

Balancing the Abstract

Lesson Plan

The Studio Museum in Harlem



Betty Blayton-Taylor (1937; Williamsburg, VA–2016; Bronx, NY) was an artist, activist, and founder of The Studio Museum in Harlem, which opened in 1968. Through layering, abstraction, and blending materials, Blayton-Taylor meditates on visual communication that explores the relationship between humans and their environment.

Betty Blayton-Taylor
Untitled, 1968

Blayton-Taylor's practice presents an artist's search for balance, a focus that is mirrored in her efforts as an artist and educator in Harlem. In addition to co-founding the Studio Museum, she helped establish the Children's Art Carnival in New York and co-founded Harlem Textile Works.

In *Untitled*, Blayton-Taylor conveys emotion and movement with organic shapes.

Rather than depict representational images, Blayton-Taylor communicates through "spiritual abstraction" and ultimately explores "being a black soul in a material world, trying to find balance." (1)

In this exercise, individuals have the opportunity to engage with the work of Studio Museum co-founder Betty Blayton-Taylor through art-making.

(1) Blayton-Taylor, quoted in *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African American Artists* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1995)

Objective

To explore the work of Betty Blayton-Taylor and experiment with abstract painting and collage to reflect on our current environment.

Essential Question

How can we use abstraction to visually communicate our relationship to our broader environment?

Materials

Canvas or paper
Acrylic paint or watercolor
Magazines or newspapers
Scissors
Glue/glue stick
Brushes
Water and water cups

Vocabulary

Abstract art

Art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead use shapes, colors, forms, and gestural marks.

Organic shapes

Shapes that are irregular or asymmetrical in appearance, often flowing and curving and reflect intuitive growth in the natural world.

Environment

The natural world, as a whole or in a particular geographical area, especially as affected by human activity. Ideoscape (According to anthropologist Arjun Appadurai) The global cultural movement of ideologies often through audio, text, images, and the ideas, often political, expressed within.

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Preparation

1. Meditate on *Untitled* by Betty Blayton-Taylor. What do the colors and shapes remind you of?

2. [Listen to this 1968 WNYC interview between Blayton-Taylor and Ruth Gurin Bowman](#) that gives further context on her practice.
3. [Watch an excerpt of Five Black American Artists \(1982\)](#) featuring Blayton-Taylor and her work as an artist and educator.
4. Read "A Collection is Born" by Connie Choi, Associate Curator, Permanent Collection. The essay discusses pivotal moments that led up to the Studio Museum's founding in 1968. What can you interpret of that time's energy through *Untitled*?
5. Take a moment to reflect on 1968 and our current climate. Are there connections between these moments in time? What emotions do you feel? What colors, shapes, and gestures represent those emotions?

Methods

1. Collect and prepare your materials. Be creative with substitutions.
2. Protect your work area by covering it with newspaper, tarp, or plastic bags.
3. Using a canvas or paper as your foundation, respond visually to the connections you made between 1968 and now. Through layering, collaging, and painting, create an abstract work.
4. Favor the process over product and focus on expressing energy.
5. Once done, allow adequate time to dry.

Reflection

1. Hang or lean your work on a wall or table. Look at it closely, and then take a few steps back to experience it from farther away.
2. Ask yourself: How do the colors and shapes communicate the emotions you felt earlier? How did it feel to make this work?



Betty Blayton-Taylor
Untitled, 1968
Oil and collage on canvas
35 3/4 x 60 1/8 in.
The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of anonymous donor
1975-3