Funnies #1," published in 1929, was the first stand-alone collection of comics.

Today, the Miss Anthology project in Portland is taking that creative foundation and using it to "support racially and economically diverse female and genderqueer youth" by teaching comics and publishing their work.

Co-founded by Melanie Stevens, Emily Lewis and Mack Carlisle, Miss Anthology is made possible through generous grant funding from a variety of sources, including the Precipice Fund and Andy Warhol Foundation. After a successful summer of workshops led by comics instructors and enthusiasts within the community, the first volume of Miss Anthology has finally come to fruition. This weekend, a handful of the newly-

published youth authors will join Stevens at the Rose City Comic Con to experience the convention and showcase their work.

While publishing their stories is one component of the Miss Anthology project, Stevens explains that the other major component is education. In its inaugural programming, up to 15 students – most of them new to the art form – were invited to delve into the world of comics over an eight-week course. Beginning

with comic origins and history, each workshop focused on a unique element of comics and slowly introduced techniques and new materials.

"Each student got their own sketchbook, a Pigma Micron pen and graphic pencils. We just kind of wanted to sort of whet their appetites for how to begin the process of making these comics and making these stories," said Stevens.

Anna Vo, an illustrator and zinester, taught students about the significance of lettering and how to evoke emotion with hand-drawn fonts, while Kinoko Evans provided a basis for comic layouts and writing. Kelly Fitzpatrick, an award-winning colorist that has worked with Dark Horse and DC Comics, among others, gave an



Melanie Stevens

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overview of digital inking, coloring, and postproduction. "The first two (segments) were really getting into the meat of where comics came from – both in America and abroad – and (provided) some of the history through different decades," Stevens said. "Part of that was instilling a media literacy and intentionality, as well as critical analysis about what (the students were) looking at as artists and how to decipher the coding that goes into the creation of different images in art."

Although she's a talented illustrator and writer with an MFA from the Pacific Northwest College of Art now, it wasn't until college that Stevens remembers picking up her first graphic novel. "I was particularly attracted to graphic novels because of the combination of visual art and text, and the ability to tell stories," she said. "I found that particularly fascinating and a rare opportunity to exercise a type of agency with narratives that isn't often afforded in other genres and mediums."

Stevens was raised in Atlanta, Ga., and recalls having created art for most of her life. While she'd spent some time working with youth in collaboration with the Boys and Girls Club, this was the first time she's worked so closely with youth and for such an extensive amount of time.

"I think a lot of the problem with diversity, in witnessing it myself as a black woman in the art industry, is that I feel like we're getting to the problem a little bit too late in the game," she said. "So my feeling is that if we start earlier – if we empower youth to learn how to tell their own stories, how to go around the gatekeepers, how to disseminate their art – that we would unveil a tool that would be useful for them in the future and (would) create a real opportunity to change the landscape."

The landscape that Stevens refers to is the comics industry which remains severely

homogeneous. Comics historian and researcher, Tim Hanley, found that as of 2014 there were eight times as many male creators as there were female when examining DC Comics and Marvel. Furthermore, 79 percent identified as white. By focusing on youth who are underrepresented within the comics industry, Miss Anthology hopes to propel them into a network of supportive peers and professionals.

"Narratives tend to be both a reflection and a reinforcement of societal power structures, and I think that subverting and interrupting common narratives and tropes can be a form of activism," Stevens said. "I know for myself, it was often very difficult to ingratiate myself with pop culture because I rarely saw myself or people who looked like me in various mediums. So I took to creating my own narratives and creating my own art which did reflect the people that I knew or the people in my life or the people who looked like me. It was empowering to see this work that I didn't get to see in mainstream art. That can be a powerful tool – it's a source of agency."

As the group gears up to debut their finished product at Rose City Comic Con, Stevens said the six artists who submitted for Miss Anthology are budding with excitement. "The age range is from 13 to 17 (years old) and it's a pretty big deal to get your work published. We've gotten a lot of good reactions from them."

Stevens hopes that by next year, more youth will get involved and those who participate in their workshops will feel encouraged to submit. "I think that a lot of them felt very insecure about their work so that's definitely something that we're going to work on in the future. There are some miscommunications about what people consider a finished work, I think." Instead of printing 100 pages of content again, Stevens said Miss Anthology 2018 would like to see that number doubled.