

Unfamiliar Ground

Inspiring Students with Abstraction

Gary Hawkins

tHEY SAY “EVERYTHING IS BIGGER” in Texas, and there is no shortage of awesome landscape to contemplate in the state. For the poet in Houston, however, some of the most stunning and inspiring vistas emerge as drawings, sculptures, and paintings within the city’s museums. For entire afternoons, I have been bewildered by the constructed boxes of Duchamp and Cornell in Dominique de Menil’s collection. I have passed unknown time before the calming and terrifying canvases that surround me in the Rothko Chapel. And, repeatedly, I have stepped inside the Cy Twombly galleries to attempt to fathom *Untitled: Say Goodbye Catullus to the Shores of Asia Minor*, Twombly’s enormous and epic work that fills a long room with explosions of color, silences, and the heavy scent of oils. It would make sense then, that as a poet with Houston’s Writers in the Schools, I have sought to kindle creative writing among elementary school children using what awakens me, this local well of abstract twentieth-century art. To inspire students with non-representational art is to watch them face the limits in their own visions and surpass them, and teaching with such art has made me face many of the same challenges.

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These challenges come down to a set of understandable resistances. I say “understandable” because the discomfort that students suffer in their efforts to come to terms with abstraction are what most viewers suffer at the hands of it. It is a purposefully unsettling form of art that intends to defamiliarize every viewer. Each time I walk into a gallery lined with canvases on which there are no human figures, no animals, no distinct objects from nature, I am immediately in unfamiliar territory, and no final appreciation of the work will dissolve that fact. I am forced to confront my own deep-seated faith in representation.

Teaching with abstract art in a museum setting also upsets a few long-held pedagogical faiths. There is no regimen of desks all facing toward the front, no strict schedule for any lesson. Instead of the rigid outlines of textbook chapters, there are the intricate nests of galleries. I find the museum rejects anything too straightforward. My students are allowed to sit or stand or lie down and are encouraged to take different angles on the work. I have my plan for what I want to show them, but I also stay attuned to the mood of the tour and to their reactions to what they see. This often means I spend a great deal of time in one spot or make a spontaneous stop in front of a particular Jean-Michel Basquiat I have forgotten. But if it fits in with the fantastic journeys I have been suggesting to them, I’ll ask them to fill with words the blank space on the left side of the canvas, which seems to be where the painting’s skeleton man is heading. Although I primarily look for ways to press my students beyond silence or rejection, I don’t set goals for what they should produce in these galleries. Instead, I orchestrate repeated collisions between the students and their expectations of art, the kinds of encounters that will change their ways of seeing even after they leave the place.

To accomplish this, I have to get my students to resist their own resistance, including that of a young student who proclaims that *Midland #11*, one of Robert Ryman’s landmark, all-white paintings, is something that “a first grader could do.” I’m not trying to get my students to understand the irony and understatement of Ryman, but I do want to get them to sit still long enough to look into the details of the piece. So while flexibility is the order of the day, rules and etiquette still have their place in this kind of teaching, and I always discuss with my students how I expect them to behave before we start out. Primarily, I show them that while art need not be worshipped, ~~that~~ it still has much to teach us. Once these guidelines of respect are in place and the students see how seriously I take them, I can

relax them a bit. I encourage them to feel comfortable as they settle in around a piece of art. I am fortunate in that the Menil Collection opens early to allow my classes to tour the galleries before the general public arrives. I am also blessed by a museum staff that follows Dominique de Menil's belief that a gallery should be a comfortable and not a staid place. I am able, therefore, to protect the art, supervise the children, and insist on their close attention to the paintings, without resorting to military discipline.

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Sometimes the discipline of attentiveness requires a bit of enforcement, especially since, over the course of a morning, I replicate for them my own long experience of coming to terms with the abstract. The museum is designed to move incrementally from the more easily recognizable to the wildly abstract; a typical tour begins with a Warhol soup can (where I might ask the students to think about who would eat from a tin that big) and then proceed to one of George Segal's full-sized plaster figures, in the presence of which I ask them to consider what a *Seated Woman* might think about all day inside her cast. These steps past the more familiar territories of the pantry and the human figure are crucial in a course toward the abstract.

