Framing Ideas: Interdisciplinary Curriculum across Genres of American Photography

LANDSCAPE AND PLACE

O. Winston Link, NW 1345 - Ghost Town, Stanley, Virginia, January 31, 1957

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This multi-section guide, organized around major genres of photography, was created by Corinne Rose, Manager of Education Museum of Contemporary Photography Columbia College Chicago (MoCP) and Cynthia Weiss, Associate Director of School Partnerships Project AIM, Center for Community Arts Partnerships (CCAP) Columbia College Chicago. This interdisciplinary curriculum was developed over seven years of collaborative work by Weiss, Rose, many talented and dedicated Teaching Artists, and several hundred Chicago youth who have participated in education outreach programs of the CCAP and the MoCP. Their work and this curriculum is featured each spring at the MoCP in the exhibition Talkin’ Back: Chicago Youth Respond. For more information see www.mocp.org/education/ or contact Corinne Rose at crose@colum.edu.

This section of the guide examines the genre of landscape photography and includes a list of suggested American artists drawn from the Museum of Contemporary Photography's collection. Images by the artists and artist's biographies can be accessed for classroom use from the museum’s website at collections.mocp.org/main.php?module=objects. Questions for looking and discussion, which promote reflective thinking and an expanded concept of literacy, as well as activities, that increase teachers’ capacity to integrate photography and creative writing into a variety of curriculum are also included.
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“If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement…”

- James Agree, from *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*

Landscape photography is a form of documentary photography that describes the geography of an area or conveys and evokes a sense of place. Each artist combines personal and external sources of inspiration, including the work of other artists, to create works in their own unique style.

**Ansel Adams**

Ansel Adams, who worked between the 1920s until his death in 1984, developed great technical skill with a large format camera and in the darkroom to create highly descriptive photographs that depict an idealized and **sublime** view of grand landscapes that are seemingly untouched by man. Adam’s rejected the “pictorial” tradition favored by photographers of the 1920s, which was marked by soft-focus images that often imitated the aesthetics of painting. He developed a
style that was distinctly photographic or “straight” yet his work connected to the romantic
tradition of nineteenth century landscape photography in many ways.

**William Christenberry**

As young artist who migrated from the Deep South to New York in the 1960s, William
Christenberry discovered the seminal 1941 publication *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* in which
photographer Walker Evans and writer James Agee described the lives of impoverished tenant
farmers in Hale County Alabama, where Christenberry (who was from Tuscaloosa) had stayed
with family over several summers. The book pushed Christenberry, who had been working in
the style of Abstract Expressionist painters, to realize that the stuff of his own life could be rich
subject matter to explore through his art.

Throughout his career (1960s to the present) Christenberry has created highly descriptive,
straightforward images that document *vernacular* structures and changes in the landscape over
time in Hale County. Since the early 1970s, he has also created multi-media works, some
realistic, others rooted in fantasy or memory, based on familiar structures, traditions, and the
visual and political culture of the region. Throughout this diverse range of work, Christenberry
reflects on, evokes and also preserves the complex and rapidly changing culture of his region.

The MoCP owns ten photographs that Christenberry made between 1979 and 1992 depicting
the same kudzu-covered house as it becomes increasingly dilapidated and is ultimately razed
by a bulldozer. In 1994, Christenberry created a small sculpture of the same house (also in the
MoCP collection) that is incredibly faithful to the original and is set in a based of red clay soil
distinctive to the region.

**The New Topographics**

The 1975 exhibition, the *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, curated
by William Jenkins at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House,
noted a shift in the tradition of landscape photography. Including work by a new generation of
landscape photographers such as Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Stephen Shore, and Frank
Gohlke this exhibition showed the work of artists who used a somewhat detached, at times
ironic approach to show everyday landscapes where the hand of man is evident.
Joel Sternfeld

In the tradition of the New Topographics photographers, Joel Sternfeld documents the American landscape noting the ironic, sometimes tragic impact of human activity on the land. In Sternfeld’s image *McLean Virginia*, 1978, we see a fireman who appears to be shopping for pumpkins at a farm stand as a house dramatically burns in the background. Sternfeld says that when he made this image, the farm and home depicted were scheduled to be demolished to make way for a housing development. The fire in this scene was actually a controlled burn training session for local firefighters.

