



Molique Wright and Amir Craig, #WeRgoing2College, grade seven. Photo by Julio Mayorga, grade seven.

Significant SELF-PORTRAITS

Jaymie Paige Stein Green

Freud taught us that teenagers are egocentric, often caught up in their own thoughts and concerned about social stresses and images of themselves. They have moments of self-definition and security, followed by moments of self-doubt and insecur-

ity. That being said, Vygotsky also taught us that we learn by doing.

Selfies are a great teaching opportunity—at the heart of each poorly lit and composed, haphazardly focused selfie, lays the foundation for a successful and interesting portrait.

Student Perspectives

My students hail from a New Jersey city, where their lives are surrounded by violence, teenage pregnancy, drug addiction, and other characteristics that make up inner-city American poverty. Despite these challenging circumstances that surround them, they continue to rise above them.

My students are strong, powerful people, and their portraits need to be viewed from their own perspectives rather than the negative stereotypes that pervade our culture. This portrait photography unit enabled them to create art that can be shared as a counterpoint to the current stereotypes of inner-city America.

Day One: Portrait Studies

The first day of the unit began when students walked into the artroom and saw three self-portraits on the front screen. I asked them to write three things that were similar in the portraits, three things that were different, and then figure out which

one was the photograph (there was a drawing and painting as well). For the rest of the class period, students worked in groups to study photos I gave them and wrote down their observations. As a social justice educator, I chose underrepresented minority portrait photographers for them to look at. Some of those artists included James Van Der Zee, Carrie Mae Weems, Diane Arbus, Jimmy Nelson, Richard Avedon, Dorothea Lange, and Zanele Muholi.

Day Two: Prompts and Terms

On the second day, I handed each student a sheet with questions prompting them to think about their personalities: "What is one adjective you would use to describe yourself?" "What is your favorite piece of clothing that you own?" "Where do you feel like you are in your element?" And, "What current political issue do you feel passionate about?"

We then looked at more portraits and learned introductory photog-

raphy terms, such as composition, arrangement, close-up, mid-range, long shot, rule of thirds, balance, space, and simplicity. Students began to notice the lighting in the photographs we observed.

Day Three: Developing Hashtags

On the third day, students developed a hashtag for the political issue they previously wrote about. Some of the hashtags were: #StopDomesticViolence, #IAMNotAStatistic, #GayMarriage,

At the heart of each poorly lit and composed, haphazardly focused selfie, lays the foundation for a successful and interesting portrait.

#BlackLivesMatter, and #BuildBridgesNotWalls. Once they came up with their hashtag, they planned their portraits, including clothing, setting, background, facial expression, pose, and distance from the camera.

Digital Photography Sessions

To prepare for their photo-shoots, students learned the different parts of a digital camera and how to use them. They each successfully learned to use a tripod and how to light their portraits using clip-on lights. We were fortunate to receive funding through a Donors Choose grant, which enabled us to get a camera, tripod, and computer.

Students took turns using the camera, adjusting lights, costumes, makeup, and directing. The rest of the class worked on drawing self-portraits while photos were being taken. After portraits were uploaded onto the art studio laptop, students edited them using iPhoto and Preview. When my students started to bring their lunch upstairs to sit for portraits, take photographs, and edit, I knew the unit was a success!

Reflection/Assessment

On the last day of the unit, I gave each student a peer's portrait to respond to with these questions: What techniques did the artist employ? What

Aleysha Candelario and Joanna Vasquez, #MentalIllnessIsReal and #StopTheHate&Appreciate, grade seven. Photo by Amir Craig, grade seven.





Ellanah Metellus, #BlackIsBeautiful, grade eight. Photo by Jeffrid Reneville, grade eight.

do you learn about the subject from this piece, and how do you know? What do you think is successful about the piece? Who does this photograph speak to and why does it matter?

Surprises

This unit taught my students to be innovative and take risks. Perhaps because they are used to taking photos, perhaps because they are more confident than I was at their age—for whatever reason—they more easily took risks in this project compared to previous projects that did not utilize technology. They posed in a variety of ways that effectively told their unique stories.

In their paintings, drawings, and

sculptures, they have been less likely to take risks and think outside the box because they wanted their work to “look good.” Through photography and editing, they learned that art could look like many different things. 🌀

Jaymie Paige Stein Green is an art teacher at Senator Frank Lautenberg School in Paterson, New Jersey jaymiepaige@gmail.com

NATIONAL STANDARD

Connecting: Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.

WEB LINK

www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2016/diane-arbus