



## *On Top of the World*

Valerie Willson

### **Overview:**

Students will learn about the tenets of the American art movement Abstract Expressionism through an examination and discussion of *On Top of the World* by Valerie Willson. Additionally, they will view the works of American Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Emily Mason. They will discuss the significance of quotes by Abstract Expressionists and how these apply to their own work.

Students will then directly participate in the creative process by experimenting with color, paints and unusual tools, discovering how artists take risks and how that enhances the creative process.

They will create an original work of abstract art using meaningful color to express emotion, an idea, or an event.

### **Subjects:**

Visual Arts, Art History, Language Arts

### **Age Group:**

Grades 6 - 12

### **Standards:**

#### **21st Century Learning Skills:**

- Critical Thinking and Reasoning
- Information Literacy
- Collaboration
- Self-Direction
- Invention

## Colorado Academic Standards:

### Visual Arts

- Observe and Learn to Comprehend
- Envision and Critique to Reflect
- Invent and Discover to Create
- Relate and Connect to Transfer

### Language Arts

- Oral Expression and Listening
- Reading for All Purposes
- Writing and Composition

## Essential Question(s):

- *How do people express themselves through art?*
- *How does art help us tell people our feelings?*
- *What inspires me?*
- *What choices must a painter make before beginning a work?*
- *What is abstract expressionism?*

## Rationale:

Adolescent students often grapple with finding positive means of self-expression. Exploring Abstract Expressionism through *On Top of the World* by Valerie Willson and creating their own art works help them to practice new ways of articulating ideas, emotions and events, thereby enhancing self-discovery, risk-taking and self-confidence. Learning more about how artists approach art-making demonstrates how others approach these questions in original ways.

## Objectives:

*Students will be able to:*

- Students will learn about the contemporary painting *On Top of the World* by Valerie Willson.
- understand the concepts of Abstract Expressionism, and create an Abstract Expressionist work of art
- identify elements in *On Top of the World* that help express Valerie Willson's thoughts and feelings
- explore multiple art mediums
- identify and experiment freely with unusual methods for using paint and nonconventional tools
- create a painting based on an emotion, idea, or unknown event
- communicate reasons for making creative choices
- discuss the significance of quotes by Abstract Expressionists and how these apply to their own work.

## Materials:

- One tool or gadget the students will bring from home that they don't mind getting paint on (ex: rag, old toothbrush, comb, funnel, stamps, hot wheels toy cars, etc.)
- Images of Abstract Impressionists Valerie Willson, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Emily Mason (overhead projector, internet or color copies)
- Paper or journals for each student to write down thoughts
- One or two 18 x 24 inch sheets of thick paper or treated canvas per student

- Acrylic paints in assorted colors
- Markers, pencils, crayons, charcoal sticks as desired
- Various stencils and stamps
- Assorted paintbrushes of different thicknesses
- Containers with water to soak and wash the brushes and tools
- Newspapers or other materials to cover work areas
- Paper towels or rags to dry off tools between different paints
- Optional: Painting aprons or cover-ups
- *The Art and the Artist* information on *On Top of the World* (found at the end of this lesson plan)
- One color copy of *On Top of the World* for every 3–5 students, or the ability to project the image onto a wall or screen

## Additional Resources:

To view more examples from this body of Willson's work, click on *The Paintings, Gallery III*:

<http://valeriewillson.com>

For more information on Abstract Expressionist art and artists:

[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/abex/hd\\_abex.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/abex/hd_abex.htm)

<http://www.jackson-pollock.org>

<http://www.markrothko.org>

<https://artsy.net/artist/emily-mason>

## Duration:

One lesson of 75 minutes, or 2 lessons of about 40 minutes (flexible)

