

Emily and Robb Sandagata

After attending our first state conference two years ago, we (spouses who are both art teachers) were inspired and determined to create our own joint presentation, even though we taught different levels. We needed a project in which the content of the lesson would be both engaging and contemporary, but could also be adapted for both elementary and high school levels. After some discussion, we chose narrative silhouettes, a concept that combined several content-rich areas: an historical artform, storytelling, detailed contour drawing, and design.

Artists of Focus

We chose the contemporary artist Kara Walker and historical artists August Edouart (1830s) and Lotte Reiniger (1920s). While Walker's artworks contain strikingly beautiful silhouettes, there is often a disturbing undercurrent to her work. These unsettling images are highly engaging for high-school students, but may be inappropriate for younger students. It is important to carefully select images that fit your school environment. With some research, you can find Walker images that are engaging, meaningful, and appropriate for all students.

We felt it was important to share examples of the historical silhouette

artwork referenced in Walker's work, so we began with August Edouart, profile artist; and Lotte Reiniger, creator of the first animated film, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926). This entire film is animated with silhouettes! The variety of sources allowed students to compare and contrast different approaches to silhouettes. At this point, all of our students were fully engaged and ready to work.

The elementary version of this lesson used a unique and engaging process for creating silhouettes: contour drawings + modeling clay + cyanotype (sun print) paper = silhouettes. The high-school version used conventional materials while focusing on content and detail.

Narrative Silhouettes



Isabelle, grade five.

Elementary

Desert animals and their environments were chosen as the subjects for our silhouettes. These animals are part of the everyday lives and experiences of children in Arizona. We began with students' prior knowledge of animals, and moved on to the subject of human interaction when students were creating their narratives.

Students created simple contour drawings of their animal of choice on 8½ x 11" paper. Optional references of desert animals and places were available to students who needed additional inspiration. When complete, students outlined their completed images with colored permanent markers.

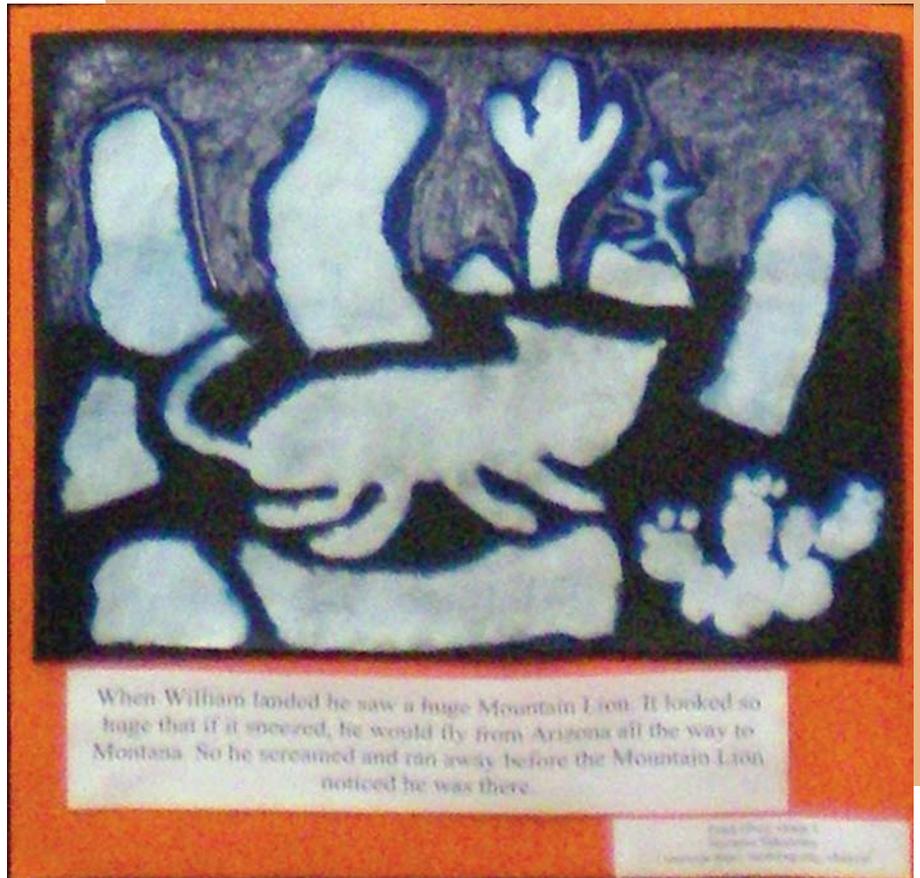
Creating the Contour Sculpture

In the following class, students placed a clear transparency sheets on top of their contour drawings and traced the images onto the transparencies



Amazing Amanda was very thirsty. When she arrived at the river, she noticed that there was a bobcat drinking from it. She was trying not to disturb it, but she got so distracted that she hadn't seen a rock and she tripped over it. The bobcat had been startled, so the bobcat wanted run away, but he decided to help her. She was scared, but then she noticed it was nice and they lived happily ever after. *Mylaysia Spink*

with black permanent marker. Next, they filled in the outlined shapes with modeling clay, placing the clay directly on the transparency without leaving any gaps. After filling in the shapes, each student added a tiny figure with modeling clay. Adding a figure helps create a narrative.



When William landed he saw a huge Mountain Lion. It looked so huge that if it sneezed, he would fly from Arizona all the way to Montana. So he screamed and ran away before the Mountain Lion noticed he was there.

