

Thinking Big Inside a Small Box

Martha Rives

Students in my ninth-grade sculpture course recently completed an installation of a group sculpture exhibition in the main hallway of our school. Modeled on the groundbreaking work of twentieth-century sculptor Louise Nevelson, students worked in groups of three or four to create sculptures inside wooden boxes. Students selected a color palette and design features to unify the installation, then claimed the inside of each box for their own creative ideas.

What I most enjoyed about this work was the collaborative spirit. I am neither a sculptor nor a carpenter, but students stepped up to add to the vision of what this project could be. The imaginations unleashed became extraordinary magic moments.

Introducing Louise Nevelson

Louise Nevelson is a premier artist of the 20th century. Her creative genius faced a hostile environment, as the art world did not make room easily for female sculptors. Indeed, there were many articles that stated that Nevelson's work would have been more acclaimed in her time if she had been a man. It is important for my students to realize the political tensions that art can bring to the surface.

Like Nevelson, I believe in the recasting of found materials. My room is filled with discarded things—scrap lumber, empty toweling tubes, egg cartons, plastic packaging, etc. Nevelson worked in wood and metal and created within boxes. We altered her technique to include color and individual creativity, but strived to unify our theme. One way we maintained unity was by agreeing that

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each box should contain the color black. Students also used masks of their own faces as a focal point inside the boxes, which helped make the project their own, rather than just a copy of Nevelson's works.

My initial discussions with students revolved around form, shape, and negative space. Once we had the basic mock-up, we discussed the essential elements of artistry, engineering, and design. These conversations were invaluable in helping students visualize their final products.

Collaboration

In addition to discussions about form, we also discussed the learning expectations of collaboration and self-directed learning. What always amazes me in working in a collaborative manner is that the creative illu-

mination happens and adds enormously to the aesthetic of the completed sculpture.

Each group was responsible for building one to four boxes out of a piece of 4 x 4' (1.2 x 1.2 m) plywood. Students were also responsible for partnering up to make plaster gauze masks of their faces and painting them to fit within the design of their project.

Students chose found objects to prime, paint and place within their boxes along with their masks. When it comes to the finished product I am a real stickler for artistry, and that frustrated students who wanted to slap on paint and hot glue, for instance.

Outcomes

I was very proud of the final result. As the teacher, I was the holder of the vision, insisting that everything was possible and attainable. It could not be just good enough, it had to be exceptional. It was our work, on display for a public audience.

Other people helped us with the installation. Our principal suggested a location, another art teacher and I arranged the boxes on heavy panels, and one of our maintenance workers hung the work in the hallway. Some





of the pieces did not fit in the final installation and we placed them in the library instead.

Student reflections added to my satisfaction with the work. Students stated that they were “proud of the detail and artistry we put into our project.” Another stated that students were “proud of the outcome because the final product looks awesome.”

The installation became the central piece of our Youth Art Month exhibition, and is so prominently located in the school that many, many people have had the chance to see it. It truly shows what ninth-grade students can do collectively when they are creatively motivated! 🌀

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Students conceive and create works of visual art that demonstrate an understanding of how the communication of their ideas relates to the media, techniques, and processes they use.

WEB LINK

www.louisenevelsonfoundation.org

Materials

- ¼" (.6 cm) inch plywood, 4 x 4' (1.2 x 1.2 m) pieces
- hot glue
- wood glue
- jigsaws, power drills, power sanders, safety goggles (students brought home permission forms for power tool use)
- various hand-saws
- found materials of all sorts
- plaster gauze (like Pariscraft™)
- sandpaper
- primer
- acrylic paint (½ gallon containers)
- small brads and nails
- cardboard boxes for mock-up stage of project