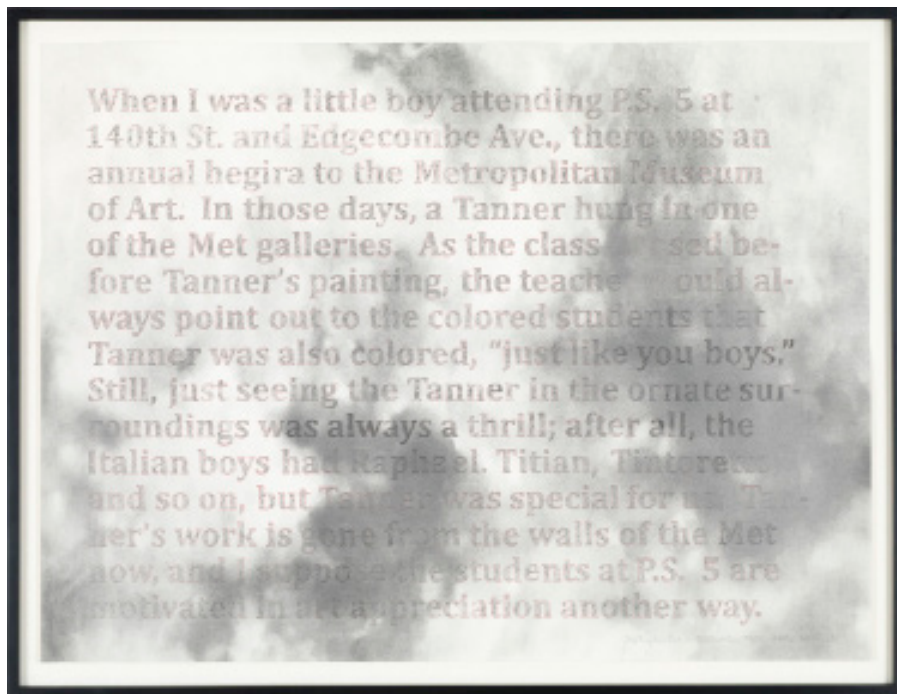


Breaking the Rules

Lesson Plan

Recommended for 9th–12th grades



Charles Gaines (b. 1944) is a conceptual artist and influential educator whose drawings, photographs, and works on paper explore the ways language, systems, and patterns contribute to how we construct meaning. Gaines is interested in how we experience and derive meaning from art, particularly when a work of art looks nothing like what we expect.

Charles Gaines
String Theory: Romare Bearden, 2011

Gaines investigates how rule-based processes, formulas, and routines construct our experiences. His conceptual practice began in the 1970s with artworks that consisted of numbered marks in ink on a grid. His methodical work often deliberately avoids subject matter connected to race but approaches race and identity in a radical way that moves beyond representation.

String Theory: Romare Bearden (2011) is part of a series of austere drawings executed in graphite. Plumes of smoke across the paper obscure text. For Gaines language is a pattern and a construct that [“becomes meaningful because we assign combinational rules to letter sequences... and the rules themselves are arbitrary because they are a social convention.”](#)

This artwork was created as a part of *The Bearden Project* celebrating the centennial of the birth of Romare Bearden (1911–1988), a widely influential artist who spent much of his life in Harlem. The included text, told from the perspective of a young Bearden, describes being a student at P.S. 5 in Harlem on an annual field trip to The Metropolitan Museum of Art and having a teacher point out artwork by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937), an internationally acclaimed nineteenth-century black American artist.

In this lesson, students will use their writing to create an artwork while working within a system of predetermined rules.

Objective

Students will learn about the work of Charles Gaines and create a text-based drawing.

Essential Question

How can language represent or describe an image?

Vocabulary

Aesthetics

The branch of philosophy dealing with such notions as the beautiful, the sublime, and the cosmic, as they apply to the fine arts, with a view to establish the meaning and validity of critical judgments concerning works of art.

Austere

Solemn, serious, severe in manner or appearance; without excess, ornament, or luxury.

Juxtaposition

An act or instance of placing together or side by side, especially for comparison or contrast.

Conceptual Art

Art for which the idea (or concept) behind the work is more important than the finished art object. This type of artwork emerged in the 1960s and the term usually refers to art made from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s.

Materials

[2 printed or digital images from the Studio Museum collection page online](#)

Variety of graphite pencils

Erasers

Ruled index cards

4.5 × 6 sulphite paper or regular drawing paper

9 × 12 watercolor paper

Letter templates or letter stencils

Preparation

1. Visit the Studio Museum collection webpage and select two artworks that students will use to create their own artwork. Print or make images available digitally.
2. Introduce the work of Charles Gaines and talk about *String Theory: Romare Bearden* using visual inquiry.
3. Ask students to imagine what the painting Gaines is describing looks like. Connect similarities among their responses.
4. Create an open dialogue about museums and representation. Ask students why they think Gaines chose to highlight this specific museum experience in the artwork.
5. Provide examples of artworks by Tanner, Titian, and Tintoretto for students to better understand the experience described by Gaines in the text.

