

Alebrijes - A Perfect Gourd Fantasy for Kids

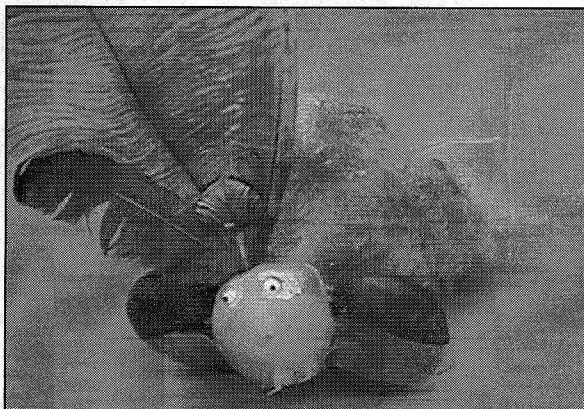
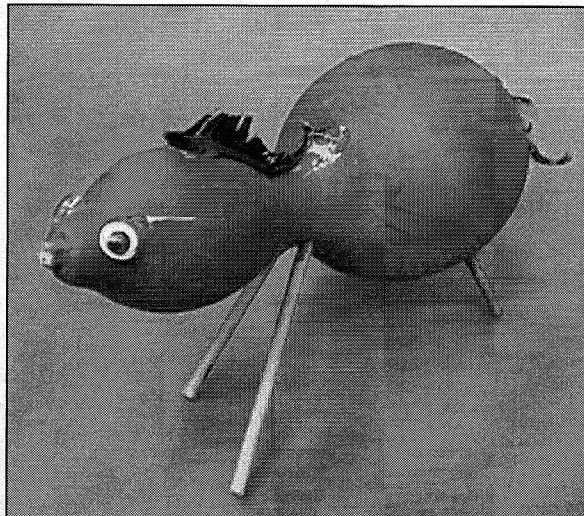
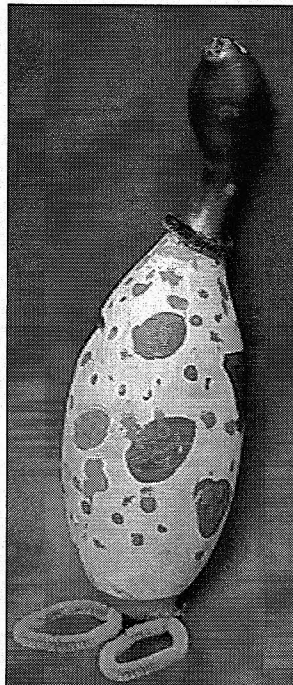
By Leigh Adams

As the school year drew to an end, my last camping trip impending, I realized that my younger students hadn't had an opportunity to do their annual gourd projects in my Spanish classes. I needed a project that would allow the students freedom of imagination and afford them the maximum enjoyment of artistic processes. I thought a lot about how adult interference and judgements create the roadblocks that lead to the suppression of creative thought and action. How could I give the students an opportunity to fully express their imaginations and do so in a school year in which I had less time than ever before to support my students?

Alebrijes were the answer. There is no translation for the Spanish language word "alebrije". If pressed, a Mexican folk artist may give an erudite "alebrijes represent the triumph of good over evil" one day and the next day will laugh and say "good over evil, I must have been dreaming!" (An actual response given by a very creative Oaxacan friend.) The simplest description is that alebrijes are fantasy animals usually carved out of wood or made from paper mache and painted in truly joyous colors. To inspire the 6 to 10 year old students, I showed them a real (but stuffed and ancient) armadillo. They were duly impressed. Then I showed them a Larry McClelland armadillo made out of a gourd and painted with wonderfully bright and colorful patterns. Extremely impressed! And then I gave each one of them a gourd. They were allowed to trade with one another or to trade back to me and then the wild rumpus began.

"What do we do?" "What are we supposed to make?" Repiten por favor, "Que vamos a hacer?" They chorused, "kaybamosaser?" "What are we going to do?" I showed them feathers, beads, paints, yarn, eyes and paper clay. Anxious to get to work, the students scrubbed their gourds and wrote a note to their parents. "Queridos padres, I need buttons, beads, feathers, pipe cleaners, leather and other fun stuff I can trade with my classmates for a gourd project in Spanish class." With the added ingredients brought in by the children and the goat hair, twigs, shells, seed pods and beads contributed by my friends who love to see how the kids use the materials, the students got to work. Whenever they wanted to attach something, a colorful dowel for a leg or a feather for a topknot or wing, I made a hole with an awl. No other cutting was necessary and I was delighted that this project required no sawing! No gourd dust, no sneezing, no allergies or sensitivities.

As the creatures began to manifest, the children's eyes grew larger and larger. A few reminders that "these are not toys,



these are works of art" helped to keep the alebrijes intact and developing. They sprouted wings, developed topknots, grew stilts and huge feet. They began to get named in English and Spanish. And when the alebrijes neared completion, the children began to write about them and create their stories.

Please give this project a try with your students. Assure them that they are the only ones who know the right way to make their personal alebrijes. Let them have as many eyes, ears, noses and wings as they would like and enjoy the magic that occurs.

