

Art and Activism

Lesson Plan
Art and Activism



Benny Andrews
Composition (study for Trash), 1971
Oil and collage on twelve joined panels, 50 × 92 in.
The Studio Museum in Harlem;
gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Katz,
New York 1981.14.2
Photo: Adam Reich

Benny Andrews (1930–2006) was a self-declared “people’s painter.” He saw art as a way to tell stories of human suffering, injustice, and resilience. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, he became known for a distinct style which hybridized politically-charged subject matter and surrealist art-making methods.

Composition (study for Trash) (1971) features a group of onlookers pulling back a curtain on a large crowd surrounding a bright blue globe with the United States featured at its center.

Within the country’s borders are three figures pulling at ropes, while Lady Liberty sits atop the globe and three bodies at its base seem to carry the world on their shoulders. The painting shows the artist’s personal perspective on the history of the country, with references to patriotism, incarceration, and labor, among other themes.

This lesson offers students the chance to learn about the role of art in social activism.

Objective

Students will explore contemporary social justice issues through collage and painting.

Essential Question

What role can art play in activism and social change?

Vocabulary

Collage

Artwork made by attaching and layering various materials such as photographs, pieces of paper, or fabric onto a backing

Socially Engaged Art

Artistic practice that aims to improve conditions in a particular community or in the world at large

Surrealism

A 20th century movement in art and literature that sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind

Symbol

An image, mark, or character used to describe an idea, feeling, place, or object

Unconscious mind

The part of our mind that affects how we think and feel without our being aware of it

Materials

Canvas paper (or construction paper)
Assorted acrylic paints
Assorted fabrics
Assorted brushes
Assorted fabric scraps
Scissors
Tape
Tacky glue

Preparation

1. Ask students to think of examples of how people have used art to bring attention to a contemporary social or political issue.
2. Introduce the work of Benny Andrews and discuss *Composition (study for Trash)* using visual inquiry.

3. Have the students look closely at the artwork and write down any details or symbols that stick out to them. Ask students why they think Andrews chose to include those symbols and details.
4. Show the first five minutes of “An Interview with Benny Andrews” at bennyandrews.com/about-benny. Ask students what stood out to them about his technique and perspective on social justice.

Methods

1. Ask students to think about a contemporary social or political issue they feel strongly about and discuss how it makes them feel.
2. Ask students to create a list of symbols, colors, people, locations, textures, objects, and images that they associate with the issue they chose.
3. Distribute paper, tape, scissors, and fabric scraps. Challenge students to use the materials to create a composition in response to the list they made. How will figures relate to the objects and the environment? How will texture and color help communicate the story and emotion?
4. Distribute paints, brushes, and glue. Encourage students to layer their fabric compositions with paint.
5. Challenge students to be intentional about how their figures and objects relate to each other, by thinking about body language, negative space, and movement.

Reflection

1. Have students discuss their work with a partner. What issue did they decide to focus on? What specific choices did they make in the art-making process?
2. As a class, discuss how combining different materials affected how they approached their subject
3. As a class, discuss the role of art in activism and social change.



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