

Arts and Issues: Creating a Context for Art

Arts and Issues was developed as an introductory course for high school sophomores. Central to the program is the concept that imaging, or the mental construction of images, is fundamental to understanding. Because the course is concerned with developing understanding through the art object, it stresses the importance of critical thinking in studio work rather than the mastery of specific skills.

The program is comprised of eight units, each of which includes both structured and open-ended studio projects based on personal experience, contemporary aesthetics and historical models. It is fundamental to the program that students see themselves as artists whose efforts, though less focused, are similar to those of professional artists. It is also important that students have access to alternative methods of experiencing, speaking about, and constructing images.

Organizational codes

Students approach experiencing, speaking about and constructing images in two fundamentally different styles: expressive and analytical.

Expression. Through an examination of works by artists such as Anselm Keifer and Willem de Kooning, students are directed toward expression in both the style and content of contemporary works. In this way students are encouraged to differentiate between the work of artists who apply an expressive working style and artists whose work is expressive only in content. In seeking exemplary works in which artists use distortion and expression, the path leads to works cov-



Zachary Meadow, grade 11, pastel on paper. A pre-Columbian deity serves as the central elements in this student initiated project for the unit on iconographic symbols.

ering a range of cultures and periods such as Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* or Rodin's *Balzac*.

Written reflection on the subject of

expression involves the use of poetic associations. Students are asked to compose poems based upon a single work. Writing in a poetic style en-

courages the use of expressive verbalization that corresponds with the expressive nature of the unit and fosters a sensitivity for the value of intuitive thought.

This particular teacher-guided project was a series of two-dimensional works that moved from pastels to paint to collage over a period of four weeks. Aimee Hultman's works show how this series can develop into images that are compositionally rich and expressively individualized. Kendra Carter's assemblage constructed from a garbage disposal came to class complete with a dangling Barbie doll leg along with the signs "useless" and "hopeless" added in a fit of adolescent indignation.

Analysis. The students are introduced to the concept of analysis through the works of contemporary artists such as Arman, Close and Arakawa and through historical examples such as the Taj Mahal and Poussin's *The Judgement of Solomon*. As in the unit on expression, students are encouraged to differentiate between the use of an analytic working style, such as critical thinking or problem solving, and analytic context, such as perspective, sequence and modularity. The creation of art through a formal analytical system has led to student-initiated studio projects, such as a photographic series that documented a scene over specific intervals of time, and a modular sculpture comprised of tennis shoes tied around a bicycle wheel to form a "walking wheel."

As they focus on the features of an analytical system, the students are asked to identify how categorization and analysis helps them to structure their everyday lives. For example, how they organize their time or how they categorize friends and acquaintances.

A theoretical approach to writing about art is done through a critical model that starts with a theory. For example, a model might judge the merit of art by the degree to which its



Ari Vena, grade 11, pastel on paper. The heart serves as the central elements in this student-initiated project for the unit on iconographic symbols.

elements are harmonious, and then show how individual features of the work reflect that harmony. Through this method, students see that we come to art with theories in hand.

Symbolic codes

While experiencing, speaking about and constructing images can involve a mixture of expressive and analytical learning styles, the interpretation of art requires an explanation of what

we mean by the term "representation." The goal is to alter the students' understanding of representation from a conception based on mere resemblance, such as in Audubon's prints, to a more abstract conception based on culturally determined symbols, such as in Duchamp's Readymades.

Observation. Students are generally comfortable with representation based upon "direct" observation. However, even the most realistic images can introduce different areas of interest. For instance, Wyeth's work introduces students to the role of nostalgia and memory, Flack's to the "truth" of photography, and Chardin's to the limits of one-point perspective.

In writing about art, the students are asked to use a critical model that starts with a description of the physical and sensory images in a work. The model moves on to an interpretation of the work and finally to the development of a theory about how representation functions in that image. Appropriate approaches to the construction of images based upon observation include traditional studio exercises such as contour drawing, life drawing, direct impressionist paintings and clay sculpture modeled from objects.

Imagination. In this section, students view works that stress imaginative imagery such as the works of contemporary artists like Clemente, Bacon and Rothenburg, as well as historical images such as shaman masks, the visions of William Blake, and Kahlo's *Two Fridas*. Students are asked to reflect upon how imagination is used in these works to develop a conception of reality.