## Vocabulary:

### Abstract

- existing in thought or as an idea but not having a physical or concrete existence:
  - *abstract concepts such as love or beauty.*
- dealing with ideas rather than events:
  - *the novel was too abstract and esoteric to sustain much attention.*
- not based on a particular instance; theoretical:
  - *we have been discussing the problem in a very abstract manner.*
- denoting an idea, quality, or state rather than a concrete object:
  - *abstract words like truth or equality.*
- of or relating to abstract art:
  - *abstract pictures that look like commercial color charts.*

### Abstract Expressionism

- A development of abstract art that originated in New York in the 1940s and 1950s and aimed at subjective emotional expression with particular emphasis on the creative spontaneous act (e.g., action painting). Leading figures were Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning.
- An artistic movement of the mid-20th century comprising diverse styles and techniques and emphasizing especially an artist's liberty to convey attitudes and emotions through nontraditional and usually nonrepresentational means
- Some preferred the term "Painterly Abstraction", and indeed Abstract Expressionism was characterized by the lavish and loose manner in which paint was applied to canvas.

- Using non-representational forms, expressive use of color, interplay of form and color to create a sense of space, and belief in nature as jumping-off point for abstraction.

#### **Action Painters**

- Jackson Pollock was an American abstract expressionist painter who was famous for innovative "action paintings". Instead of careful brush strokes, Jackson Pollock dripped, poured, and splattered paint.

#### **Color Field Painters**

- Color-field painting was one of two offshoots in American abstract expressionism of the late 1940s and early 50s. After 1947 artists, such as Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman concentrated on the expressive qualities of color.
- In order to maximize the visual impact of color, they applied their pigments over large areas. The result was the creation of a painting of a single color which relied on the intensity and saturation of color.

#### **Representational (or Objective)**

- A work of art that is created to look like a particular place, thing or person

#### **Non-representational (or Non-objective)**

- A work of art that does not represent or depict a being, place or object in the natural world

#### **Color Palette**

- The range of colors used in a particular work of art or by a particular artist

#### **Additive Process**

- An additive process is one in which something is added to the art piece to give it interest. A 2-dimensional additive process is painting, you add more paint to the canvas. A 3-dimensional additive process is coiling a clay pot, you add more clay.

#### **Subtractive Process**

- A subtractive process requires you to take something away from the material. If you use an eraser with charcoal, it is subtractive because it removes charcoal. If you carve a piece of linoleum it is subtractive because it removes linoleum.

### **Quotes:**

"When I am in a painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc, because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well."

~ Jackson Pollock, American Abstract Expressionist  
1912 - 1956

"If you are only moved by color relationships, you are missing the point. I am interested in expressing the big emotions - tragedy, ecstasy, doom."

~ Mark Rothko, American Color Field Painter  
1903 - 1970

"I live on a rural island near Seattle where I am influenced both by an intense immersion in nature and a close involvement in the process of people's lives. The exciting thing about an abstract work of art is that you have a chance to bring your own imagination into play."

~ Valerie Willson, American Artist

## Lesson:

**Preparation:** Assemble art materials and set up painting space.

**1. Warm-up:** Have the students close their eyes and imagine they are sitting in an empty white room. Then tell them to think of a color. Have them imagine that the color is just a spot in the room. Slowly the color grows to cover all the walls and ceiling so that they are surrounded by one color. Allow the students to stay in this 'special place of color' for a few moments.

**2. Ask the students to record their thoughts, ideas and emotions.**

- Have the students slowly open their eyes and regroup.
- Ask them to take some time to write and/or draw their impressions and feelings regarding their room of color.
  - Ask them some leading questions:
    - How does the room of color make them feel? Is the color warm or cool? What made them choose that color?

**3. Show and discuss *On Top of the World*.**

- Look closely at the painting. How does the artist express feelings in the piece?
- Lead a discussion with the students on how color can affect mood. Which colors communicate what moods? Ask them to associate feelings with the color red. Do those feelings match the mood of the painting? What would the mood of the painting be if most of the colors were blue?
  - Explain that cool colors (blues, greens, grays) recede and that warm colors (reds, oranges, yellows) pop out at you.
- On a blackboard, write a list of words that come to mind as the students look at the painting. What nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs emerge?
- Read Willson's Artist Statement about the piece:
  - "In this painting, *On Top of the World*, I am trying to capture what something special feels like, not just how it looks but what it feels like to be high on a mountain in the clear air with the wind in your hair. You can hear music in your head, or feel like the earth is dancing. You might see my vision in the energy of the lines and color of the picture."

