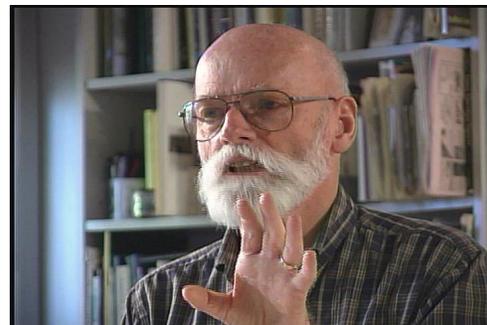


## EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: Paint 3x  
Subject: Robert Bechtle  
Discipline: Visual Arts (Painting)

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Photorealist painter Robert Bechtle talks about his work and the lifetime he has spent learning how to look. Still image from SPARK story, February 2005.

## SECTION I - OVERVIEW

### EPISODE THEME

Paint 3x

### SUBJECT

Robert Bechtle

### GRADE RANGES

K-12 and Post-Secondary

### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts, Language Arts

### OBJECTIVE

To introduce students to Photorealism in painting as a mode of visual exploration and understanding; to provide students opportunities for looking, reflecting, responding to, and writing about the world around them

### STORY SYNOPSIS

For more than forty years Robert Bechtle has been widely recognized as one of the founders of American Photorealism, a style of painting that rivals the detail and objectivity of the photograph. SPARK watches Bechtle at work rendering one of his favorite subjects – his Potrero Hill neighborhood – and talking about his motivations and his images as he prepares for a retrospective exhibit of his work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in spring 2005.

### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Group oral discussion, review and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing

Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance

Hands-on individual projects in which students work independently

Hands-on group projects in which students assist and support one another

### INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

To provide opportunities for considering how art relates to life

To encourage students to look closely at and respond to the visual world around them

To inspire students to consider how the familiar is extraordinary by considering its details – details, edges, shadows, colours and forms

To help students express how time and space impact upon their immediate environment

To provoke discussion about the differences between art and photography

### EQUIPMENT NEEDED

SPARK story about Robert Bechtle on DVD or VHS, and related equipment

Computer with Internet access, navigation software, speakers and a sounds card, printer

Samples of Photorealism and Superrealism paintings in books and on the Internet

### MATERIALS NEEDED

Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers

Pencils, pens, and paper

### INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

Bodily-Kinesthetic - control of one's own body, control in handling objects

Intrapersonal - awareness of one's own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations

Spatial - ability to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems

Logical-Mathematical - ability to detect patterns, reason deductively, think logically



See more information on  
[Multiple Intelligences](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education) at  
[www.kqed.org/spark/education](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education).

## SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

### CONTENT OVERVIEW

For more than forty years Robert Bechtle has been widely recognized as one of the founders of American Photorealism, a style of painting that rivals the detail and objectivity of the photograph. SPARK watches Bechtle at work rendering one of his favorite subjects – his Potrero Hill neighborhood – and talking about his motivations and his images as he prepares for a retrospective exhibit of his work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in spring, 2005.

When Bechtle began painting in the late 1950s and 60s, the local art scene in the Bay Area was dominated by figurative and Abstract Expressionist painters who used the broad, painterly gestures of the East Coast Abstract Expressionist style to depict figures and landscapes. Bechtle initially began working in this expressionist style, but quickly found himself drawn towards making carefully detailed portrayals, observed and executed with the unblinking accuracy of a camera. Along with fellow Realist artists Ralph Goings and Richard McLean, Bechtle helped popularize Photorealism, a mode of painting whereby the artist covers over any trace of brushwork to produce an image that approximates a photograph as closely as possible.

The camera is an essential tool in making Bechtle's paintings. His process begins by making photographs of the landscape around him, which he then uses as a kind of sketchbook, selecting single images to develop into paintings. Bechtle then projects the image onto the canvas and traces the basic lines and shadows of the image. He then completes the painting by matching his paints to the colors in the photograph.

