

Powerful Poses

Lesson Plan

Recommended for 9th–12th grades



EJ Hill (b. 1985) is a mixed-media artist who often uses durational performance to convey the hardship human bodies endure while celebrating their resilience. Hill looks closely at histories of prejudice that result in the continual targeting of black, brown, and queer bodies in daily interactions.

EJ Hill
Surrendered (A Harrowing Descent), 2016

As an artist in residence (2015–16) at The Studio Museum in Harlem, Hill revived his childhood obsession with roller coasters, building one from wood and neon lights in *A Monumental Offering of Potential Energy* (2016). Every day of the exhibition, during the Museum’s public hours, he reclined at the sculpture’s base; his prone position evoked images of violence and memories of people who will never stand and go home again. Rising at the end of each day, Hill realized the potential to overcome victimization and redefine how we view the black male body.

Surrendered (A Harrowing Descent) (2016) mirrors the tension and ambiguity in Hill’s *Artist-in-Residence* performance. The figures’ upraised hands recall images of police confrontations, and the protest rallying call of “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” juxtaposed with the upraised arms of children on a roller coaster. In this lesson, students will reflect on how they overcame moments of adversity, explore using body language as a visual communication tool in a photograph and experiment with digital collage.

Objective

Students will learn about how to use body language as a visual communication tool in photography, performance, and digital collage.

Essential Question

How can we transform our understanding of each other and ourselves through performance and collaboration?

Vocabulary

Durational Performance

Artworks that use the physical body and an extended duration of time to draw attention to an experience.

Mixed media

Artworks created using multiple types of materials and techniques, for example, collage and painting; photography, digital manipulation, and collage; performance and photography.

Digital Collage

A form of graphic art that utilizes digital cameras to capture imagery and computer software or camera filters to manipulate and alter images.

Embody

To represent an experience, idea, feeling, or action with your body.

Adversity

An individual instance or continued state of serious difficulty, something that makes everyday actions more dangerous or challenging.

Materials

Digital cameras

iPads

Laptops and/or Smart Phones

Access to digital imaging software or apps

Optional: Projector for sharing student digital artwork

Share resources in your school or community where students can be supported and unpack what may come up in this lesson; peer groups, counselors, therapists.

Preparation

1. Establish community guidelines, creating a safe space where everyone feels supported if they choose to share what might be emotional and personal experiences.
2. Introduce EJ Hill's work while asking students to describe what they see. Ask students what they notice

about the gestures and body language of the people in the artwork.

3. Ask students to break into small groups and discuss how their body language or the way they walk changes in different situations: in class, at work, at home with family, on the subway—what if there are police in the subway?
4. Ask students to take a quiet moment to reflect on a experience of personal adversity. Ask them to express that experience with their body in a still pose. Ask them to hold their pose for sixty-seconds then strike another still pose that represents how they overcame that challenging moment and hold that pose for sixty seconds.

Methods

1. Explain that students will take turns sharing their still poses while being photographed by a peer. They will collaborate to edit photographs into digital collages.
2. Share an example by embodying a still pose that expresses how you respond to a personally challenging moment while a student volunteer takes photographs.
3. Have a group discussion about what you communicated with your still pose and then share the context for the pose.
4. Demonstrate how to edit photographs, and ask students to consider how edits will alter the artworks context.
5. Ask students to find a partner and to take turns embodying a still pose and photographing their partner.
6. Encourage pairs to edit images of themselves individually and to then work together to combine both their images into one composition.
7. Remind students to consider how digital editing can recontextualize the photographs by altering color; shifting lighting; and duplicating, concealing, distorting, or layering images.

Reflection

1. Ask students to get back in the same small groups where they discussed body language. Did collaborating to create artwork in response to a personal moment shift the way they thought about that moment? Did they learn anything new about their partner?
2. Have students write about one of the experiences they chose to depict and display their writing alongside the final digital collage.



EJ Hill
Surrendered (A Harrowing Descent), 2016
Acrylic, collage, and photo transfer on birch panel
24 x 18 in.
The Studio Museum in Harlem; Museum purchase with funds provided
by the Acquisition Committee
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