

## **Case Study Narratives**

### **Bringing Contemporary Art into the High School Classroom**

The unusual, magical, everyday, unexpected, expanding a moment, contracting the universe become ingredients in my art21 classroom. The essentials of skill building, visual analysis, decoration and representation as the foundation of art education become the building blocks and notations in a more contemporary approach to the making art. Taking the leap into the contemporary classroom, which up until now, I had done to the degree I thought appropriate, became the driving force behind my lesson planning and execution after the summer of 2010 Art21 Educators Institute in New York City.

As an art educator, I made a point of making annual field trips to Site Santa Fe, a contemporary art gallery in Santa Fe, NM. Student's response to the experience was as expected: eye-opening, jaw-dropping, shocking and all-at-once student's view of art was revolutionized. Returning to the classroom, we would talk about what we saw. I wanted their everyday art projects to be engaging on all those levels. As a teacher with multiple endorsements, I was assigned several different subjects every year. Making big changes in my curriculum seemed nearly impossible, then I was accepted into the Art21 2010 Educator Institute: the scaffolding for change in the classroom was at hand.

The presentation of ancient art initiated this unit on contemporary art. In the beginning, I found it difficult to make the switch from teaching making to teaching thinking and making to students with little or no formal art training. I tended to err on the side of set-up, as I also teach history, and really work the thinking aspect into my introductions. I always want students to have plenty of ideas before we start on the making.

#### **Narrative One:**

##### **Art, History and Contemporary Art**

Contemporary art instruction prompted by art21 resources promotes creative thinking in ways that encourage students to think beyond the skill-based representations in which the traditional art classroom succeeds. Where these classrooms create an atmosphere of rendering likenesses of objects, students understand the context of the point of the instruction. When introducing what might be considered unorthodox practices into the art classroom, I think it pays to make strong historical connections, so that students gain a web of understanding before advancing into the new frontier of contemporary art-making. In my situation as a multi-disciplinary instructor, diving right into contemporary art instruction would represent a missed opportunity to make connections across disciplines, and ground student learning more deeply by creating cross-references. I often have the same students in more than one class, so building bridges from one period of time to another, or one subject to another has become an key ingredient in laying out a matrix of incidents and their contexts. An instructional strategy like this creates the opportunity for building complex meaning, complex learning and complex thinking into contemporary art projects.

Essential questions become the driving idea in contemporary art instruction. In my unit called Learning from Objects, the essential questions are: Learning from Objects: Essential Question: What connects you to an object?

*What connects you to an object? What do objects tell us about their makers and their culture? How were the Greeks connected to their objects and what does this tell us about their culture?*

In the beginning, to build context into the content of the project. Full of utilitarian purpose, ancient makers, enriched everyday objects with what we, today, would consider extravagant for a utilitarian vessel. We talked about the elements and principles as they related to the images, placement and design of the overall piece of ceramics. We looked at and talked about the shapes of the urns, and the grace and movement of the surface imagery.

To emphasize the figurative nature of the shapes and illustrate the tendency of humans to produce objects that are proportionally similar to humans, became a key idea in developing a universal connection between objects and humans. Tugging at this visual line, gave ample opportunity to look in on and discuss cultures and their context over time. As many things, like technique and materials, and images change, many things remain the same.



*Illustration 1: Aphrodite and Dionysis, red-figure terra-cotta, reproduction, c.540 B.C.E.*



*Illustration 2: Attributed to Exekias, terra-cotta amphora with lid Archaic period c.540 B.C.E.*

*What connects you to an object? What do objects tell us about their makers and their culture? What's the difference between craft and art objects?*

We engaged in a discussion about what was important to Greek artisans. The gist of it: The hand-made nature of these utilitarian objects revealed a closeness between the artisan and object they make that is still present today, but most utilitarian objects are mass produced. Students made a T-chart to compare and contrast today's images and subject-matter with the ancient Greeks. Contemporary water containers usually sport the logo of the manufacturer, an athlete, mountain tops, while the Greeks more often than not chose to represent gods and goddesses. I chose hunting, boating, and agrarian theme to make the comparison to modern day activities in our community.



*Illustration 3: Heracles & Cerberus, Caeretan black-figure hydria c.6th B.C.E. Eurystheus ordered Hercules to go to the Underworld, which was underwater and kidnap the beast called Cerberus (or Kerberos). Eurystheus must have been sure Hercules would never succeed at this impossible task. Nice water bottle!*



*Illustration 4: Exekias, black-figure kylix, 530 B.C.E. The story illustrated here is from the Homeric Hymn to Dionysus. Dionysus takes command of the ship, has the spars bear grape vines (for wine), and when the frightened sailors jump ship, they turn into dolphins. People drank out of this!*

## Narrative Two: Context in the Contemporary Art Classroom

A set of descriptives, narratives, and circumstances, named or unnamed that we hold individually and collectively, will determine our responses, our willingness to cooperative and most of all, deliver on our sense of belonging in an environment or not. When a student feels that sense of belonging, that student is more likely to participate and produce quality work. Contemporary creativity builds on contemporary context. With that in mind, I endeavor to employ a strategy that looks to what is happening in the classroom. In other words, have I correctly predicted the response to a lesson, demonstration or video? Are enough students absent that I need to enrich or re-invent an earlier classroom episode? Is the understanding of a concept or outcome of an interaction taking an unanticipated turn? I have just described a productive contemporary learning environment. Often scripted curricula move away from students' contexts. Fortuitously, contemporary art21 artists provide a rich dish of offerings that serve up to an atmosphere of divergent and unanticipated turns. Fresh examples of artists who currently work in the world we live in model idea exploration in use of materials, all manner of subject matter. Thereby creating examples enough for students to realize more about the presence of art now and in the future, and to get them to access their own context to do their artistic best.

