

Playing with Frank Stella

John Purcell

Over the years that I have taught first grade at an inner-city school in Los Angeles, I have tried to utilize my art degree in as many ways as I can. Though I have been able to incorporate a lot of modern and contemporary art influences in my classroom, I have always wanted to do a project centering on the abstract aspects of art that I found to be the most stimulating to me when I was in college.

As I was looking through one of my art books one evening, I reviewed the early 1980s work of Frank Stella, an artist who worked during a time when the formally minimalist artist went “maximalist” in a series of baroque abstract paintings that seemed to burst from their canvas. What amazed me about these works is the way they incorporated the brushiness of Willem de Kooning, sprawling scrawl like Jackson Pollock, bright colors like Henri Matisse, and the inclusiveness of Pablo Picasso.

Inspired by Play

The next day at school, I noticed a connection between Stella’s works and the imaginative compositions my students came up with when they played with storage containers filled

with colored blocks, shapes, and other small toys. The longer my students played, the more “maximalist” their sprawling play settings became.

I discovered that these abstract play environments were actually filled with energetic stories that reflected the drama of influences my students received through their lives growing up in a metropolis like Los Angeles. Through their play, they were making abstract compositions.

I decided that the class would take the organic storytelling features of their objectified play and transform that into abstract works using Stella’s works as inspiration. To prepare the class for this, I gave a presentation on some artists I thought would be relevant for this assignment including Picasso, Matisse, Pollock, de Kooning, Al Held, and of course, Stella.

Calling on Reinforcements

I called Maria Teresa Cardenas, an art teacher with whom I had worked before, to help me with my “Stella project.” I explained to Maria that I wanted students to use the geometric

shapes they had studied in math, but to also create organic shapes for their compositions.

I wanted the artworks to have the bright pinks, blues, reds, oranges, purples, and greens that colored the pop culture items that students brought to school each day through their stickers, books, backpacks, clothes, and toys, yet also reflect the grays,

browns, whites, and blacks of the changing architecture, graffiti, and grittiness of our smoggy city. Play would be a distinctive inspiration, too, since

I wanted students to play with their shapes, objects, and paints as if they were elements of free play like their toys and blocks.

Constructing Stories

Maria understood the nature of the project and scheduled it into three different sessions. The first session centered on shapes. Students cut out and then painted and decorated geometric and organic shapes.

The second session centered on painting the boards that would serve as the background of the artworks.

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Left: Ivan Macias, Outer-space Blue, grade one.
Right: Allan Austin, The Sky Park, grade one.
Bottom: Viviana Owens, Thinking, grade one.



The Abstract Becomes Real

This lesson worked because it allowed students to explore concepts of abstract art and connect it to their imaginations through play. Once they understood that the abstract could represent things just as their imaginations allowed them to represent reality in play, they became completely engaged. Their abstract worlds were real to them and each artwork contained unique stories behind the compositions.

The class had their artworks shown at the Lyndhurst Art and Architecture Galleries at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and the LA Mart design building. As they saw their art on the walls, the young artists pointed out what was happening in their works. Stories and playful imaginations had been transformed into art.

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students use different media, techniques, and processes to communicate ideas, experiences, and stories.

WEB LINK

www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=5640

Maria suggested that we use foam board for this since it was strong enough to support the layering of shapes and fragments that would be glued onto it.

In the third session, students assembled the art fragments into a composition. As they played around with their shapes, stories began to emerge. Shapes became people, buildings, animals, and vehicles. As students constructed stories, they

began to glue down shapes onto their boards.

Some students built three-dimensional constructions onto their work. Others realized they needed to create more organic shapes to finish the story they were illustrating. Still others opted to add sticks, beads, jewels, and other available items. Some began to cut up foam and cardboard boxes and added the cut pieces to their works.