

ASSEMBLAGE

Portraits

David Anderson

Every year, I implement a self-portrait unit with my eighth-grade students. This particular year was unique in that it was the first time we offered a yearlong art elective course. This increase in time allowed me to consider lessons and units that were more in-depth and spread out over longer periods of time. The unit I chose focused on the work of Schroeder Cherry, an artist who constructs 3D artworks using paint and found objects on wood to colorfully depict people, real and imagined.

I attended a workshop with Cherry more than fifteen years ago, and his thematic assemblage portraits have resonated with me since. I appreciated the implied stories behind his work,

A layer of conceptualism added to this unit on portraiture allows students to share intimate stories about their lives.

which the artist achieves through the symbolism generated from the deliberate placement of text and three-dimensional objects. Using Cherry's work opened the door for discussions with my students about symbolism and conceptualism.

Pre-Assemblage Assignment

Following the introduction to the unit, I charged students with a series of tasks to complete at home:

- Find a portrait photograph to use for the project, either a self-portrait or someone close to you in your family.
- Record in your sketchbook at least four sentences explaining why you chose the person for this



project. If it's you, explain what you hope to convey about yourself.

- Bring in at least five objects from home that you wish to include in your box assemblage.
- Explain what the objects are in your sketchbook and any possible symbolism associated with those objects.
- Record in your sketchbook three lines or quotes from a movie, song, or poem that you find meaningful.

Starting with Portraits

We began by discussing the fundamentals of portraiture: facial proportions, symmetry, light and dark areas, etc. Students sketched their portraits on one half (top or bottom) of 12 x 24" plywood, and then large areas were blocked in first, followed by details, using acrylic paint. Some time was also spent learning how to mix paint to achieve a desired skin tone.

Box Assemblage

Once the portraits were complete, students began assembling their boxes using wood glue and nails. They measured and divided the length of the 12 x 24" plywood in half using a pencil, allowing for a 12 x 12" (30.5 x 30.5 cm) section to be used for the portrait, and the other half to be used for the "box" area. The box area would be sectioned off using four 1 x 3" boards.

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Materials

- 1 pre-cut piece of plywood per student: 12 x 24" (30.5 x 61 cm), which serves as the backing for the box and for the portrait
- 4 pre-cut pieces of 1 x 3" (2.5 x 8 cm) boards per student: two 12" (30.5 cm) and two 10" (25 cm), used for creating the box
- acrylic paint
- found objects from home
- any items I could find in my art room



James S.,
grade eight.



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Now it was time to take all of the items students had gathered during the preliminary steps and consider how to incorporate them into their boxes. I stressed that I didn't want them to randomly glue or attach the items to the box and call it "finished." To avoid this, I challenged students to consider the symbolism of each object and how it might be altered. For example, an apple has common associations with health, education, and religion. However,

if the apple or its surroundings are altered, the implied symbolism of the apple changes. While all of my students were able to grasp this concept, putting it into action with their own work took some gentle nudging.

Summary

The project took about fifteen hours to complete. To grade the project, I had students submit an artist statement, a rubric, and a two-minute video discussing their work. The added layer of conceptualism to this unit on portraiture allowed students to share intimate stories about their lives. Many of these components were not immediately recognizable within the students' work. Instead, they were revealed to me through their artist statements or the videos they submitted. Some of these revelations included:

- insecurities about one's socioeconomic status

- struggles with color-blindness
- the inclusion of a symbolic artifact that was given to the student before a parent passed away
- references to a parent's health struggles
- one student's admiration for his father, another for his older brother, and another for his older sister

Students utilized this project to share intimate pieces of their lives, and for that, I am incredibly grateful. 🙏

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Connecting: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

WEB LINK

Schroeder Cherry: bakerartist.org/portfolios/schroeder-cherry