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When we encounter something that is unusual, we map the new upon a set of givens we hold to make our worlds. Abstraction interferes with the knowing that seeks to identify. It highlights the dynamic between our desire to ground a work of art by naming what it represents and our hidden willingness toward more imaginative, associative comprehension. This is the dynamic moment of the lyric, the hinge of metaphor. For this work to inspire I must allow my students the chance to locate known forms and simultaneously look for ways to break from the known into lyric territory. After they circle the Segal sculpture, I start with the literals: What is this? (A woman.) What is she doing? (Sitting.) What's her expression? (Down-turned.) Then, since I feel the best way to access strong, imaginative association is through empathy, I tell my students that instead of an anonymous woman inside there, they should imagine themselves wrapped in that plaster. I give them first the open-ended prompt: "Tell me what you are thinking." I keep them writing by dropping new prompts, asking new questions at intervals: "How did this happen?" "What were you doing just before that?" "Where were you headed?" "What are you trying to say?" "Who do you want to hear you?" "Who are you missing?" I want the writing to include the expected responses of "Let me out!." But I also want it

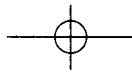
- 4 to surpass the practicalities of escape. By imagining themselves inside the sculpture, they become immediately and concretely involved with it, and through their conjecture they move beyond the literal moment.

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While we can't imagine ourselves into an abstract painting in quite the same way as we can into a sculpture, there is much about abstract painting that encourages involvement. In the figureless field, shapes and textures resonate before us, brushstrokes move with a kinetic energy. All this is a convenient and tactile way to engage the students with a piece of art, by drawing their attention to the material of it and to the drips and pours of how that material is employed. What this also means is that the students need to spend some time in front of the work, allowing its subtleties and gestures to form in their imagination. Place a group of young students in front of *Requiem Blue*, Yves Klein's rough azure of speckled canvas and attached rock-like structures, and it won't take long before most of them see a lunar landscape through the painting's monochrome. They will quickly enter the work of substitution, like a game of picking pictures out of the clouds. To keep such substitution from becoming its own kind of reductive interpretation, I make the ~~welcome~~ ~~datacomp~~ students depart from the moon and call out other terrain. Soon, I'm hearing of strange blue-sponge lawns and indigo surfaces of microscopic creatures. Often classes will set a challenge among themselves, each student trying to outmatch the others with his or her discoveries.

Each room in the museum can be a new discovery, and a constant movement between galleries helps keep students from settling into any pattern of perception. When I think they need a more dramatic shift, we move outside and cross the street to the separate building that houses the work of Cy Twombly. Just inside its front doors is a slightly darkened gallery lined with what appear to be three huge blackboards covered with rows of spiraled lines like warm-up penmanship exercises. At first sight, the students declare that this is all so much "scribble-scrabble." But when I ask them to move closer and look at the surface, they admit that the "chalkboard" is indeed a canvas and that the "chalk" itself is an illusion of the paint. Once they grasp that this is not mimesis and that their attempts at reference lead them to a dead end, they begin to make some progress along the road to understanding abstraction.

If abstract forms like Twombly's are a perfect training ground for furthering the work of visual metaphor, this training can can be a rough course in troping, both for the teacher and the student. Sometimes when I



go around the circle asking what those rows of spirals look like, I hear repeatedly: like lines, like spirals, like curls, like paint. All claim that abstract art is hermetic find evidence in these authentic replies. Sometimes I have to give my group of students an idea of how far afield from the literal they might venture. "These spirals look like all the rings of hair cut today from the heads of a hundred princesses," I might say, "Or like wrinkles, like terrible rain." Inevitably, one student will raise his hand and set the bar by saying something such as: "They look like fields of wheat blowing in the afternoon wind."

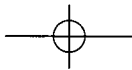
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There are always some students, though, for whom the leap to metaphor is not nearly so easy. I prompt them by asking if these shapes remind them of anything else, or what they could be *made into*. I know that this method seems to go against all I have previously said about avoiding the tyranny of representation in an abstract work. Yet while to ask of a painting, "What is it?" encourages a singular response, to inquire into what a painting is "like" elicits the more expansive responses of metaphor and simile that do not try to close down a work in one explanation. So if those "lines" remind a boy of "circles," I keep pushing him until he makes them into a "row of circles." I ask him if those circles might be part of something bigger or if they are moving anywhere. But I am not always successful. All my prodding sometimes only takes a young writer up to the brink of figurative language and shows him the rewards on the other side. Ultimately, the leap is one that he must make himself.