Bechtle chooses as his subject matter the urban and suburban landscape that surrounds him--a terrain populated by neat bungalows and gleaming cars bleached by the California sun. His neutral, near featureless scenes of San Francisco, Oakland and

other neighborhood streets--often devoid of any human presence--reveal the deep-seated sense of alienation that characterizes the American middle class neighborhood of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Bechtle received his BA in 1954 and MFA in 1958 from the California College of Arts and Crafts. From 1969 until he retired in 1999, he taught in the Painting Department at San Francisco State University. His works have been exhibited widely throughout the United States and Europe, as well as in Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Bechtle's paintings can be found in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art and Museum of Modern Art in New York, National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Oakland Museum, and in many other public and private collections across the U.S. and abroad.



Painter Robert Bechtle scrutinizes his source photograph as he maps out a new painting. Still image from SPARK story, 2005.

### THE BIG PICTURE

New York gallery owner Louis K. Meisel is generally credited with coining the term Photorealism to describe the works of photographic accuracy first shown in the exhibition Twenty-Two Realists at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970. Artists

working in this style (also called Hyperrealism or Superrealism) include painters and sculptors, and while their subject matter varies, Photorealists base their works on photographs, taking images of their subjects and copying the image onto a canvas using a projector so as to transfer an image exactly. Application of paint (be it acrylic, oil or watercolor) is accomplished flatly so that the painting's surface is as smooth and consistent as possible, further adding to the simulation of an exact reproduction of the real scene. As such, a finished Photorealist work appears remarkably like a photograph.



Robert Bechtle, Alameda Gran Torino, 1974. Oil on canvas. Collection SFMOMA, T.B. Walker Foundation Fund purchase in honor of John Humphrey © Robert Bechtle

When Bechtle was starting out as an artist in the late 1950s/early 60s, the art scene in the Bay Area was largely dominated by artists working in the figurative and Abstract Expressionist styles that had migrated across the country from New York. Works in these styles are generally characterized by broad, painterly gestures and bold, expressive color. Some of the most well-known artists from this period in Bay Area art are Richard Diebenkorn, Wayne Thiebaud, David Park, Elmer Bischoff and Nathan Oliveira. Many art historians and critics contend that the color-saturated landscapes, whitewashed architecture, and unique light effects of Diebenkorn's paintings typify the West coast Abstract Expressionist style.

By the mid-1960s, a number of artists, including Bechtle, began shifting away from these trends towards a realistic style, producing fastidiously rendered realistic paintings. Advocates of the style stressed objectivity and technical proficiency to create images of photographic clarity, often street scenes or

portraits. While the subjects of the Photorealist works were similar to those of painters such as Diebenkorn and Bischoff, including urban landscapes, people, places and things, Photorealist paintings are not expressive. In fact, they were just the opposite, as the artists were seeking to represent *exactly* the scene from the "real" world without particular interpretation into subjective colors, shapes, etc. Photorealist images can be seen as portraits of specific moments of everyday life, much like photographs.

As a practice, photography and traditional "fine art" are united in Photorealism in terms of content and process. A photograph captures *everything* in a particular scene, enabling an artist to record and then reproduce the scene *as it was*, rather than how s/he might *choose*. The relationship between the thing in the world and the subject of the photograph is time-based – when we look at a photograph, we know that thing *was there* – the photograph acts as a document of existence.

Richard Diebenkorn, Cityscape I (formerly Landscape I), 1963. Oil on canvas. 60 1/4 in. x 50 1/2 in. Collection SFMOMA. Purchased with funds from Trustees and friends in memory of Hector Escobosa, Brayton Wilbur, and J. D. Zellerbach 64.46 © Estate of Richard Diebenkorn



When an artist transforms a photographic image into a painting, the way that Bechtle does, its role as a truthful document of a specific moment in time is simultaneously confirmed and called into question. Because the painting looks like a photograph, we as audiences transfer to it the faith we have in photographs, believing that what we see in the painting *was there*. At the same time, the fact that the finished image is a painting and not a photograph means that we know it may not be a truthful documentation of what was, having been interpreted and realized by an artist who makes decisions about color, shape, tone, composition, etc. – decisions that a camera does not make. This dual effect, along with

the masterful craft required by the style combines to make Photorealism appear deceptively simple and highly intriguing.

