

Education: Lesson Plan

RESOURCES FOR K-12 EDUCATORS

Pas de Deux

Alex Katz, American, b. 1927, Pas de Deux (detail), 1983.

oil on canvas, 132" x 360", gift of Paul J. Schupf H'91 in honor of Hugh J. Gourley III

Gift of Paul J. Schupf LL.D. '91 in honor of High J. Gourley III.

Lesson: Alex Katz

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In 1992, Katz donated 400 of his works to the Colby College Museum of Art, and in 1996 the Paul J. Schupf Wing for the Works of Alex Katz was completed through the generosity of then Colby trustee Paul J. Schupf, who contributed the naming gift for the building. The Colby College Museum of Art is one of the few museums in the United States with a wing devoted to a single living artist.

Summary

Artist Alex Katz has created important art works in the style of modern realism. His paintings and prints explore light, landscape, time, fashion, and human relationships. Katz's trademark techniques include: pouncing (perforating a drawing and dusting it with chalk to transfer an image to canvas); using billboard-scale canvasses, and painting in strong flat colors. These techniques showcase composition, scale, light (natural and artificial) and the ephemeral nature of moments in time. His works appear deceptively minimal, and yet they contain a blunt and aggressive beauty.

Pre-Museum Visit Activities

K-4:

Discussion: What parts of our faces and bodies convey feelings? Students will pair up and face each other. The instructor will call out different emotions (sad, happy, angry, etc) and students will express those emotions. After each enactment, students will share the different parts of their partner's face and body that moved to make each expression. Share that Alex Katz is a living artist whose pictures capture his subjects' expressions. Examples of Katz's portraits can be found on the Museum's Web site.

Extension Activity: Give students a piece of white paper. Fold it in fourths and ask students to think of eight emotions and draw them on the paper (four on the front, four on the back). Remind students to incorporate the expressions they saw their partner make.

5-8:

Discussion: Collect old magazines and glossy advertisements. Break the class into small groups and distribute the magazines to the groups. Ask each group to find five advertisements that they find

appealing. Discuss which advertisements compelled the students. Are there people in the images? What are the people doing? What emotions do they seem to be feeling? Have students describe the colors and lines in the images.

Read the following quotation from Alex Katz's book, *Positions in Contemporary Art* (Cantz Verlag, 1997): "I love the bluntness of illustrations. I love the way they present images, and the quality of the image. The story in images are sometimes corny, but they have a way of aggressively presenting an image which I like." Explain that Alex Katz is a living artist who uses images to depict halted moments in time. Examples of his works can be found on the Museum's Web site.

Extension Activity:

Ask students to think about a time when they saw something first-hand (not filmed or televised) that stuck in their memory. Ask them to recreate that image in as much detail as they can, capturing the light when that moment occurred. Students should use at least five different colors in their work. Questions to consider: Were there other people present? What did their faces look like? Was it day? Was it night? What were you feeling when the moment happened?

When the picture is completed, discuss the difficulties involved in capturing a moment in time. Questions to consider: Does your picture do the moment justice? If you could improve your picture, what would you change/add/subtract? How do an artist's ability and technique affect the way a moment is captured?

High School:

Discussion: Select some images of Alex Katz's work and show them to the students. (images can be found on the Museum's Web site.)

Ask students to identify what makes Katz's style unique. Point out that Alex Katz's works contain flat color: the colors are simple and there is very little shading. His contour lines are also simplified.

Discuss why an artist would choose to simplify his/her composition in this way and discuss how these techniques affect the mood of his work.

Extension Activity:

Ask students to draw two self-portraits. For the first portrait, students must use ten or more colors and complex details and lines to complete the drawing. For the second portrait, students must use three or fewer colors to complete the portrait. Students must only use simple lines and little detail. Ask students to write a one- to two-page paper comparing and contrasting their two pictures.

Museum Visit Activities

In addition to participating in a docent-led tour of the Museum, teachers can lead their students in the following activities in the galleries.

Poses

Approach Katz's painting *Pas de Deux*. Select five students to be the artists, and ten students to be the subjects (five boys and five girls is preferable, but not essential). Each subject should stand with his or her back facing one of the people in the painting. Each artist then chooses a couple, and adjusts the subjects so that they are posed exactly like the figures in the painting. Artists may also verbally suggest facial expressions to their subjects.

Discussion questions for the artists: What aspects of posing your subjects were easy? What aspects were difficult? Describe the posture of your subjects. What is the relationship between your two subjects? Do they like each other? Do they hate each other? How do they feel about each other?

Discussion questions for the subjects: What was it like being posed? When you were in the same position as the figure in the painting did it change your feelings about the work? How would you describe the mood of the figure you copied? What is the relationship between the figure you copied and his/her partner?