An-My Lê

In her series *29 Palms* and *Small Wars*, An-My Lê explore the military conflicts that have framed the last half-century of American history: the war in Vietnam and the current war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The artist approaches these events obliquely. Instead of addressing her subject by creating reportage images of actual shocking events, she photographs dramatizations of battle in places where war is psychologically anticipated, processed, and relived. *Small Wars* (1999-2002) depicts men who spend their weekends reenacting battles from the Vietnam War in the forests of Virginia. Lê’s current series, *29 Palms* (2003-present), documents a military base of the same name; located in the California desert; it is where soldiers train before being deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. Her equipment and working method are reminiscent of those employed by the Civil War photographers, though Lê’s pictures address issues of war by looking at the preparation for combat instead of its aftermath.

Lê, who was born in Vietnam in 1960 and came to the United States as a refugee in 1975, created Small Wars to explore, as she describes it, “the Vietnam of the mind.” Although she has vivid memories of the conflict’s waning days from her teenage years in Saigon, she also knows the war, like many of us, through a variety of sources including history textbooks, movies (*Apocalypse Now, Full Metal Jacket*, and so on.), magazines, travel, museum exhibitions, newspapers, and perhaps the experiences of relatives or friends. By joining and documenting Vietnam War reenactors, she explores the cumulative effect that various accounts of war have on memory, both individual and collective, and ultimately questions how we remember, glorify, and imagine war after the fact.

Suggested Viewing:

MoCP collection artists working in the genre of landscape photography include, Ansel Adams; Robert Adams; William Christenberry; Terry Evans; An-My Lê; O. Winston Link; Stephen Shore;
Frank Gohlke; Mark Klett; Richard Misrach; Bob Thall; and Alec Soth. Images by the artists and artist's biographies can be accessed for classroom use from the museum's website at collections.mocp.org/main.php?module=objects.
Landscape and Place: Questions for Looking and Discussion

• Look carefully at the image or body of work. Describe what you see.
• What can you tell about how this image was made?
• How do choices made by the photographer such as his or her use of light, time of day framing, composition, or vantage point, contribute to your perception of this place?
• Are there clues in the image that suggest when and where this photograph might have been made? Describe.
• Is there evidence of human presence in this photograph? Where?
• Does this place seem to be idealized or romanticized in this photograph? How?
• What do we learn about this place in this picture? What details reveal that information?
• What else might this work be about? Why do you think that?
• What do you know about the maker of this image? Can you tell how he or she feels about this subject?

Activities

Create Photographs that Depict the Landscape or a Sense of Place.

Create a series of photographs that depict a place that is important or interesting to you.

• What place will you photograph? Why?
• Are there distinctive features to the natural or built environment of this place? Describe.
• Have significant events happened there?
• What scenes, places, structures, or objects might you show to teach others about that place? What moods, feelings, or histories do you associate with that place?

How could you make those things show in photographs? Consider how you might use light, time of day, vantage point, framing and composition, etc. to render your subject in a way that is visually pleasing.
Photograph that place using the strategies you describe above. Critique your images.

• Which are the most successful visually? Why?
• Which images contain details that you feel are important to describing this place?
• If you were to assemble a series of five to ten images to tell the story of this place, which images would you include? Which would you leave out? Why?
• Are there any images you wish you had made? Are there any scenes you would like to reshoot?

If time allows, reshoot and critique again. Reedit your images and continue shooting and editing until you feel your series is successful both visually and in telling the story of this place.

Play with sequencing the images. Do you think they should the images be presented in a particular order? Why or why not?

Critique this series with your peers and have them describe what they learned about that place through your images. Did your images convey what you intended?

Memory as Place

Poet and educator, Jenn Morea, has developed a writing exercise that encourages students to recall a sense of place through sensory memories. She uses the I Remember poems by poet, Joe Brainard from his book, I Remember (Granary Books, 2001) as model poems for her lessons. She has students first respond to a series of questions about a favorite place from memory, and to recall a vivid image from each of the five senses. Students are asked to begin each line of their poem with the phrase, I remember....

Below are some examples from Joe Brainard’s book:

I remember the only time I ever saw my mother cry. I was eating apricot pie.
I remember shower curtains with angel fish on them.
I remember one very hot summer day I put ice cubes in my aquarium and all the fish died.
I remember not understanding why people on the other side of the world didn’t fall off.
This writing exercise encourages students to create an emotional landscape that builds in rhythm and emotional charge with the repetition of each phrase.

