

Paint Over, Paint Under

Lesson Plan
Paint Over, Paint Under



Firelei Báez
Fire wood pretending to be fire, 2013
Acrylic and gouache on yupo paper,
27 3/4 x 20 in.
The Studio Museum in Harlem;
promised gift of Carol Sutton Lewis
PG.2014.4.5
Photo: Zalika Azim

Firelei Báez creates work that focuses on the experiences of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latina women. Her practice is deeply rooted in historical research and committed to redefining dominant historical narratives. She focuses on cultural ambiguity within diasporic communities, strategies for surviving cultural invasion, and redefining identity.

Báez's *Fire wood pretending to be fire* is an acrylic and gouache painting on paper. It is made up of a pair of eyes that confront the viewer, surrounded by layers of overlapping

colors that create the figure's ambiguous facial features. The portrait is both figurative and abstract.

This lesson provides an opportunity for middle school students navigating their own identities within potentially conflicting peer, family, ethnic, and cultural affiliations, to create evocative watercolor self-portraits using both figuration and abstraction. Using wet-on-wet and dry brush applications, students will learn about how questions about identity can be explored through a layered painting technique.

Objective

Students will learn about the work of Firelei Báez and explore their own identity by creating a layered watercolor portrait using wet-on-wet and drybrush techniques.

Essential Question

“What role does abstraction or fiction play in history and identity?”

Vocabulary

Abstract

Imagery composed of patterning, color, geometry, and form that is not easily identifiable and can be interpreted multiple ways depending on the viewer’s perspective.

Ambiguity

Mixed feelings; holding multiple ideas, feelings, and identities at the same time.

Drybrush

A watercolor technique where paint is applied with little to no water on the brush creating harsher lines.

Self-portrait

A depiction of oneself by oneself, which can be literal and/or abstract.

Wet-on-wet

When using watercolor paint or ink, applying one color on top of another before the first color has dried, resulting in color blending and organic shapes.

Materials

Watercolor paint sets
Watercolor paper
Thick and fine brushes
Containers for water
Paper towels or small sponges
Mirrors

Preparation

1. Introduce Firelei Báez’s work and discuss *Fire wood pretending to be fire* using visual inquiry.
2. Review vocabulary words and have students find examples of figuration and abstraction in Báez’s painting.
3. Organize art supplies and demonstrate wet-on-wet, drybrush, and sponge watercolor techniques.
4. Have students take a quiet moment to create a list of all of the elements that they feel make up their identity.

Methods

Have students use the list they created to produce a layered portrait.

1. Have students develop a specific type of mark or paint application technique to correspond with each element of their identity they listed.
2. Working their way from the beginning to the end of the list, students should layer each type of mark making to create their portrait.
3. Encourage students to think about what they cover and what they leave exposed as they add each layer of their identity to their portrait.
4. Provide mirrors for students who want to include realistic elements in their painting.
5. As students work, provide feedback and encourage peer-to-peer support and conversation.

Reflection

1. Have students volunteer to share their self-portraits, describing paint application and the relationship between aesthetic choices and their identity.
2. Encourage classmates to provide supportive feedback and ask constructive questions. Have each student offer a compliment for another student’s painting, or an observation about process and technique.



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