

Visual Personal Narrative - Student Exercises Packet

Seeing Into Nature

This booklet will get you started on the ideas and exercises for learning about how visual arts can powerfully communicate human themes through depictions of nature.



Albrecht Dürer, The Large Piece of Turf, 1503, watercolor and gouache on paper, 16-1/8 x 12-5/8 inches (detail)

This is a workbook designed to immerse you in the world of visual expression using content drawn from the natural world.

The goal is to start an exploration of how artists find inspiration and direction in nature. Nature can provide a rich interaction for conveying themes, emotions, and ideas.

We will examine a number of artistic styles, focusing on symbolism and beauty to reveal the power of nature in art. This journey aims to deepen your appreciation for visual language and the role nature plays in expressing universal themes.

Bring this booklet and your sketching journal with you on our hike on the university trail system. The professor will lead a “walking discussion” about each of own subjective experiences of the environment. After time for investigation and silent reflection, you’ll receive some additional instruction about choosing 2 activities from this booklet, and how to complete them.



Albrecht Dürer's "The Large Piece of Turf" (1503) demonstrates the artist's acute observation of a seemingly ordinary subject in nature, transforming it into a symbol of the interconnectedness and complexity of life. ([Wikimedia Commons](#))

Exercise 1: Grandeur in Small Things

Prepare:

While walking to the trail pavilion, listen attentively to the professor's micro-lecture about "The Large Piece of Turf" and the psychological skill of empathy. Share any thoughts or questions you may have in the brief discussion on the way. Think about how you might apply the professor's idea of Visual Empathy as we complete our walk in silence.

Engage:

Look at small living things in the forest. Can you "see into" them with "visual empathy?" Look at leaves (alive or dead, any color or shape). Examine moss, lichen, bark. Carefully look underneath small sticks or bark on the ground for insects or amphibians. In your sketching journal, take notes and make quick drawings about how a small thing can remind you of very large and powerful themes.

Reflect:

Take notes below about your experience of noticing small things that are easily overlooked. You can bring your thoughts about the exercise to the group discussion at the end of the day.



The ancient art of Chinese Silk Painting plays a significant role in our exploration of visual communication through depictions of nature, specifically focusing on the use of line and landscape.

This tradition showcases the unique harmony between fine lines and flowing brushwork, resulting in delicate, ethereal depictions of nature that reflect the Chinese philosophical concept of balance.

Exercise 2: Landscape Lines & Balance

Prepare:

At the trail pavilion, find a comfortable place to sit or stand (the plant benches by the fire pit, one of the wood tables under the pavilion, leaning against a tree, etc.) where you can get a clear view of the professor's easel during the demonstration of seeing line and balance in the surrounding forest.

Engage:

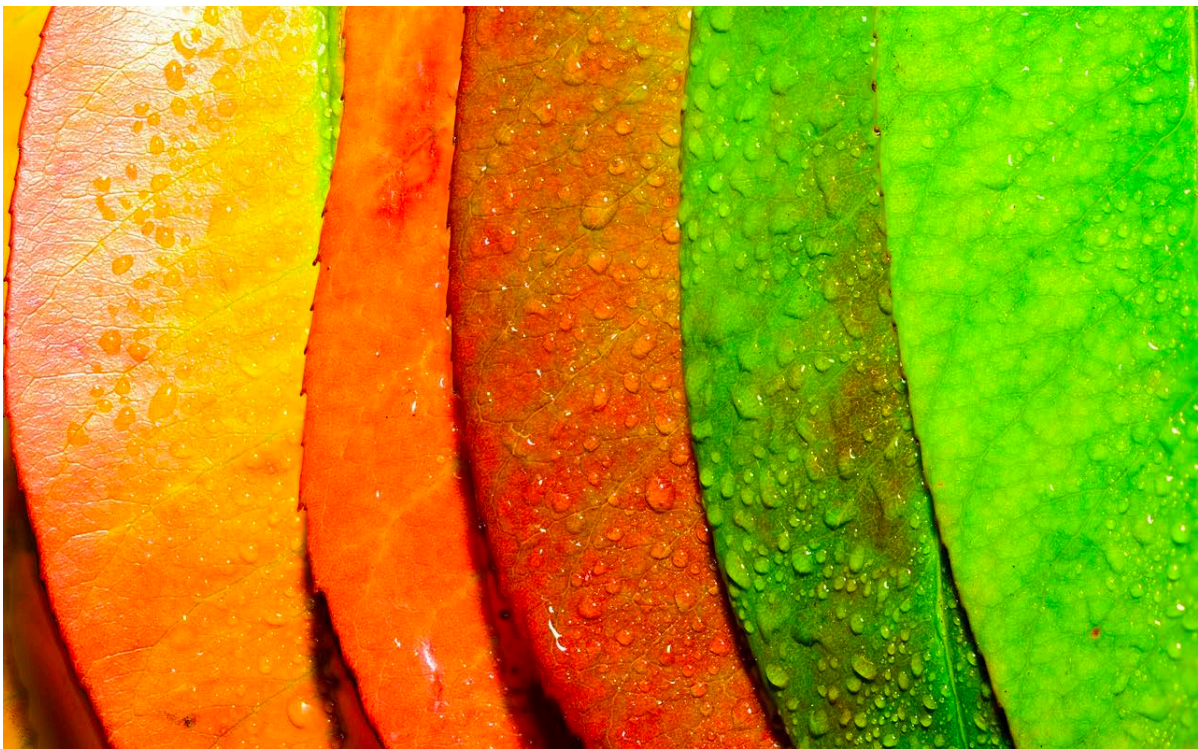
Find a large view of the landscape in front of you. Try to focus on the lines you see (not so much shapes or colors). How do the lines suggest movement, or quietness? Are they vertical or horizontal or diagonal? Is there a way that you can focus on mostly 3 or 4 lines that seem to be balanced? Record your thoughts and sketches in your sketching journal.

Reflect:

Take notes below about your experience of trying to view your environment in this unique way. You can bring your thoughts about the exercise to the group discussion at the end of the day.



cristian prisecariu, London/United Kingdom, via Pixabay



cristian prisecariu, London/United Kingdom, via Pixabay

Abstract photography, whether of natural subjects or not, offers a compelling perspective on the role of form and shape in visual communication. By emphasizing patterns, textures, and the interplay of light and shadow, abstract nature photography invites viewers to engage with the environment in a more emotional and intuitive manner.

Exercise 3: Not the Thing, But the Shape of the Thing

Prepare:

Watch the professor demonstrate the “behind the back” exercise. Take a minute to gather small objects from the forest environment nearby the pavilion. Then with a partner from class, take turns handing each other an object behind your backs. When you’re holding your object, guess what it is **after** you describe the formal properties you can feel: shape, volume, texture, weight, etc.

Engage:

Look around at the forest environment surrounding you, but don’t think about the names of what you see. It’s not easy, but try to let go of the words “Tree,” “Cloud,” “Soil,” etc. Instead, see the world around you as shapes and color combinations. Focus on what the lines and textures *actually are*, apart from the objects they outline. Write and draw in your sketching journal.

Reflect:

Take notes below about your experience of finding an abstract perspective on the forest environment surrounding you. You can bring your thoughts about the exercise to the group discussion at the end of the day.



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