

Inside Art 2015 — *Enhanced!*Title

Construction for the Camera

Concept/Main Idea of Lesson

Constructing structures specifically for photography results in work that is often ambiguous and visually provocative. This lesson explores the work of two artists who construct models explicitly for the camera.

Intended Grade Levels

Grades 9-12

Infusion/Subject Areas

Visual Arts

Social Studies

Curriculum Standards

Next Generation Sunshine State Standards

Visual Arts:

VA.912.C.1.2: Use critical-thinking skills for various contexts to develop, refine, and reflect on an artistic theme.

VA.912.C.1.4: Apply art knowledge and contextual information to analyze how content and ideas are used in works of art.

VA.912.C.2.4: Classify artworks, using accurate art vocabulary and knowledge of art history to identify and categorize movements, styles, techniques, and materials.

VA.912.S.2: Development of skills, techniques, and processes in the arts strengthens our ability to remember, focus on, process, and sequence information.

National Standards for Arts Education

Standard 1: Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes.

Standard 6: Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to depend understanding.

Common Core:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Instructional Objective

Students will:

- describe the work of James Casebere and Yamini Nayar;
- consider the unique characteristics of art works that result from photographing models and sculptures.

Learning Activities Sequence

Attention Getter: Show the digital print, “Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #8” (slide 2 of the PowerPoint presentation [PPT] accompanying this lesson plan). Facilitate student discussion by asking:

- What do you see in this image?
- What time of year do you think this is taking place? What time of day?
- Where do you think this is taking place?
- How do you think the photographer took this image?

Explain that the image is part of a series created by photographer James Casebere; it is called “Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #8.”

Show slide 3 of the PPT. Say: *This is a photograph of the photographer’s studio, as he worked on creating the image you just saw.* Prompt students by asking:

- How does your perspective change when you see this studio shot?
- How is looking at a model different from viewing a photograph of the model?
- The artist, James Casebere, created the “Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY)” series during the housing and mortgage crisis of 2008. What do you think he might be trying to say through his work?

PPT-Guided Presentation:

Slide 4: James Casebere (b. 1953, East Lansing, MI) received a BFA from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and an MFA from Cal Arts. Casebere’s works have been featured nationally and internationally, including at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and the Musée d’Art Contemporain in Montreal and the 2010 *Whitney Biennial*.

Slide 5: Casebere was commissioned to produce the May 5, 2013 cover of *The New York Times Magazine*. He has received fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. He lives and works in New York.

Slide 6: Casebere’s *Tenement* offers a different view of housing. Ask students to describe what they see and what feelings the image invokes. Explain that Casebere’s work often looks at social, economic, and political policies and that affect the working and lower classes.

Slide 7: Say: *Casebere created this image, Big Sur, by building the model from the back of the set for the Dutchess County series, not wanting to waste the material already invested in that construction. The artist has said that it was intended as an "ideal" seascape...he says he was thinking "vacation" and "beaches."* Ask: *What feelings and thoughts come to mind as you view this*

image? Does it look neat and well-controlled? Or is it messy and perhaps not so friendly? Support your response with visual evidence.

Slide 8: The other artist whose work we will view today is Yamini Nayar (b. 1975, Detroit, MI). She received a BFA in photography from the Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include *an axe for a wing-bone* at Thomas Erben Gallery in New York and *Harpoon* at Amrita Jhaveri Gallery, Mumbai, India. Nayar received an Art Matters grant in 2014 and was an NYU Visiting Artist Scholar in 2011-12. She serves as an MFA thesis advisor in the School of Visual Arts photography department in New York, where she resides.

Slide 9: *Chrysalis* (2013), is Nayar's work

Ask students to define/describe what a "chrysalis" is (a protecting covering, e.g., the hardened outer protective layer of a butterfly pupa).

In this piece, what looks to be chaotic is very carefully constructed and planned. The slides that follow are working shots that Nayar has provided give a window into her working process.

Slides 10-11: *Chrysalis* (2013), in process. Show students the "behind the scenes" look at the creation of the sculpture that resulted in the final work. Consider how the honeycombed structure, clearly 3-D in slides 10 and 11, becomes flattened out in the final image, slide 12. While she uses "the flattened dimensionality" of the photography process itself, she also employs many pictorial strategies to achieve this, among them color and line. The play of the various tonalities of green, for example, confuses perspective, with the light green in what might be the background, bringing it to the forefront. The multidirectionality of the black lines leads them to contradict each other, providing no real clues into the way the image "should be read."

