

Activity: The Gee's Bend Quilts

(Adapted from a lesson plan developed by Nikki Stewart, Women's Studies Department)

This could be done as an in-class group assignment or as an out of class individual or group assignment.

Teaching Notes: The following activity may be completed using the images from *Gee's Bend* that are indicated; however other images may be easily substituted, if you wish. There are many online digital resource sites for visual images, including the Paul R. Jones Collection at the University of Delaware: http://www.museums.udel.edu/jones/archive/archive_pages/guides/medium.html. This is one of many rich online depositories of contemporary abstract work. Many of the images available at this site have zooming capabilities to allow the viewer to examine portions of the images in close detail. This activity is designed to be used as is or to be adapted to your teaching context. You may choose to use some or all of the discussion prompts below. The images may be printed or reproduced in another format for use in a non-technology classroom setting, but students will need access to a computer outside of class to read the resource links. Additional questions that may prove useful when considering visual analysis in general can be found in the Bank of Questions: <http://www.arhu.umd.edu/vislit/bank.html>

LOOKING AT ARTWORK: ASSUMPTIONS – INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONTEXTS

Your response to each question should be approximately 2-3 sentences, except for the questions asked in number 1 – they will require somewhat longer responses to be answered fully.

1. Display QUILT IMAGE without additional information – do not indicate that it is a quilt: [link to image online in toolbox](#) (I have a quilt image I can email you, but we would need to credit it somewhere, right?)
 - a. Describe what you see. Do not interpret. Create a description that would allow someone to “see” this image without looking at this picture.
 - b. Make up a story about this object. Give it an imaginary context. What is this object? Where did it come from? Who owns it? Where is it located? Where does it belong?
 - c. What is the value of this object? Artistic? Economic? Social? Cultural? Political?
 - d. Do you consider this object a work of art? Why or why not?
2. QUILT IMAGE W/ Catalogue Information: <http://www.shellyquilts.com/geesbend/>
 - a. How does this change your story about the object?
 - b. How does this change your perception of its value?
3. STORY OF THE ARTISTS: <http://www.quiltsofgeesbend.com/history/>
 - a. To view images: <http://www.quiltsofgeesbend.com/quiltmakers/>
 - b. How does this change your story about the object?
 - c. How does this change your perception of its value?
4. MUSEUM EXHIBITION DESCRIPTIONS/NPR STORY:
 - a. <http://www.mfa.org/exhibitions/sub.asp?key=15&subkey=498;>
 - b. [http://www.artcritical.com/blurbs/SSQuilts.htm;](http://www.artcritical.com/blurbs/SSQuilts.htm)
 - c. http://www.corcoran.org/exhibitions/previous_results.asp?Exhib_ID=69
 - d. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=970364>
 - e. How does this change your story about the object?

f. How does this change your perception of its value?

5. DISCUSSION

- a. Internal Context – What you ‘see’ in the image/object without context (link to Frame and Gaze for additional resources on ‘seeing’.)
- b. External Context – Additional context brought to your viewing experience by learning how others interpret and or use the image/object
- c. What assumptions did you bring to viewing this object? Did learning about the context of the object change any of those assumptions?
- d. Do you consider this object to be a work of art?

6. QUILT-MAKING in the AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY – more resources:
Note – some links are ‘broken’

Quilts – African American: Traditional and Contemporary
<http://www.quiltethnic.com/traditional.html>

ACTIVITY EXTENSION: Gee’s Bend Quilts and Abstraction:

After reading the links in question 4, student may be encouraged to think, discuss and write about why abstract patterning is used in the Gee’s Bend quilts, as well as the connections between the abstract pattern designs and the lives and experiences of the quilters. How do the quilters seem to make meaning and what kinds of meaning do they make in constructing the quilts? To help students reflect more deeply and experience the beauty of the abstract designs in the quilts in a more tangible way, refer them to the many activities on the site of Auburn University: *The Quilt’s of Gee’s Bend in Context*, particularly the links under explore and play:
<http://auburn.edu/academic/other/geesbend/home.html>

*Teaching modules are also freely accessible – the user must simply register a profile with name and email to view the various modules. Access is immediate.

Beyond Gee’s Bend: RESOURCES

Additional online resources to examine confluences between ‘high art’ western abstraction and other co-existing traditions including Native American, Latin American and African American:

- 1) University of New Mexico Art Museum: <http://unmartmuseum.unm.edu/programs.cfm>
Lesson plans, images and materials available on the following exhibitions:
 - a. *ART, CULTURE, PLACE: VISUAL TRADITIONS OF THE SOUTHWEST*
 - a. *Jaune Quick-To-See Smith: Made In America*
 - b. *Architecture: Defining Spaces/ Defining Time*
- 2) Albright-Knox Art Gallery: <http://www.albrightknox.org/exhibitions/index.html>
 - a. *Petah Coyne: Above and Beneath the Skin*
 - b. *Abstraction: Formal Exchange – The Gallery and Latin America*
- 3) Art Museum of the Americas: <http://www.museum.oas.org/permanent/abstraction.html>
Latin American abstraction, 1950s - 1980s
- 4) Black Arts Movement, Abstraction, and Beyond by Richard Powell:
http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/a/african_american_7.html

5) A contrasting example of a site that DOES NOT incorporate various cultural contributions in constructing the story of abstraction, but that privileges only the ‘high art’ engagement with

abstraction can be found on the Metropolitan Museum of Art web site. Students could be asked to contrast and compare these different narratives and queried as to why contrasting narratives exist. Individual or small group responses could then be discussed in a large group context with attention to the different responses imagined among the group.

Geometric Abstraction: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/geab/hd_geab.htm