

Observe Like O'Keeffe



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Close observation and mindful focus are tools for true artistic exploration

Artist Georgia O'Keeffe was an important 20th century artist, but it's impossible to classify her work or her ideas with any particular movement in art. O'Keeffe was an independent observer, with a keen ability to edit what she observed and focus in on the components that intrigued her.

"It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis," she said, "that we get at the real meaning of things."

With nature as her muse, O'Keeffe carefully studied and connected with a subject - then isolated connection to the canvas. Rather than making a painting of a landscape or still life, she focused on the nuances of colors on a form or a single perfect curve described by soft, transitional shading, or the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated objects.

Had O'Keeffe been painting in the current age, her work may have been associated with the concept of "mindfulness". Being mindful, in very simplified terms, is being fully present in the moment, paying close attention to current surroundings and sensations. As a practice, it encourages simplification, observance and focus by eliminating unnecessary distraction.

To sharpen observation skills and dive into the essence of a subject, this lesson takes cues from O'Keeffe and focuses on connections using mindful practices.

Students use a viewfinder or cell phone cropping to "zoom in" on their chosen subject and explore various viewpoints. While studying what they see, they also make a list of what their other senses discover. All of the information that is gathered is then expressed through drawing and collage and assembled into an artistic arrangement.

"To see takes time," Georgia O'Keeffe is quoted as saying, "like to have a friend takes time."



Materials (required)

Blick Student Grade Illustration Board, 20" x 30", 14-ply (13414-1003); share five sheets across class

Pacon Card Stock, Black, 8-1/2" x 11", pkg of 100 sheets (11319-2021); share one package across class

Drawing Materials, recommend:

Blick Essentials Mechanical Pencils, 0.7mm (26814-5917); need one per student

Derwent Onyx Drawing Pencils, Dark (20339-1003); need one per student

Sakura Koi Coloring Brush Pens, set of 12 (19902-0129); share one set between three students

Faber-Castell Goldfaber Colored Pencils, classpack of 144 (22652-1449); share across class

Elmer's Craft Bond Extra Strength Glue Sticks, pkg of 4, size 0.21 oz (83816-1004); share 3 pkgs across class

Scotch Precision Student Scissors, 7" (86002-1007); need one per student

Collage Materials, recommend:

Decorative Paper Assortment, 1 lb (12440-1001); share one across class

Roylco Feely Fabric Shapes, classpack of 216 (65313-1001); share one across class

Paper Accents Cardstock Super Value Pack, assorted colors, 8.5" x 11" pkg of 200 sheets (11329-1851); share one across class

Optional Materials

ViewCatcher, pkg of 12 (0/1001)

Scratch Art 3D O's, pkg of 400 (14904-1003)



Preparation

1. View paintings and drawings by Georgia O'Keeffe and discuss the artist's choices. For example: what did she choose to focus on? What did she choose to leave out?
2. Students will select a subject to study and explore. It's best to choose an item that they may already have a connection to. Examples might include a backpack, shoe, or a favorite food item. Avoid items that are 2-dimensional, such as photos or books. To further explore Georgia O'Keeffe's ideas, the subject could be an object from nature.
3. Cut illustration board. Each student will need one 8" x 10" piece. Cut remaining board into pieces approximately 2" x 3" (does not need to be exact). Plan on providing a minimum of 10 of the smaller pieces per student.

Process

1. Make a viewfinder using one of these methods:
 - Cut strips card stock. Each student will need two strips approximately 1.25" x 4" and two approximately 1.25" x 4.5". Glue, tape or staple the corners together to form a frame.
 - Cut a viewfinder opening from a piece of card stock using a craft knife.
 - For a viewfinder that can be used over and over again, a plastic Viewcatcher is adjustable and long lasting.
 - Using a cell phone camera, take closeup reference photos..
2. View the subject from as many angles as possible, filling the frame and holding it close to the subject. Make sketches of what is seen through the frame onto the smaller cards. Use pencil, pen, marker or other drawing media. Sketches can be made quickly and refined later.
3. While viewing and sketching, keep a piece of note paper at hand. Write down any descriptive words that come to mind. What words would be used to describe what is seen and felt as the subject is studied? For example: round, soft, sharp, rough, shiny, etc.
4. After the cards are filled with sketches, return to the list and write down words that describe what other physical senses notice about the subject. Is there a smell or sound associated with it?
5. Choose a few of the words from the list and create text that visually describes each word. Text can be drawn on remaining cards (cut as needed) or designed using materials that match the word. For instance, the word "round" might be drawn with balloon-style lettering. "Rough" might be drawn on burlap and "shiny" could incorporate metallic markers or foil.
6. Create a collage by gluing the sketches, words, and other objects onto an 8" x 10" piece of illustration board. For emphasis, place small scraps of illustration board or other materials beneath cards so that the collage has a variety of dimension. Pieces can overlap and be positioned horizontally, vertically or diagonally.

Option

After completing steps 1-4, select one sketch and 1-2 sensory words. Create a painting from that sketch that also emphasizes the descriptive word. For example, build up textures to represent roughness or emphasize highlights to communicate shine.



Step 1: Make a viewfinder or use a cell phone camera to capture multiple, close-up views of chosen subject. Create sketches.



Step 2: Make a list of sensory words that describe the subject. Create text that visually represents the words.



Step 3: Assemble words and sketches into a dimensional collage.

Ready to order materials?

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National Core Arts Standards - Visual Arts

Creating

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Presenting

Anchor Standard 6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artwork.

Responding

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Connecting

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.