

Moveable Murals:

A Dynamic Collaborative Public Artwork Project

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Public art exists for a variety of reasons – expressions of remembrance, contemplation of place, and celebration of identity. And while usually impressive in scale, such works are typically fixed and stationary, their permanent nature leaving little room for dynamic structure or form. In response to this, 8th grade art students at Raymore-Peculiar Middle School chose to question the nature of such artworks in a project called “Moveable Murals.”

Essential Questions: Exploring Identity With A Sense of Purpose

In consideration of a proposed public art project, my students were asked to reflect on the following essential questions:

- Who am I?
- Who are middle school students?
- What is public art?
- What does collaboration look like?



In order to formulate a “blueprint” for our project, we began by evaluating each question. Students were asked to write reflectively about the question, “Who am I?” and to contribute to an open forum discussion of “Who are middle school students?” in which we identified key characteristics unique to

middle school students. Various public artworks were researched on the internet and slides were reviewed, projected at floor-to-ceiling size to emphasize the impact *scale* has upon an artwork.

Students pinpointed fundamental attributes of “collaboration.”

The Blueprint

With these general ideas in mind, we set about outlining a plan for a public artwork project to be displayed in our middle school environment. These are the goals upon which we formed our framework:



Our project will focus on a “big idea.” Our focal point was *identity*, specifically as it relates to middle school students. With each student representing a unique and individual perspective, we realized that certain core ideals would need to be singled out. To that end, several students were nominated to act as *archetypes*; they agreed to pose as “visual metaphors” for “Fun,” “Athletic,” “Visionary,” “Thinker,” and so forth.

Our project would be both ephemeral and dynamic. Middle school students are nothing if not independent-minded. After determining that most public artworks are permanent,



unchanging, static installations, my students asked, “Why?” We decided that, aside from our expression of identity, going against the *status quo* would be the other important identifying characteristic of our collaborative artwork. To this end, it was determined that the artwork would *not* be installed in any

permanent fashion; indeed it would be constructed using collage techniques to reinforce a feeling of impermanence. Furthermore, the artwork would feature life size representations of middle

school figures that could be moved, re-posed, and changed in context with each new location and/or arrangement.



The process of art-making will utilize both digital and hand art processes. To keep the project relevant to the life experience of an eighth grader living during 2004, we decided to include digital techniques in the construction process. My students, on a day-to-day basis, commonly interact with iPods,

internet, Gameboys, blogs, video, etc. It seemed like a highly authentic approach to include such tools as a digital camera and digital projector in addition to utilizing student magazines as collage material.

Preparation



We collected several large sheets of corrugate (appliance boxes are great) and boxes of color magazines. Magazine photos were torn into small pieces, approximately 1” x 2” and separated into piles by colors such as red, blue, yellow, black, flesh, and so forth.

Obviously, there will be more than one way to identify such colors as “flesh” – I encourage such observation and relevant reflection. Our “palette” of colors created, each pile was stored in a separate container.

Technology

Students were divided into groups of four or five with one “model” in each group. The model was posed to expressively reflect his or her “visual metaphor” and photographed with a digital camera. Once photographed, a large sheet of corrugate was taped to the art room wall.

The camera was connected to the digital projector; images were projected at life size, reviewed, and one chosen from each group. Projected onto the corrugate, contours were loosely traced with black markers.

Process

After demonstrating safety procedures with the heavy-duty shears, students cut the life-sized shape from the corrugate. Narrow sections were reinforced by gluing Popsicle sticks and heavier strips of cardboard to the reverse side of the corrugate substrate.

Using a watery mixture of *papier mache* glue, each team of students collectively began to apply pieces of torn magazine photos to the corrugate base. By preparing and separating the torn pieces in advance, selection and choice was made similar to the creation of a painting – building upon prior student knowledge of a medium with which they were already familiar and proficient.

Students were instructed to select appropriate “general” colors of torn pieces for each part of the construction and to be sensitive to those color and value shifts that might appear in their collage “paintings” – especially where folds of cloth or facial features emerge. Students were encouraged to use pieces to form faces rather than simply “lifting” an intact and whole face from a magazine photo.

Some students began to experiment outside the confines of collage technique, incorporating a sort of “bas relief” by using *papier mache* to build up and emphasize selected facial features. Others applied paint on top of collage. At the end of each session, a light coating of white glue was applied to all exposed surfaces and blended in evenly with fingertips to seal the collage surface.

Conclusion

When completed, the life-sized figures were arranged into several different compositions around the school. My students would rearrange the compositions by adding, moving, or removing figures each day to keep the displays dynamic and fresh.

Learners manipulated small forms into large, intentional structures endowed with personal meaning. The process of reflecting, deliberating, defining, and constructing proved to be engaging and authentic. Students demonstrated real enthusiasm for the joint effort required to produce life-sized archetypes of eighth grade identity and were very vocal in pointing out the integrated meaning of each figure to their fellow students.



Standards Addressed

- The student will learn the process of creating a mural-sized public artwork.
- The student will explore unique properties and potentials of materials.
- The student will apply common medium in creating application of design and structure.
- The student will understand that people create art for various reasons and from various materials.

Materials

- Large sheets of corrugated cardboard (appliance boxes work well)
- Lots of color magazines
- Black markers
- White glue
- Papier mache glue mixture
- Heavy duty shears
- Digital camera
- Digital projector
- Shoe boxes or bags to store torn photos
- Exemplars of collage, paper colle, assemblage art
- Exemplars of murals and other public art works