*What connects you to an object? What do objects tell us about their makers and their culture? What's the role of craftsmanship in creating objects?*

Kara Walker's double silhouette revealed the nature of contrasting shapes of story telling in contemporary art and subject matter. Students discover that descriptive handmade images of events mostly grace walls. Walker juxtaposed past and present by layering one image on top of another. The stories told on the Greek urns were told in layers, not overlapping layers, but the vertical stacking of one on top of the other. Students immediately saw the radical shift that placement had on meaning.

Students were connected instantly to this image through the familiar silhouette. Everything about this image is handmade by the artist expect for the process of printing, which students decided was more of a craft. The art was in the drawing, the idea and the design.



*Illustration 5: Exodus of Confederates from Atlanta 2005 (Portfolio of 15) Offset lithography/silkscreen 39 x 53 inches. Walker unleashes the traditionally proper Victorian medium of the silhouette directly onto the walls of the gallery, creating a theatrical space in which her unruly cut-paper characters fornicate and inflict violence on one another... With one foot in the historical realism of slavery and the other in the fantastical space of the romance novel, Walker's nightmarish fictions simultaneously seduce and implicate the audience.*

<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/walker/>

*What connects you to an object? What do objects tell us about their makers and their culture? What's the role of craftsmanship in creating objects?*

The point of introducing Raymond Loewy's timeless designs is to create a visual counterpoint between modern and ancient modes of transportation and drinking bottles. Furthermore, to generate the discussion on the difference between art and craft.

Juxtaposition of cultural contexts gives breadth to ideas and establishes a bond different cultures. The similarities resonate. It's all about moving through space on a vehicle and consumption and how we/artists record that (in this context anyway.) With what and how we do that defines our cultures. The Studebaker relates to Exekias' horses in illustration 2 and Dionysis' boat in illustration 4.



*Illustration 6: The 1951 Land Cruiser was a long-wheelbase sedan with suicide doors and the more refined version of Studebaker's 'bullet-nose' styling. It also had Studebaker's all-new OHV V-8 engine, one of the most advanced engines available from any car maker.*

*What connects you to an object?*

Again, Loewy's Coca-Cola bottle transitions us from the oinochoe depicting Greek Aphrodite and art21 artist Josiah McElheny's Venini. Touching back on the familiar creates the sense of continuity between cultures over time. Once again the designs are described by students as definitely art, machine manufactured objects are not, nor are they craft.

'between two products equal in price, function, and quality, the better looking will outsell the other.' he proved that the success of a product is as dependent on aesthetics as function.

'the goal of design is to sell,' he said. 'and to drive the point home, he added, 'the loveliest curve I know is the sales curve.'

<http://www.designboom.com/portrait/loewy.html>



*Illustration 7: Raymond Loewy said, 'the coke bottle is the most perfectly designed package in the world.'*

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Students were immediately attracted by the feminine aspects of the McElheny's glass blown shapes. After watching the art21 video, they were able to determine that they were more attracted to these because the objects are unique. That made the handmade glass-blowing employed by McElheny an art. If he was making the same shape over and over again, it might be considered a craft.



*Illustration 8: Influenced by the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, McElheny's work often takes the form of 'historical fiction'—which he offers to the viewer to believe or not. Part of McElheny's fascination with storytelling is that glassmaking is part of an oral tradition handed down generation to generation, artisan to artisan.*

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McElheny's Total Reflective Abstraction was a stunning sight. Reflective bottles covered with silver nitrate brought to the point of understanding knowing the contemporary. They were able to say that these bottles were artistic, required a high degree of craftsmanship, and had a modern appeal and newness that made them want to watch the process and displays several times. These bottles represent a blossoming of contemporary culture.



*Illustration 9: In "Total Reflective Abstraction" (2003-04), the mirrored works themselves refract the artist's self-reflexive examination. Looking at a reflective object becomes a metaphor for the act of reflecting on an idea.*

## **Narrative Three: Flow in the Contemporary Art Classroom**

In a 45 minute work day in the art room, flow is a difficult, but essential aspect of art-making to achieve. When a student says, "you mean it's already time to clean up?", you know that the generative atmosphere (context) is there.

Next, the student's work was to design and create their own contemporary object from clay.

Working with clay is a wonderful thing. Student connection to the materials they used developed into a close student object relationship. More remote was the design and application of the surface decoration and creating something current and meaningful was a slower process.



Students were required to write about their urns once they were finished. Using the elements, they made references about their object to their object, their object to themselves and their object to the world. I originally thought that they might chose to inscribe this text with an image on the surface of the urn. They wanted to take a different direction. We scanned in the text and I projected it on to the urn. We needed some kind of dramatic movement. Drama creates connections!

My Pottery and Me- COLOR-color of my pot is brown like the mesa's that surround my house. LINE- lines on my pot define a shirt with a collar and pocket, with a tie. SHAPE- The shape of my pot reminds me a human torso. TEXTURE- The texture of my pot reminds me of polished wood of stone. FORM- The form of my pot reminds me of vase.

Time was running out for this unit. Students were given Nikon L12 video camera for one night and they had to come up with connective footage. Many of our students don't get home from school until after dark, so students chose to videotape the landscape from the bus window. Those who weren't done on schedule, just downloaded road footage from YouTube. Some students layered text over the video before projecting the moving image,, others added music. The text they used was based on what they had written previously. (see Illustration 11.) We projected that video onto their greenware ceramic urns.

Place student videos here.



Student work



Student Work



Student Work



Student work



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