**4. Show works of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Emily Mason as you lead students in a discussion of Abstract Expressionism.**

- Abstract Expressionism covers a wide range of non-representational painting in the United States in the latter half of the 20th century. It became the first American art movement with international impact.
- Abstract Expressionism was characterized by the lavish and loose manner in which paint was applied to canvas, producing vivid, emotionally charged paintings of bold intensity and saturation of color. Some Abstract Expressionists (Jackson Pollock) were Action Painters, emphasizing gesture and movement in their process. Others were Color-Field Painters (Mark Rothko), using large planes of color to create atmosphere.
- The fundamentals of Abstract Expressionism include using non-representational forms, expressive use of color, interplay of form and color to create a sense of space, and big emotions as a jumping-off point.

**5. Have students begin their paintings.**

- Read the artists quotes above, asking them to consider how these ideas might influence their ideas as they begin to paint.
- Read Valerie Willson's Process Statement:
  - "Beginning with an under painting of a fairly brilliant color, I build textures and colors slowly, using both subtractive and additive processes. I apply paint with stencils (lace, Japanese papers, found objects), stamps (hand-cut linoleum blocks and commercially made patterns) and create textures by applying paint both with a brush and with brayers."
- Explain that the students will create their own abstract painting.

- Ask them to consider what mood, memory, idea or event they want to express.
- What colors would best express that mood or memory?
- Remind them to consider their room of color.
- Encourage them to use broad gestures (action painting) and/or bold swathes of color (color field painting).
- Prompt students to use alternative painting tools in addition to paint brushes, including the gadgets they brought from home.

*Note: If you are dividing the lesson into 2 days, this ends Day 1.*

**6. Allow students to complete their artworks.**

- Review information on Abstract Expressionism and the works of Valerie Willson.
- Review procedures from the day before as necessary.
- Allow students time to complete their projects, using stamps, stencils, markers, crayons, etc as desired.
- Give students the opportunity to share their paintings with the class. Have them share something about their painting, such as
  - the emotion, mood, idea or event that inspired the piece
  - how their room of color influenced them
  - how creating an abstract painting gave them freedom of expression
  - which quote led them in their artistic decisions
  - their process and materials

## The Art and the Artist



*On Top of the World*

*Valerie Willson*

Oil on handmade paper, c. 1997

24" x 24"

**Artist Statement**

Patterns fascinate me, in growing things and in our lives, the way we address similar issues over and over, but differently as events unfold.

Hope and joy fascinate me, the way I see it in the continual cycle of living things, and in the way for us humans it is a reason to live and yet is such a challenge. I infuse these fascinations into my abstract oil paintings as I build / subtract layer upon layer, and pattern over pattern.

When the paintings are done I take time to consider what they have revealed to me. This is how the titles come about, and I feel they are very important. Sometimes it could be a partially seen landscape at a particular time of day (but of course the next time you look at it, it is something else). Sometimes it is more of a remembered emotion or an odd juxtaposition of reactions- whatever the human moment I hope the viewer will have a chance to feel as though they are part of what happens in the interpretation of the piece - it will become part of their memory as well as mine...

**Process Statement**

To create the oil paintings, I start by applying gesso on both sides of heavy rag paper. Then I dry it using blotters, creating a very flat surface which will take a lot of abuse. Beginning with an under painting of a fairly brilliant color, I build textures and colors slowly, using both subtractive and additive processes. I apply paint with stencils (lace, Japanese papers, found objects), stamps (hand-cut linoleum blocks and commercially made patterns) and create textures by applying paint both with a brush and with brayers.