Exposing the Print

Exposing the print is a quick, but exciting step. You will need access to direct sunlight to complete this process. Students began by placing the transparency (with modeling clay attached) on a piece of cyanotype paper (blue side up). They exposed the paper to direct sunlight for two minutes, or until the paper turned light green. They brought the paper inside and rinsed it face down in a tray of water for thirty to sixty seconds.

The quality of student thought, effort, and discovery was more than worth the effort.

Completing the Silhouette

On the final day of the project, students used black and white chalk pastels to add texture and a horizon line to their work. I sprayed the finished pieces with matte fixative to prevent smudging.

Creating a Group Narrative

I divided the class into groups to combine their individual narratives into a more complex story. Each group filled out a Narrative template. To help them organize the elements of their

story, students in each group arranged their artwork in a sequence. I provided scraps of paper numbered one through four to help them with this process.

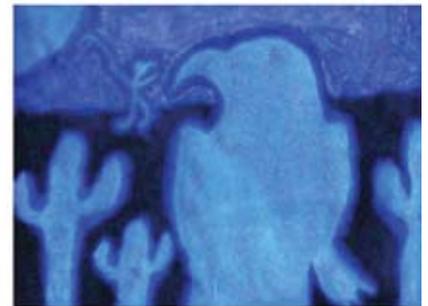
I asked each group to discuss, debate, and justify their decisions. When a sequence was chosen, each student wrote his or her portion of the narrative

on a strip of paper. Finally, each group arranged the images and narrative strips into a sequential work of art.

Results

The results of this lesson were exciting during each stage of the process. The narratives covered a wide range of emotions, including joy, fear, and sadness. Although the process was complex and lasted several class periods, the quality of student thought, effort, and discovery was more than worth the effort.

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Jake was hanging on a rope attached to a sun ray. When he was looking at the eagle, the eagle got mad, so Jake jumped off the rope and ran. *Spina Spink*

Materials

- cyanotype paper
- 8½ x 11" (21.5 x 28 cm) transparency sheets
- reference images of desert animals
- black and white pastel/charcoal
- modeling clay
- wooden craft sticks
- black permanent markers
- colored permanent markers



Narrative Silhouettes

Robb Sandagata

High School

While many high-school students may be intimidated by the idea of interpreting artwork, they easily respond to narrative and story. With this in mind, I developed a student-centered approach to creating narrative artwork. Students could choose a story, poem, song lyric, or historical event as the basis for their design, or they could use autobiographical stories as “historical events.”

In order to increase the level of honest engagement with their work, I gave students the option of not discussing their stories with me. Several students used extremely personal stories that they were not comfortable sharing with their classmates or me. If they were forced to discuss these narratives, they would have chosen nar-

ratives that were less meaningful and ultimately less successful.

Suggested Project Requirements

- sketches based on some type of narrative, either an historical event, literature-based story, or any significant event or experience in students’ lives
- one large image (two or more figures) or two-to-three images in a sequence
- excellent use of negative space
- highly detailed, clear image
- silhouette evenly mounted on board

Discussing Artists

Students began by drawing a narrative silhouette. This tested students’ prior knowledge of both narrative and silhouettes, built their anticipation for

the upcoming lesson, and helped me prepare for the class discussion. Next, I gave a PowerPoint presentation and lead a discussion on traditional silhouettes by Lotte Reiniger (first woman animator/first woman to direct a full-length film, first animated movie) and the work of Kara Walker. The use of effective questioning strategies keeps students on track, helps them determine meaning, and helps them interpret the complex imagery in Walker’s work.

Sketching Designs

Students began sketching designs, using a variety of resources and paying close attention to positive and negative space and contour line. (Anatomy and animal books are particularly helpful during this process.)

Contour Drawings

When the designs were complete, students sketched their contour drawings on black construction paper (11 x 17" or larger), then used white pencils to outline and simplify their sketches, transforming them into bold contour drawings.

Cutting the Silhouettes

Students next carefully cut out their drawings with X-Acto knives, cutting inside the white lines or planning to flip the image over when the cutting was complete. This will ensure that no pencil lines are visible on the finished silhouette. Cutting took at least two class periods, depending on the complexity of the design.

Mounting the Design

To mount the final cutout, students used spray adhesive to coat the side of the silhouette that would not be seen in the finished piece. They laid the silhouette face down on a large piece of newsprint or scrap paper to prevent adhesive from getting on the tables.

After spraying the adhesive, they carefully attached the silhouette to a large piece of white Bristol board (or equivalent surface), starting at one edge of the piece and smoothing out the paper as it was attached to the background. This can be a challenging step when the design includes lots of tiny details. Mistakes were easily fixed by cutting the silhouette into sections or adding missing pieces with a glue stick.

Assessment

The completed narrative silhouettes were bold, engaging, and exciting. After each student completed a self-assessment rubric, we held a class discussion and critique in which several students shared their stories. The entire class was engaged and participated in the discussion, offering interpretations and ideas. The narratives covered a wide variety of themes, including autobiography, heartbreak, relationships, myths, fantasy, and historical violence.

Resources

Walker, Kara. *After the Deluge*. New York, NY: Rizzoli Publications, 2007.

Reiniger, Lotte. *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, 1929.

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WEB LINKS

www.pbs.org/art21/artists/walker/index.html

learn.walkerart.org/karawalker

Materials

- PowerPoint presentation (silhouettes, Lotte Reiniger, Kara Walker)
- large white Bristol board
- black construction paper, 11 x 17" (28 x 43 cm) or larger
- X-Acto knives and blades
- spray adhesive
- white colored pencils