More and more, I am headed away from the visual analogue in favor of a different kind of portrayal. Instead of asking my students to depict the literal or suggested objects in a painting, I try to get them to evoke the feelings within. I further this process by asking my students the simple yet provocative question: "What do you think the artist was feeling when he painted all these spirals?" The responses range wonderfully from "frustration" to "excitement." For each of the emotions the students name, I ask them ~~welcome datacomp~~ to point to a specific part of the painting that led them to arrive at that answer. Still, I don't want them to lose sight of the larger work or to forget that the effect of the whole is as important as any given part. I maintain this holistic view by having the students stand in silence for a minute in the center of the gallery, their only permitted movement that of their heads as they scan all the walls. At the end of the minute, I ask them what it feels like to be surrounded by these paintings, and they take a moment to write their responses. Again, the reactions vary,

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6 from “It feels like everyone is yelling at me” to “I feel like I’m a baby again.” As we exit the gallery, I encourage them by pointing out the ways in which they have transformed what appeared to be “scribble-scrabble” into a much more complex entity. Now they are prepared for even grander abstraction.

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No method into abstraction can hope to encompass every instance of it in art. The confoundedness and awe we feel is mingled with inspiration. My purpose in taking my students to see Twombly’s perplexing *Catullus* is personal as well as pedagogical. This piece stretches for over fifty feet, filling one entire length of the gallery and reaching to its high ceiling where the day’s shifting light slants through the louvered roof. There is nothing else in the room. I have the students assemble in the doorway, ready their writing materials, and then I lead them into the gallery in a line. As we walk parallel to the painting, I pause at intervals along its length to situate each student in a spot where he or she will remain for the duration of our visit. I turn him or her toward the painting and sketch out the swath of it from top to bottom that I designate “yours.” In this way I form a row of children covering the entire length of *Catullus*. I tell them that I love this work but that I’m not always sure I’ve seen or know all of it. It is, I emphasize, enormous, and I ask for their help in exploring it. We will, I explain, try to get a sense of this painting by first observing and writing alone, and then assembling our responses into a larger poem. I remind them that they are responsible for ~~their~~^{your} sections, down to its tiniest dot of paint.

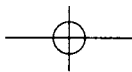
Now I pull out Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, a section of *Salut Au Monde!* that I have edited to highlight the poem’s grandeur and metaphor. Alone with the children in the gallery. I take full advantage of acoustics that are as large as both Whitman and Twombly. The children look at the painting as I walk slowly behind them, the full length of the gallery, reciting Whitman:

What do you see Walt Whitman?

Who are they you salute, and that one after another salute you?

I see a great round wonder rolling through space,

I see diminute farms, hamlets, ruins, graveyards, jails, factories, palaces,
hovels, huts of barbarians, tents of nomads upon the surface,



I see the shaded part on one side where the sleepers are sleeping, and the
sunlit part on the other side, 7

I see the curious rapid change of the light and shade,

I see distant lands, as real and near to the inhabitants of them as my land
is to me.

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I see plenteous waters,

I see mountain peaks, I see the sierras of Andes where they range,

...

I see the tracks of the railroads of the earth,

I see them in Great Britain, I see them in Europe,

I see them in Asia and in Africa.

I see the electric telegraphs of the earth,

I see the filaments of the news of wars, deaths, losses, gains, passions, of
my race.

I see the long river-stripes of the earth,

I see the Amazon and the Paraguay,

I see the four great rivers of China, the Amour, the Yellow River, the Yiang-
tse, and the Pearl,

I see where the Seine flows, and where the Danube, the Loire, the Rhone,
and the Guadalquiver flow,

I see the windings of the Volga, the Dnieper, the Oder,

I see the Tuscan going down the Arno, and the Venetian along the Po,

I see the Greek seaman sailing out of Egina bay.

...

I see the places of sagas,

I see pine-trees and fir-trees torn by northern blasts,

I see granite boulders and cliffs, I see green meadows and lakes,

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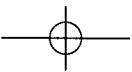
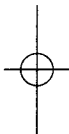
I see vapors exhaling from unexplored countries,

...

I see male and female everywhere,

...

And I salute all the inhabitants of the earth.



8 Immediately, without any pause for talk or questions, I set them to writing, saying, "Look at your section of the painting and tell me what it is you see."