In addition to the technical level, the subject of Photorealist artworks is also layered. While on the one hand, the documentary or evidentiary nature of the process renders the painting as “objective.” By contrast, because they are selected scenes that represent particular places, people and things at a particular point in history, they also express a slice of American culture. Although Bechtle’s works are *still lives* of a sort, as painting carefully constructed through an elaborate process, they convey certain ideas about choices, values, and time.

### RESOURCES – TEXTS

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Ashbury, John and Kenworth Moffett, Fairfield Porter: Realist Painter in An Age of Abstraction. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Little, Brown & Company, 1982.

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Meisel Louis K., Photorealism Since 1980, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1980.

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Real, Really Real, Super Real: Directions in Contemporary American Realism, San Antonio: San Antonio Museum Association, 1981.

Robert Bechtle: A Retrospective. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2005. – Exhibition catalogue featuring 91 color plates of Bechtle’s paintings and works on paper, with essays by Michael Auping, Janet Bishop, Charles Ray, and Jonathan Weinberg. Available from SFMOMA Museum Store: Phone: 415.357.4035, Web: <http://store.yahoo.com/sfmoma/robere.html>

Treadwell Nicholas, Super Humanism, introduction Michael Shepherd, London: Paul Foster, 1980.

Vaizey, Marina, The Artist as Photographer, London: Sidwick & Jackson, 1982.

## RESOURCES – ARTICLES ON PHOTOREALISM

“Realism: When a Rose is a Rose.” ARTnews February 1996, p. 93.

“The New Realism: A Synthetic Slice of Life.” OPUS International No. 44-45, June 1973, pp. 28-37.

Alloway, Lawrence. “In the Museums: Paintings from the Photo.” Arts, December 1, 1970.

Bonito, Virginia Anne. Don Eddy: The Resonance of Realism in the Art of Post War America, published electronically at Artregister Press.com, 1999.

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Seitz, William C. “The Real and the Artificial: Painting of the New Environment.” Art in America November-December 1972, pp. 58-72.

Stevens, Carol. “Message into Medium: Photography as an Artist’s Tool.” Print Vol. XXIV, no. III, May 6, 1970, pp. 54-59.

## RESOURCES – ARTICLES INCLUDING BECHTLE

“The Lonely Look At American Realism,” Life Magazine, 1980, pp. 74-82.

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Beals, Kathie. “Whitney’s ‘Autoscape’ is driving display,” The Westchester/Rockland Newspapers, 6 April 1984.

Boraks, David. “Autos, landscapes, and art,” The Sunday Republican, (Waterbury, CT), April 1, 1984.

Eisman, Alberta. “Autoscape at the Whitney,” Connecticut Magazine May 1984, pp. 111-113.

Eliasoph, Philip. “America on Wheels: Whitney show explores our paved-over paradise,” Southern Connecticut News, April 8, 1984.

Larson, Kay. “Art: Dead-End Realism,” New York Magazine, October 26, 1981.

## RESOURCES – WEB SITES

Artyclopedia – Find information and images for Bechtle and 22 other Photorealists - <http://www.artyclopedia.com>

The Artists.org – A listing of Photorealist artists, including Robert Bechtle – <http://www.the-artists.org/MovementView.cfm?id=FE89B7EE-E538-4152-BA676BBD1CB91EB7>

ArtLex – Art Dictionary listing about Photorealism - <http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/p/photorealism.html>

Art in Context - <http://www.artincontext.org/listings/artist/genre/photorea.htm>

Bonito, Virginia Anne. Don Eddy: The Resonance of Realism in the Art of Post War America, published electronically at <http://www.artregisterpress.com> 1999.

