

Lesson Two: Figure as Metaphor

IMPRINT artists of focus: Dotty Attie, John Coplans, Susan Fenton, Kerry James Marshall

Project introduction:

Throughout time, artists have used the human form in their artwork. Changes in beauty ideals have been reflected in both art and advertising through the centuries. Artists today face complex choices when incorporating the body as subject matter in their work. Four artists in IMPRINT use the human form in very separate ways:

- Dotty Attie creates a stark depiction of a patient/doctor relationship with text overlay.
- John Coplans photographs create a magnified abstraction of his aging body.
- Susan Fenton photographs the backs of women's torsos with their heads and bodies bound in materials.
- Kerry James Marshall creates an imaginary figure "Rhythm MASTR", an African-American superhero.

This lesson delves into the complex ways in which the human form is objectified, subverted, and transformed. Students will make art that responds to treatment of the body's exterior as a means to convey ideas, using the body as metaphor or allegory in a meaningful context.

Objectives:

1. In the discussion of body type "ideals", students will become aware of the meaning of the body as a vehicle of expression. In discussing an image like Coplan's photographs, students will confront the depiction of an aging body and address the symbolic meaning of such a work in a public context.
2. Students will learn about the longstanding tradition of objectification of the body in both advertisement and art, and how many artists have used the human form to make meaningful work using the human body that goes beyond objectification.
3. Students will become critical of the uses of the human body as subject matter and will make informed decisions to include the human body to create unique artistic compositions.

Looking and Reacting:

A class discussion should take place, focusing on the images of the four selected IMPRINT artists. After surveying their images for IMPRINT, students should be asked questions such as:

1. How does each IMPRINT artist use the human body to create meaning? What is the meaning of each work?
2. How does the figure set a mood, tell a story, or act as a symbol?
3. Does each artist show the whole body in their treatment of the image? How does each artist's choice add to the intention of the piece?

The instructor should discuss images from art history, with a wide range of the human form as subject matter. Art historical images should range from Boticelli to Rubens to Picasso's classical and cubist periods. Questions in looking might include:

1. In looking at images from art history, is there a sense of the ideal body type that is the same throughout time? How might it change?
2. How is the treatment of the male versus the female figure different through time? Are there any similarities in changing depictions of male and female figures?

Advertising images that incorporate the human form should also be on hand. A discussion regarding the formats of IMPRINT (billboard, bus shelter, paper cups, and newspaper inserts) should follow, with questions such as:

1. What kinds of images do we usually see in these formats?
2. In the examples in front of you, how is the body used to sell a product?
3. What is the general appearance of the person? How does this speak to society's "ideal" body type, if at all?
4. How is the body photographed or drawn? Does this help to sell the product?
5. Do any of the artists in IMPRINT incorporate or comment on the graphic depictions of the body as observed in the advertisements studied?

Art Activities:

Students will be asked to make a piece of art that incorporates the human figure as its focus. The work created should go beyond objectification of the body in order to tell a story, make a comment, or illustrate a new way of discovering the human form. They may also choose to address popular culture and make a statement about the use of the human form to influence life choices, personal image, and relationships. For example, students might:

- pose for each other in photography sessions tied with a discussion of creating a background, lighting, and cropping of the figure to produce an intended image.
- create drawn or painted self portraits that address how they feel about the "ideal body image", making use of exaggeration of features or pose in order to convey feelings of inadequacy or triviality.
- use a mixed media approach including digital processes utilizing magnification of details, fragmentation of image, distortion of perspective, and unique image combinations to create a finished piece.

Students should be encouraged to try several approaches to problem solving before settling on an idea or format. It will be helpful to look at other artists' work in order to understand the wide range of choices available in using the body to create a statement.

Assessment:

Students will be evaluated on their ability to:

1. Analyze and discuss artworks and advertisements presented in an introspective manner.
2. Challenge themselves to think creatively in translating the material to apply the concepts discussed in the lesson and in their own artwork.
3. Create a stimulating artistic composition that breaks from traditional depictions of the human form in order to convey an idea.
4. Skillfully manipulate formal elements to create a well-rendered work of art.

Related activities:

Creating inserts for the school newspaper with "Figure as Metaphor" reproductions, combining monotype with drawn or photographed images, producing a group "photo album" with the expressive photographs, drawings or paintings created.