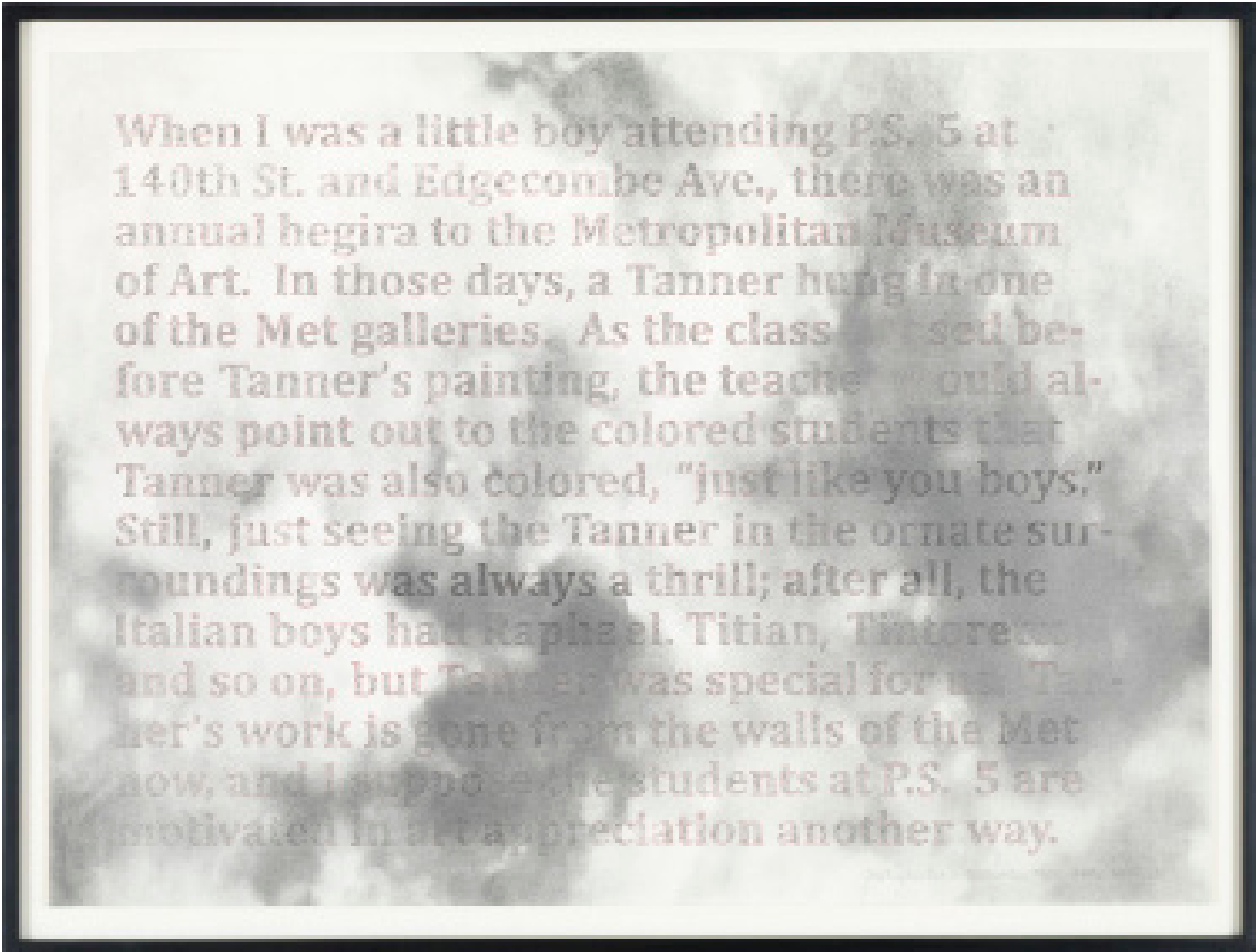
6. Prompt students to look at the text again but now as a series of figures and to focus on shapes and patterns. Ask about new forms that appear when they stop reading.

Methods

1. Ask students to select one of the artworks provided from the Studio Museum collection page and write a brief paragraph about it on an index card.
2. The writing can be a description of what they see, a poem, a narrative evoked by a detail in the artwork, or instructions about how they think the artwork was made. Connect to a style of writing they are currently focusing on in their English Language Arts classes.
3. Explain that each artwork will be created using the same three rules before having students trade cards with a partner and read their partner's text aloud.
4. Rule 1: As one partner reads, the other partner must use pencils and erasers to create a textured ground for their artwork on watercolor paper; they must stop drawing once their partner stops reading.
5. Rule 2: Each student must make two (no more, no less) edits to their partner's text.
6. Rule 3: Each student must select a letter template or use their handwriting to write the entire edited text on top of the ground they created on the watercolor paper. Have the students practice on drawing paper first.
7. Consider changing pencils for different textures or gradations of gray.
8. Consider repeating this project but have the students work in groups to create their own set of rules before they start.

Reflection

1. Hang the text-based artworks beside the artwork images the students used as a reference. Ask students to discuss the connections they see.
2. Continue your conversation about representation in museums. Ask students about the artists and the types of artwork they would like to see more of in museums.
3. Discuss the influence the rules had on their art making experience.



When I was a little boy attending P.S. 5 at 140th St. and Edgecombe Ave., there was an annual hegira to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In those days, a Tanner hung in one of the Met galleries. As the class passed before Tanner's painting, the teacher would always point out to the colored students that Tanner was also colored, "just like you boys." Still, just seeing the Tanner in the ornate surroundings was always a thrill; after all, the Italian boys had Raphael, Titian, Tintoretto, and so on, but Tanner was special for us. Tanner's work is gone from the walls of the Met now, and I suppose the students at P.S. 5 are motivated in art appreciation another way.

Charles Gaines
String Theory: Romare Bearden, 2011
Graphite on paper
30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm)
The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of the artist on the occasion of the Romare Bearden (1911–1988) Centennial and The Bearden Project 2012.7