ImageBase – The on-line collection from the de Young Museum and the Palace of the Legion of Honor, including images by Bechtle and other Photorealist artists - <http://www.thinker.org>

Voices and Images of California Art: Robert Bechtle, SFMOMA. A multimedia program exploring Bechtle's life and work through videos of the artist working in his studio, as well as photographs, letters, newspaper clippings, and gallery announcements from his personal archive. A gallery of works zoom-enabled for closer inspection shows highlights from the artist's prolific 40-year career. Also viewable at kiosks located in the galleries and in the Koret Visitor Education Center. - <http://www.sfmoma.org/bechtle/index.html>

## VIDEO RESOURCES

Philip Pearlstein Draws the Artist's Model  
Color; sound; 86 minutes, Interactive Media Corporation (\*INTMCP), 1985.

Also see SFMOMA's Voices and Images of California Art: Robert Bechtle *interactive Web site, which features video clips.*

## BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

De Young Museum  
75 Tea Garden Drive  
Golden Gate Park  
San Francisco, CA  
415/682.2481w  
<http://www.thinker.org>

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
151 Third Street (between Harrison and Mission)  
Streets), San Francisco, CA 94103  
415/357.4000  
<http://www.sfmoma.org>

San Jose Museum of Art  
110 South Market Street,  
San Jose, CA 95113,  
408/271-6840 or 408/294-2787  
<http://www.sjmusart.org>

John Berggruen Gallery  
228 Grant Avenue  
San Francisco, CA 94108  
Tel: 415.781.4629  
Email: [info@berggruen.com](mailto:info@berggruen.com)  
<http://www.berggruen.com/home.html>

Oakland Museum of California  
1000 Oak Street  
Oakland, California 94607  
510/238.2200  
<http://www.museumca.org>

Bucheon Gallery  
389 Grove St  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
415/863.2891  
<http://www.bucheon.com>

## SECTION III – VOCABULARY

### DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

**Painterly**

Application of paint that exploits or highlights the unique attributes of the material; a characteristic that is like what an artist does when s/he paints

**Realism**

In art, a specific concern for observable fact or reality, and a rejection of the visionary or expressive

**Figurative**

Of or relating to representation of the human figure in art, such as figure drawing

**Narrative**

In painting, like literature, the representation of an event or story

**Photorealism**

A genre of art in which artists use photographs to recreate images that resemble photographs

**Perception**

Awareness of the elements of an environment, place, objects or other persons through physical sensation

**Abstract**

Disassociated from a specific instance; insufficiently factual; expressing a quality apart from an object

**Still Life**

An artistic work consisting of inanimate objects

**Americana**

Materials concerning or characteristic of America, its civilization, or its culture

**Style**

A particular manner or technique by which something is done, created, or performed; a specific type of expression

## SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

### STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

#### Looking at Bechtle’s Paintings

Ask students to look closely at Robert Bechtle’s paintings featured in the SPARK story, either by freezing the frame on selected pieces, accessing photographs of the paintings on the Web (see **Resources – Web sites**) or by considering the images reproduced in this Guide.

Ask students to describe the scene in one of more paintings:

- What do they see?
- Where are their eyes drawn?
- Does the scene feel familiar? Why?
- What mood or atmosphere is created by the piece? How did the artist create this mood? Encourage students to name specific elements, such as color, shadow, light and dark, compositional elements, contrast, etc.
- What do they understand about the person(s) or object(s) in the painting?

Discuss students’ responses to these questions and draw out the ways in which their responses differ. Try to elucidate how and why they each “read” the picture differently, and whether the works are like other paintings and/or photographs with which they are familiar.

Move on to explore Bechtle’s work more widely, drawing upon the SPARK story and the image galleries of Bechtle’s work at:

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
<http://www.sfmoma.org/exhibitions>

Traditional Fine Arts  
<http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/5aa/5aa61.htm>

Art in Context  
<http://www.artincontext.org/LISTINGS/IMAGES/FULL/N/8B754JNL.htm>

Oakland Museum of California.