Scenery

Break the class into small groups (no more than six). Direct each group to an Alex Katz painting with no human subjects. Each group should take 10 minutes to plan out a short play, with the painting dictating the setting. Each play should have a beginning, middle, and an end, and should last no more than three minutes. Students then gather together and each group takes turns presenting their play.

After each play the casts should answer the following questions: How did you come up with the idea for your play? Describe the setting of the play. In what way did the setting create the mood of your play? How did the setting influence the action that occurs in the play? If each of you were alone in the painting, how would you feel?

Discuss the difference between the rural landscapes and the urban landscapes. In what ways do they convey similar feelings? In what ways are they different? How does Alex Katz capture the atmosphere of these two very different environments?

Post-Museum Visit Activities/Assessment

K-4:

Reiterate that Alex Katz is an artist who captures moments in time. The instructor can choose a story and read it to the class. After the story is complete, ask students to choose one second from the

story and draw it, as if someone had taken a snapshot. When the pictures are complete, students may share their work and discuss why they chose the moment they did.

5 –High School:

Discuss the technique that Alex Katz uses called pouncing.

Pouncing is perforating a drawing and dusting it with chalk to transfer an image to canvas. This is a centuries old technique and was first used by Fresco artists to transfer images drawn on paper (known as a cartoon) to freshly applied plaster.

After explaining the technique, students can attempt to create a pounced image.

Each student will need: paper, a pencil, a needle or a pouncing wheel, sandpaper square, charcoal crayons, a cotton ball, coloring materials, newspaper.

Each student should create a simple picture or design. Then using a needle or a pouncing wheel, students perforate the drawing by creating holes along the drawing's lines. (Make sure to do this on top of at least two or three newspapers.) Gently sand the back of the image to remove the chads. Students should then place the image on top of a new piece of paper. They then rub a cotton ball against a charcoal crayon and rub the cotton ball against the picture. The charcoal should permeate the holes and create a new image on the second sheet of paper. Students then color the second sheet.

Notable Works in the Colby Collection

Alex Katz, *Sylvia Stone*, 1962-63

Alex Katz, *Millie and Sally*, 1984

Alex Katz, *Pas de Deux*, 1983

Alex Katz, *Isaac and Oliver*, 2006

Alex Katz, *The Ryan Sisters*, 1981

Alex Katz, *East*, 1987

Alex Katz, *West 2*, 1998

Lesson Vocabulary Words

Composition, Simplification, Flat color, Fashion, Cartoon, Ephemeral, Pounce, Light, Portraits, Landscapes.

English Language Arts.

E. Listening and Speaking: Students listen to comprehend and speak to communicate effectively.

E1: Listening.

Pre-K-2: Students use early active listening skills.

3-5: Students apply active listening skills.

6-8: Students adjust listening strategies to understand formal and informal discussion,

debates or presentations and then apply the information.

9-Diploma: Students adjust listening strategies for formal and informal discussion, debates or presentations, and then evaluate the information.

E2: Speaking Pre-K-2: Students use speaking skills to communicate.

3-5: Students use active speaking skills to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts.

6-8: Students adjust speaking strategies for formal and informal discussions, debates, or presentations appropriate to the audience and purpose. Visual and Performing Arts.

B1: Media Skills. Pre-K-2: Students use basic media, tools and techniques to create original art works.

3-5: Students use a variety of media, tools, techniques, and processes to create original art works.

6-8: Students choose suitable media, tools, techniques, and processes to create original art works. **9-Diploma:** Students choose multiple suitable media, tools, techniques, and processes to create a variety of original art works.

B2: Composition Skills: Pre-K-2: Students use *Elements Of Art And Principles Of Design* to create original art works.

3-5: Students use Elements of Art and Principles of Design to create original art works including paintings, three-dimensional objects, drawings from imagination and real life, and a variety of other media and visual art forms.

6-8: Students use Elements of Art and Principles of Design to create original art works that demonstrate different styles in paintings, three-dimensional objects, drawings from imagination and real life, and a variety of other media and visual art forms.

9-Diploma: Students use Elements of Art and Principles of Design to create original art works that demonstrate development of personal style in a variety of media and visual art forms.

B3 Making Meaning: Pre-K-2: Students create art works that communicate ideas and feelings and demonstrate skill in the use of media, tools, and techniques.

3-5: Students create art works that communicate ideas, feelings, and meanings and demonstrate skill in the use of media, tools, techniques, and processes.

6-8: Students create art works that communicate an individual point of view.

9-Diploma: Students create a body of original art work. a. Demonstrate sophisticated use of media, tools, techniques, and processes. b. Demonstrate knowledge of visual art concepts. c. Communicate a variety of ideas, feelings, and meanings.