Related artists: Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, Hans Haacke, Kathe Kollwitz, Dorothea Tanner, Egon Schiele, Alice Neel, Frieda Kahlo

IMPRINT IMPRESSIONS: An art-making unit based on the exhibition

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Introduction

What is IMPRINT?

IMPRINT is the largest temporary public art project to ever take place in Philadelphia, created by The Print Center and curated by board member Joan Wadleigh Curran. IMPRINT will use images from six different contemporary artists (3 of which are from Philadelphia) in an array of formats ranging from billboards, bus shelters, paper coffee cups, the Philadelphia Inquirer's Sunday Magazine, as well as a gallery exhibit at The Print Center. It will take place in Philadelphia from September 3-November 9, 2002.

How does IMPRINT engage the public?

IMPRINT raises an awareness of public issues in public spaces. IMPRINT steps outside of the museum walls to present art, reaching masses that might not otherwise engage in the visual arts. The content of IMPRINT addresses issues ranging from sexism to class and racial awareness to confrontational parody of advertisement. IMPRINT seeks to give voice to an aesthetic not commonly seen on billboards, bus shelters, and coffee cups—one that speaks of aging, housing, fair medical treatment, and appreciation of beauty in an otherwise consumerist environment. Although all the artists work in different media, the use of digital technology translates their work into large-scale mass media advertising venues, which inevitably comment on traditional use of such venues.

What does the educational component of IMPRINT seek to do?

The educational component of IMPRINT seeks to reach those who can effectively inform a diverse population in Philadelphia: public school art teachers. We have an exceptional opportunity to inform the educators of our youth about our project and hope that with your help, we can create dialogue, criticism, and appreciation of public contemporary art in your school. Students will analyze images from IMPRINT, and create work that responds to the rich variety of subjects raised from such a project. It is hoped that such an approach will go beyond the school walls to encompass greater understanding within students' families and their communities.

How do the lessons address Philadelphia's educational standards and benchmarks?

The IMPRINT lessons use a discipline based art education format in that they address issues concerning art history, art criticism, art production, and the aesthetics of art. All of the lesson plans developed for the project IMPRINT comply with the Philadelphia educational standards

and benchmarks. Students will learn problem solving and technical skills in the process of making art. These lessons will also teach comprehension of and the application of the artistic process and abstract concepts. The lessons challenge the students to use creative thinking skills as well as verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

The artists in IMPRINT:

Dotty Attie's paintings and prints juxtapose images and text in order to pose questions about their paired meaning. Her images create a provocative visual narrative that encourage the viewer to contemplate new meanings based on their own experience. Attie's work is familiar to a national audience through exhibitions at such venues as the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum.

John Coplans makes large scale photographs of his aging body. His arresting photographs shatter conventional expectations. They call attention to our discomfort with the aging process by presenting images of the aging body rather than the conventions of youth and beauty. Coplan's images are internationally known as is his writing as critic and former editor of Artforum magazine.

Susan Fenton hand-colors her photographs of figures in controlled environments suffused with mystery. Fenton's images flirt with the conventions of fashion and advertising and create powerful allegories about the relationship between beauty and adornment of the human form and its power to transform. Fenton's photographs are well known both locally and nationally. She is on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania and St. Joseph's University.

Kerry James Marshall uses the format of the comic book to present aspects of contemporary African American life and to confront contradictions inherent in American life. In his comic book project, "Rhythm Mastr", Marshall uses figures from African art as superheroes who battle the forces of corruption and violence against the backdrop of urban decay. Winner of the prestigious MacArthur Prize (1997), Chicago based Kerry James Marshall's work has been included in exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of Art and Documents X in Kassel, Germany.

Virgil Marti's work addresses the relationship between art and mass culture, good and bad taste, nostalgia and issues of class. Marti's images of bonsai trees use the seductive conventions of advertising to present images of stylized nature, displaced yet beautiful, full of tenderness and saturated color. Marti has received a Louis Comfort Tiffany Fellowship and a Pew Fellowship.

James Mills combines text and context to surprise the complacent viewer and pose questions about the role of art and advertising. In his sculpture and installations, Mills uses commonplace words in different contexts to encourage new thinking about the realities of life. Mills has recently shown his work at the ICA in Philadelphia, and has received a Pew Fellowship.