Ask:

- In what ways did your perception of the piece change as you observe its creation?
- In what ways are the two artists' process of creating their pieces similar? Different?
- What have you learned as a result of seeing the process behind constructing art pieces for the camera?

Slides 12: *Chrysalis* (2013), completed work. Ask students:

- Consider how the title connects to the work. The titles that artists give to their works do not always point to the meanings of the works. Do you think the artist gives you hints here?

- Does the central form in the final image remind you of an insect pupa? Does the surrounding structure appear to be a protective apparatus for the more delicate central form? Did the central form develop from its surrounding?
- How can you extend this meaning into a metaphor for the growth and development of ideas — pictorial, as the central shape emerges and interacts from the surrounding areas — and philosophical, as the development and sheltering of an artistic theme or even of personal growth?

Slide 13: Nayar's series "On Form and Growth" gives a window into her process of building constructions for the camera. According to the artist: "*On Form and Growth* uses the structure of a timeline and engages with the tension between abstraction, narrative and time within architecture through four separate photographs of one spatial construction."

The fifth image, set slightly apart at the right, is the final image, which she has drawn on with a felt-tip pen.

Slides 14-18: Have students follow the progression of the images and try to determine how the elements of slides 10-13 are represented in slide 14.

Ask students to consider how the artist alters perspective from one slide to another to present a different version of the same scene.

Where does the fuzzy material in slide 14 come from? What does it tell you about the life of the buildings we construct?

What do you think is the relationship between the drawing on slide 14 and the arrangements of linear elements in slides 12 and 13?

Do you think that the drawing adds to your understanding of the piece?

What do you think the geometrical sketches mean?

What do you think the artist means by speaking of abstraction, narrative, and time within architecture? Is architecture an abstract form? And as buildings are constructed, used, and ultimately decay, do they tell a story over time?

Can you think of a story that a decayed building in your neighborhood might tell you?

Slide 19: In earlier works, Nayar's setups take the form of dioramalike views of recognizable, if distorted, interiors. Dislocated in time and space, depopulated, and often shabby, cracked or decaying, these imagined spaces seem transitional places between past and future, reflecting the artist's interest in the continuously negotiated present of the immigrant.

Note the hand in the lower right-hand area. Nayar, who was born and raised in the U.S., is of Indian descent. Might the artist's background have any bearing on her art? If yes, how so?

Hands-On Activity:

Ask a student to read aloud the following quotation by artist Yamini Nayar:

Slide 20: “Built structures – from religious to the mundane – and found imagery are starting points for my installations... My practice is process oriented, combining elements of sculpture, assemblage and photography. The materials I work with are common – plaster, branches, wood, Styrofoam, and found imagery culled from online archives. Once I choose a starting image, I research various aspects of the scene – images and texts – and work to re-imagine the scene. The final image emerges over time and through the construction and reworking of the structure and contents in a given scene.”

Provide students with various materials and cameras. Using these materials, ask them to build a structure and photograph that scene. Have them re-create the scene and photograph again. Remind them that they are engaging in a technique called “construction for the camera.”

Closure: Ask students to debate: Which is more important in this type of artwork: the model or the image created by the artist?

Evaluation

Participation in class discussion and creation of artwork.

Optional Extension Activities

1. Have a student read aloud the following statement made by Yamini Nayar:

I am interested in the space where photography becomes metaphor or illusion – where a fictional document is in dialogue with the construction of meaning. Ultimately, the final photograph is an entry point into an assembled world, in transition and momentarily held together for the lens, as well as document of a destroyed object. (<http://www.cpw.org/archives/yamini-nayar/>, para 1).

Ask the class, “What do you think Nayar means by these words?”

2. Students can find a decayed building in their community and consider what story that building might tell. Some students may take photographs of the building and bring it in to class to share with their peers.

Materials and Resources

- LCD projector
- “Construction for the Camera,” PPT for Day 3, *Enhanced!* curriculum
- Various materials for construction
- Cameras

Internet Links

<http://www.jamescasebere.com>

<http://yamininayar.com/home.html>

References

Cotter, Holland. (2013). Yamini Nayar: 'An Axe for a Wing-bone.' *New York Times*. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/06/arts/design/yamini-nayar-an-axe-for-a-wing-bone.html?_r=2&

Sardesai, Abhay. (2013). A Heap of Broken Images. Retrieved from: http://www.artindiamag.com/quarter_03_03_13/a_heap_of_broken_images.html

The Center for Photography at Woodstock (nd). Yamini Nayar. Retrieved from: <http://www.cpw.org/archives/yamini-nayar/>