**Landscape and Place: Glossary of Terms**

**framing/composition**  
How one composes an image in the camera’s viewfinder. The organization of elements within the image.

**point of view (vantage point)**  
Point of view is where a photographer stands in relation to the subject he or she is photographing. It can also refer to the photographer’s view or opinion of that subject.

**sublime**  
To elevate or exalt in a way that inspires awe.

**style**  
The way something is said, made, done, or expressed. A combination of distinctive features.

**Time of day**  
The time of day in which a photograph is made using natural light can affect many factors within the image including the rendering of color, the appearance of shadows, and the rendering of space and depth.

**vernacular**  
An everyday style of language or architecture that is distinctive to a particular region or place.
Illinois State Learning Standards Addressed in this Curriculum

This *Framing Ideas Curriculum* connects with the curricular framework of the Chicago Public Schools: Chicago Guide for Teaching and Learning in the Arts. Each unit of study that explores different genres of photography and writing addresses the four strands of the guide, including: Art Making, Arts Literacy, Interpretation and Evaluation and Making Connections.

ILLINOIS STATE GOAL 1: Read with understanding and fluency.
1.C: Comprehend a broad range of reading materials.
Middle School-1.C.3e Compare how authors and illustrators use text and art across materials to express their ideas (e.g., foreshadowing, flashbacks, color, strong verbs, language that inspires).
Early High School-1.C.4e Analyze how authors and illustrators use text and art to express and emphasize their ideas (e.g., imagery, multiple points of view).
Late High School-1.C.5e Evaluate how authors and illustrators use text and art across materials to express their ideas (e.g., complex dialogue, persuasive techniques).

STATE GOAL 2: Read and understand literature representative of various societies, eras and ideas.
Elementary -2.A.2b Describe how literary elements (e.g., theme, character, setting, plot, tone, conflict) are used in literature to create meaning.
Middle School -2.A.3d Identify ways that an author uses language structure, word choice and style to convey the author’s viewpoint.
Early High School-2.A.4d Describe the influence of the author’s language structure and word choice to convey the author’s viewpoint.
Late High School-2.A.5d Evaluate the influence of historical context on form, style and point of view for a variety of literary works.

STATE GOAL 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.
3.B. Compose well-organized and coherent writing for specific purposes and audiences.
Elementary-3.B.2a Generate and organize ideas using a variety of planning strategies (e.g., mapping, outlining, drafting).
Middle School-3.B.3a Produce documents that convey a clear understanding and interpretation of ideas and information and display focus, organization, elaboration and coherence.
Early High School-3.B.4a Produce documents that exhibit a range of writing techniques appropriate to purpose and audience, with clarity of focus, logic of organization, appropriate elaboration and support and overall coherence.
Late High School-.B.5 Using contemporary technology, produce documents of publication quality for specific purposes and audiences; exhibit clarity of focus, logic of organization, appropriate elaboration and support and overall coherence.

FINE ARTS STATE GOAL 25: Know the language of the arts.
Understand the sensory elements, organizational principles and expressive qualities of the arts.
FINE ARTS STATE GOAL 26: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced.
   A. Understand processes, traditional tools and modern technologies used in the arts.

Elementary-26.A.1e Visual Arts: Identify media and tools and how to use them in a safe and responsible manner when painting, drawing and constructing.
Middle School -26.A.2e Visual Arts: Describe the relationships among media, tools/technology and processes.
Early High School-26.A.3e Visual Arts: Describe how the choices of tools/technologies and processes are used to create specific effects in the arts.
Late High School-26.A.4e Visual Arts: Analyze and evaluate how tools/technologies and processes combine to convey meaning.

FINE ARTS STATE GOAL 27: Understand the role of the arts in civilizations, past and present. Analyze how the arts function in history, society and everyday life.

SOCIAL SCIENCES STATE GOAL 16: Understand events, trends, individuals and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States and other nations
Apply the skills of historical analysis and interpretation

Elementary-16.A.2b Compare different stories about a historical figure or event and analyze differences in the portrayals and perspectives they present.
Middle School -16.A.3b Make inferences about historical events and eras using historical maps and other historical sources
Early High School-16.A.4b Compare competing historical interpretations of an event.
Late High School-16.A.5b Explain the tentative nature of historical interpretations.