Students are also asked to reflect on the self and social images they imagine themselves to portray and to consider the role that these images play in their lives. This enables the students to see how representation through distortion of mental images (both physical and symbolic) is fundamental to daily life.

Studio assignments are designed to allow the students to employ private



Kendra Carter, grade 10, assemblage from a garbage disposal. This work was completed for the expression unit in a student-initiated project.

language and personal content to communicate their themes. One assignment had students distort a household appliance so that it made a comment on their family life. One student brought in a portable radio. The front side was slick and clean and broadcast laudable family achievements. On the back side, the housing of the radio had been torn off. Inside a lone figure, crouched amid the tangled wires, cranked out the public message.

Verbal responses include student narratives based upon clues drawn from a particular work of art. For example, after viewing Hopper's *Nighthawks* students are asked to construct a screenplay in which this painting serves as a single scene.

Iconography. While personal symbols may have an immediate appeal to teenagers, a study of iconographic symbols requires specific research into their historical meaning. This unit is particularly helpful in developing a multicultural awareness and understanding. It also develops an understanding of related issues such as myths, fetishes, totems and dogmas.

Written work for this section takes the form of a research paper that examines the historical foundations of a particular image. Through this research, students are to find specific examples of the iconographic element that they have researched. This research is developed into a series of works in which students address a particular issue or problem. Ari Vena's work was the culmination of a

series of sketches that employed the "heart" as a historical symbol. Zachary Meadow's pastel centered around a traditional pre-Columbian deity.

Graphic forms. Through the contemporary images of artists such as Jasper Johns, Barbara Kruger and Ed Ruscha, students are introduced to the symbolic use of alternative graphic forms including phonetic text, graphic symbols, pictographs, optical representation, physical objects, sensory materials, etc. Important here is the interpretations to how different symbol systems are used within a specific work, such as Kruger's use of words and images and the Egyptians' use of pictographs and images.

One project required that a visual representation be combined with a text to form an ironic interplay, such as in Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas un pipe*. Students construct images within which different systems of representation interact.

Students are then asked to write a functional interpretation of an image. For example, students interpret the different graphic forms in Jasper John's *Summer*, and discuss the roles that each system plays. This task is the most puzzle-like of any of the written assignments.

Aesthetic codes

These units have served to open up the students' awareness of how representation functions in their lives. It is now necessary to spend time thinking

about specific aesthetic relationships. The last two sections deal with two different aesthetic concepts: presence and context.

Presence. The integrity of the art object exerts a force upon the viewer. Contemporary examples of works by artists like Kelly, Serra or Murray as well as historical examples, such as the Lascaux caves, Chartres cathedral, Monet's *Waterlilies* and Zen landscape paintings, emphasize the pre-cognitive relationships that are formed between people and objects. Students are encouraged to reflect upon instances where the physical and sensory properties of particular locations have affected their attitudes toward that space.

Works such as these form models from which students write poetic descriptions which employ colorful language and include personal memory. Writing is used to move the students into the same emotional space that they perceive in the image. Other considerations include placing a priority on elements that are important components of presence, such as scale, surface and composition.

Context. The final section is constructed to develop the students' awareness of the social and environmental contexts that affect the production of art. Through the contemporary works and methods of artists, such as Christo, Rollins and Haacke, and through historical exemplars that include Native American sand paintings, Chartres cathedral

and Heartfield's photomontages, students come to see the diverse contexts that surround various artworks. Students are encouraged to think further about the interrelationships between images and the events in their lives, including issues relating to gender, consumerism and multiculturalism.

One way to end the course could be an installation in the artroom that addresses an agreed upon issue but contains the various perspectives of each of the students. An alternative is individual site-specific "guerilla art" projects done throughout the campus directed specifically at school-related issues. This is an excellent way of bringing provocative installations out of the classroom and into the halls.

Conclusion

In this course, students are encouraged to engage in a range of procedures, problems and conceptions that will expand the ways in which they experience, speak about and construct images. Art instruction, from this perspective, should be measured by the degree to which it strengthens students' abilities to interact critically with the images that structure their lives.▲

John H. White Jr. developed this curriculum while teaching art at Crossroads School, Santa Monica, California.



Aimee Hultman, grade 10, pastel on paper, This work was completed for the expression unit in a teacher-directed project.