[www.museumca.org/exhibit/exhib\\_bechtle.html](http://www.museumca.org/exhibit/exhib_bechtle.html)

Invite students to work in pairs and identify common themes in the paintings: the mood(s), stylistic choices, colour palette, compositions, etc. Ask each pair to write a paragraph on Bechtle’s work responding to the questions above and to discuss with the group or to present with images.

Consider Bechtle’s comment on his work in exhibition catalog for *California Classic: Realist Paintings by Robert Bechtle*, on view at the Oakland Museum of California in 2000 ([http://www.museumca.org/exhibit/exhib\\_bechtle.html](http://www.museumca.org/exhibit/exhib_bechtle.html)), featuring paintings and drawings from 1965 to 1997.

“My subject matter is my immediate world, objects that I know and care about. [...] They represent the essence of the American experience.”

Initiate a discussion of what Bechtle means when he says “the essence of American experience.” What symbols or icons does he depict? What is essentially American? Why? Do Bechtle’s images comment upon America? What do they say? Are they neutral, objective representations of a culture? What is the mood(s) or tone(s) of Bechtle’s work?

#### RELATED STANDARDS

##### VISUAL ARTS

##### Grade 4

##### 1.0 Artistic Perception

##### *Analyze Art Elements and Principles of Design*

1.5 Describe and analyze the elements of art (color, shape/form, line, texture, space and value), emphasizing form, as they are used in works of art and found in the environment.

##### 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

4.3 Discuss how the subject and selection of media relate to the meaning or purpose of a work of art.

## Camera as Sketchbook

“Constant practice devoted to one subject often outdoes both intelligence and skill.”

~ Cicero, Greek orator and statesman, c. 106-43 BC

In the SPARK story, Bechtle observes that he uses his camera “like a sketchbook,” traversing a neighborhood with his camera and taking images of the spaces, objects, qualities, effects, and colors that attract him. Consider why Bechtle uses this method of exploration and documentation, and what he means when he says...

“I keep shooting it [the intersection] because I’m sort of fascinated by the changes that have happened, different light qualities.”

Discuss with students the ways in which they could record what attracts them about the places and everyday things around them, including writing, taking photographs, sketching, audio portraits, etc. Ask students to choose a place (their street, their walk to school, a favorite park, etc.) and to explore and record their reflections using at least two of these methods, preferably two that employ different skills such as writing and drawing, or recording and photography. Invite students to share their portraits of places with the class through presentation and/or exhibition.

To go further with this activity, after seeing what students have created, challenge students to create one new work by selecting different elements from their documents. Offer Bechtle’s reflection on his own process as an example.

“I’ve treated it essentially like a still-life. I can position the edge of the building on the corners so that the division between the light side and the dark side is dead center in the frame. So I get a bit of street that way and a bit of street that way – bright sun, deep shadow.”

### RELATED STANDARDS

#### VISUAL ARTS

Grades 9-12, Proficient

1.0 Artistic Perception

Impact of Media Choice

1.5 Analyze the material used by a given artist and describe how its use influences the meaning of the work.

3.0 Historical & Cultural Context

3.4 Discuss the purposes of art in selected contemporary cultures.

## A Question of Style

“...Realist painting was really a way dropping all of that [outside influences] away... it was a way of saying I’m not interested in style, this is a no style way of painting.” – Robert Bechtle, SPARK, 2005.

After watching the SPARK story, talk about this quote from Bechtle about style. Ask students what Bechtle means when he says Superrealism is “a no style way of painting”? Consider this in terms of visual art in general. Is it possible to paint without any style? What is style? To get at this question, develop a few comparisons to help students articulate the uniqueness of certain styles as well as their differences. Compare Bechtle’s paintings to paintings by artists working in other styles, such as:

Jackson Pollock (Abstract Expressionism)

Thomas Hart Benton (Social Realism)

Richard Diebenkorn (California Figurative)

Andrew Wyeth (American Realist)

Frida Khalo (Mexican Surrealism)

Li Huayi (Chinese Landscape Painting – See the SPARK story about Huayi)

Helen Frankenthaler (Abstract Expressionism)

Jean-Leon Gerome (Academic)

Pablo Picasso (Cubism)

