Getting the Big Picture; Discovering the Details

Overview

Artworks are comprised of many details, and often many techniques are employed by artists that the viewer must carefully scrutinize to decipher and appreciate. Examining the whole artwork from afar, then honing in on certain areas, can help us to make sense of the methods required to produce an artwork. Metaphorically, this idea of "getting the big picture, then discovering the details" is a hallmark of many works in the *Life on Mars* exhibition. Oftentimes artists deliberately create a sense of tension by offering viewers both a compelling macrocosmic perspective and a microcosmic one. Our experience of the artworks will be richer if we search for the personal and thematic significance of these visual effects. This activity invites participants to explore the details of works in *Life on Mars* and to compare and contrast them as a way of making meaning.

Objectives

- Discuss what one sees as one zooms out on the whole and zooms in on details.
- Identify and list elements of works that make up their whole compositions.
- Write a descriptive paragraph that explains the role of the macrocosmic, or "big-picture," perspective and the microcosmic, or "close-up," perspective of at least one carefully chosen artwork.
- Reflect on artists' decision-making processes based on your exploration and analysis of wholes and parts.
- Consider the role of exhibition production as it affects viewer perspectives and appreciation of visual art.

PA Standards

1.5.11 Quality of Writing
1.6.11 Speaking and Listening
9.1 Production, Performance and Exhibition of Arts
9.3 Critical Response
9.4 Aesthetic Response

Pre-Visit Activities

1. Review and Connect

Explain the main idea and objectives with the participants.

Many participants are likely to be familiar with Google Maps or Google Earth online applications. Make a connection to the main ideas in the overview by discussing with participants the Google views of Earth, countries, mountains, cities, and streets from far away and from up close as they zoom in and out. Showing these images in the classroom—perhaps views of your school or community—can make helpful connections for students.

2. Ask

When using a map application like Google Maps or Google Earth, what do you notice when you zoom out in satellite view? (Continents, mountains, deserts, clouds?) What do you notice when zoomed in? (Streets, buildings, cars, trees, small bodies of water?) What do you notice when you zoom out in map view? (Countries, states?) Zoomed in map view? (Street names, highways?) How are all of these alike? (They all show the Earth and its features.) What differs? (Zoomed out does not show details, names, or distinguishing features, whereas zoomed in does not show contexts, distances, patterns, relationships.) Can you demonstrate the "street view" feature? Now what has changed or developed? (Heights of objects can be deciphered and the detritus of the area is perceptible.)

Visiting the Exhibition

3. Looking at the Macro and the Micro

While taking a tour of *Life on Mars* with a museum docent, invite participants to look at the artworks in terms of the big picture (from a distance, as a whole) and then in terms of details (close up, in parts). Choosing artworks together that best convey evidence of this thematic relationship can be a good group activity. Here is a suggested list to inspire you on your visit, with the help of the exhibition map in the printed Gallery Guide, which is available at the museum:

1. Mark Bradford: *Across 110th Street*
2. Vija Celmins: *Night Sky #17*
3. Mike Kelley: *Kandor 1*
4. Wilhelm Sasnal: *Untitled*
5. Ranjani Shettar: *Just a bit more*
6. Richard Wright: No Title

Practice with a group working together on viewing and inquiry-based dialogue with one artwork. Here are some sample questions to begin the dialogues:

1. What is your first impression of the piece? What does it resemble, and what makes you say that?

2. What do you see, standing back, regarding the work as a whole?

3. What do you see when you move up closer? Does the work have smaller parts that make up the whole? What details can you see and how are they arranged?

4. Why do you feel the artist might have chosen to appeal to both of your perspectives? What might the artist be saying about the nature of our view of ourselves, the world, or a particular place in time?

4. Make Notes

As participants become familiar with zooming out and in on works, ask them to make notes with pencil and paper. Suggest dividing their notes into four columns in a table. See Student Handout:

1) Name of work and artist,
2) Macro view (big picture),
3) Micro view (details), and
4) Reflection (what one notices about the comparison and contrast of macro and micro)

Post-Visit Activities

5. Write

Ask participants to choose a work from their notes and write a paragraph description about what they noticed by zooming in and out. Suggest that they synthesize their notes and interpret how the meaning of the work is suggested by the relationships among its macro and micro aspects.

6. Relate and Reflect

Participants share their ideas about macro and micro aspects and how they affect understanding or appreciation of a work. Discuss with the group these ideas by comparing their notes and descriptive paragraphs.

7. Assess

Depending on age and ability, check for understanding of “whole and part” by asking students to point out their

findings and evaluate their ability to analyze the parts in comparison and contrast to the whole. You can also assess participants' abilities to write and discuss the synthesis of relationships among macro and micro aspects of the works and their evaluation of how these create meaning related to the guiding concepts of the *Life on Mars* exhibition.

Alternatives and Extensions

8. Explore with GigaPan℠ *

GigaPan℠ is a new high-resolution panoramic image technology developed in Pittsburgh that offers online images that can be explored not only by panning right and left, but also by zooming in and out while retaining great clarity. Find some shots taken at *Life on Mars* on the exhibition web site, or a full series at gigapan.org:

<http://www.gigapan.org/viewProfile.php?userid=5306>

There you will find the works of Thomas Hirschhorn, Richard Hughes, Mike Kelley, Ryan Gander, Richard Wright, Michael Monahan, Ranjani Shettar, Noguchi Rika, and Peter Fischli and David Weiss. To find them all in the GigaPan℠ search engine, try searches for "Life on Mars," "Carnegie Museum of Art," and the artists' names. Have students note the details they can find with Gigapan technology that they may have missed or not have been able to see on their visit.

9. Micro Scavenger Hunt

Print out a sheet of detail images from works in the exhibition from the *Life on Mars* web site. Participants must identify the artworks from which the detailed shots were taken as they tour the exhibition. You can also use the images as a recall matching game after your visit, back in the classroom.

10. Blog Posts

Have participants post their paragraphs on the *Life on Mars* web site. You can set up a Classroom Blog just for your group. In this way, participants can readily share ideas, comment on peers' posts, and practice writing for digital media. Additionally, participants can write posts on other works, thus practicing their descriptive and analytical writing skills with an authentic audience. Research shows that blogging is a great way to improve proficiency.

11. Audio Podcasts

Create podcast accounts on a free podcasting site (e.g. Gcast.com). Participants bring mobile phones and record their notes and descriptions and post them to your Classroom Blog on the *Life on Mars* web site.

12. Descriptive Drawing

Rather than writing a paragraph that describes and interprets the macro and micro aspects of a work, participants make drawings that show the comparisons and contrasts. This is also a great post-visit activity, during which students must make drawings based on their descriptive writing from their trip to the museum, which tests the quality of their language and syntax.

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*The GigaPan℠ system was developed by Carnegie Mellon University in collaboration with NASA Ames Intelligent Robotics Group, with support from Google.
(See NY Times article:
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/20/technology/20novel.html?r=1&sq=gigapan&st=cse&adxnnl=1&oref=slogin&scp=1&adxnnlx=1219335502-om2lquRhkY4CpxNemFhaFw)