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Parts of *Catullus* are filled with huge splashes of color while others are subtle gradients of washes and grays, but throughout the painting there is energy of movement and there are shapes suggesting images both fantastic and mundane. Everywhere there are words and phrases scrawled onto the surface, or indecipherable beneath layers of paint. I have the students write in silence. For those who are still struggling to get beyond statements like "I see paint," I kneel down and ask them, again, what they could turn that shape of paint into. Or I point to a section up near the ceiling and ask them to be the first to detail the sight of it.

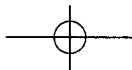
The true finale is the assembly of their individual views into a larger, collaborative poem. I ask them to re-read what they have written and choose the two lines that they like the most and mark each of them. Then I set the stage directions. They will stand up and remain facing the painting. I will walk behind them and one by one tap them on the shoulder. This is the signal to read their favorite line loud enough to fill the whole room. When I reach the end of the row, we will repeat the process until each student has read both of his or her lines. I walk to the far right-hand side of the painting, where those explosions of color are, and hold the gallery silent for a moment before I tap the shoulder of the first student, and we begin.

I wish I were not always in the midst of conducting this performance so that I might get a better sense of how it comes off. But from my perspective as well as what I can divine from the faces of the guards, the effect of these group poems that build down the face of the painting and rise to fill the room is stunning. I rarely direct any more writing after this event. It seems the perfect culmination of their visit. I have never transcribed one of these choral works, but I do hold onto the individual poems they write in front of *Catullus*. Time and again these young poets find sublime elements and remarkable moments deep within Twombly's abstractions.

I See

I see colors and colors like on a paint palette.

I see words about the emotion.



The colors look as if they were dancing with one another.
It looks as if some are slowing down and some are speeding up.
It looks like some are happy and some are sad.
Some are filled with a great heart, others not.
I see a beautiful painting that can describe every good thing or bad thing.

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—*Jaclyn Rosenthal, fourth grade*

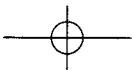
Big Painting

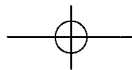
I see writing written on the walls and big and small words. I see a cloud bursting with white which no one can describe. I see ice cream, smushed, reminds me of the flavor sweetcream. I see a bundle of stars, all squished like they are hiding a secret, which they don't want to tell anyone. I see a cluster of colors like fireworks flying into the dark gray sky. I see shiny white air trembling. I see rain.

—*Sydney Sadick, fifth grade*

A Mile Long

I see a story
Blobs of smoke
The daytime coming
The rain from the
clouds The firecrackers
and the madness
of people. The
one fist out on
the paint from a flyer
I see the
tears of a baby
but behind
Ally off his—every
thing I see





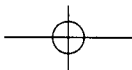
10 behind the rain
 The smoke the
 baby's tears the
 story the mad people
Unfamiliar I see a smile
Ground a nice big smile

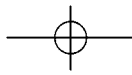
—Andrew Scheinthal, fourth grade

Gray rain falling down on the boats of the explorers in it
fighting for their life! Words and prayers they are saying.
Some of them are saying,
"There is land close by,"
or, "Look over there, there is light and dark
everywhere." Some people praying to not die
and the fight to stop. Journals, people are
writing in sloppy writing because it's cold
and boats are shooting, putting holes in other boats.
The boat is rocking very hard. Suddenly
I . . .

—Hannah Goetz, fourth grade

When such final, confident offerings come to me at the end of a
morning at the museum, I am forced to realize that the hesitation of my
first, conservative attempts at using art to inspire poetry were the result
of my own uncertainty. In the face of my desire that my students produce
something, some exquisite object of poetry as the product of each
encounter I offered them, I concocted a limitation. Feeling the represen-
tational to be a safe path to orchestrated creativity and abstraction to be
the road to—well, who knows—I made a divide between them. Such is too
often the fate of pedagogy: the theory precludes the experiment or the
plan eclipses the immediate situation. Ironically, in this case, my resistance
and trepidation helped me to lay out a strong path into this experimental
realm.





If anything, my students have confirmed for me by their writing that abstraction is often the most suggestive type of art. Surely I knew this—otherwise why would I have stood there so long in front of Twombly's work with a wealth of thoughts and emotions pouring over me? The difficult part is taking that confused overflow of inspiration and then starting forward into the work that is necessary to turn it into art. Working with young writers reminds me that maturity is not the best opening to art, but that creation yields best to awe, that most youthful position.

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