Claude Monet (Impressionism)

Rembrandt van Rijn (History Painting)

Artemisia Gentileschi (Baroque)

Caspar David Friedrich (Romanticism)

Max Ernst (Surrealism)

Robert Downs (Bay Area Abstract Expressionism)

Also compare Bechtle to other Photorealist painters:

Phillip Pearlstein    Audrey Flack    Ralph Goings

Charles Bell        Chuck Close    Richard Estes

Idelle Weber        Carolyn Brady

See **Resources – Web Sites** for sites featuring works by listed artists. When comparing, address how artists solve problems, helping students articulate the specific elements of the various styles.

### RELATED STANDARDS

#### VISUAL ARTS

Grade 8

3.0 HISTORICAL & CULTURAL CONTEXT

3.2 Compare, contrast, and analyze styles of art from a variety of times and places in Western and non-Western cultures.

### Ordinary/Extraordinary

After watching the SPARK story, discuss as a group what students understand about painting, particularly the subject of painting. Prompt students to consider history painting, portraiture, still life, landscape, figure painting, and Abstraction. List these on the board. Then address Bechtle's subjects, making a list on the other side of the board of as many the students can name (cars, streets, etc.). Then, talk about the differences between the lists of subjects. Which subjects are ordinary? Which are extraordinary? What makes a subject one or the other?

### Photographic portraiture – Color and Mood

Discuss different types of portraits (full length, profile, group, bust, three-quarter) with the group, showing examples of each. Have students plan out their composition before they take photographs of their classmates. They can include objects and settings in the composition. Using Polaroid cameras have students take portraits of their classmates.

Working in pairs, invite students to sit quietly and look closely at their classmate. Encourage them to think about their sense of this person, their feelings and mood, not just how they look. Ask them to think about what mood would they like to convey about the other person.

Illustrate this point by asking students to associate feelings or objects with a particular color. What would the mood be if the background were blue? Discuss the fact that visually (according to how the eye processes color) "cool" colors recede (blues, greens, grays) and "warm" colors pop out (reds, oranges, yellows). Have students create a photographic portrait using only one color that conveys a sense of the person without including objects that indicate or suggest something about them. They may need to think about this and assemble items of clothing or backdrops to produce the color they plan to work with.

Display the portraits in the classroom and then initiate a discussion about the work. Discuss the ways in which color, composition, background, objects etc. convey mood in a photograph or

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.

painting. Encourage students to look at the ways these elements create mood in their portraits.

Review the work with the group. What have they learned about portraiture and how composition and color create mood?

*This exercise can also be accomplished by drawing.*

### Painting and Photography

Discuss the differences between photographs and painting, using images from the artists listed in this Guide as well as others. Ask students to articulate the differences and similarities between the two forms.

Historically, the identification of photography as a fine art has been challenged by various artists, critics, historians, and members of the public. Invite students to research the history of this discussion. Form small groups with the class, and challenge each pair to write a short position paper taking a side in the debate. Ensure that students address some of the key points of the discussion, asking:

- Are fine and commercial art different?
- What defines "art"?
- What defines "fine art" versus "low art"?
- Is photography an "art"?
- Under what genre does photography belong?
- Is photography creative?

Afterwards, consider the manner in which Bechtle and the Photorealists use photographs in their work and how it is different or similar to the use of other tools? Ask students what they prefer aesthetically.

#### RELATED STANDARDS

##### VISUAL ARTS

###### Grade 4

###### 5.0 Career and Career-Related Skills

5.4 Read biographies and stories about artists and summarize the readings in short reports, telling how the artists mirrored or affected their time period or culture.

###### Grade 8

###### 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

4.2 Develop a theory about the artist's intent in a series of works of art, using reasoned statements to support personal opinions.

###### Grades 9-12, Advanced

###### 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

4.2 Identify the intentions of artists creating contemporary works of art and explore the implications of those intentions.

###### 5.0 Connection, Relations & Applications

5.2 Compare and contrast works of art, probing beyond the obvious and identifying psychological content found in the symbols and images.