

Explorations in Photo-conceptualism

Inspired by Ian Wallace: Image Transfers

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TOPICS: Creating a composition using photographs and painted blocks of colour; Representing private and public spaces; Creating a narrative using images and colour; Image transfer technique using acrylic medium

SUBJECT(S): Visual Arts

GRADE(S): 8-12

UNIT DURATION: 4 lessons

OVERVIEW & CULMINATING TASK: In this unit students will explore the works of Canadian artist Ian Wallace. Students will pair photographs with monochromatic blocks of colour to create compositions that convey narrative and that explore personal and private spaces. Students will learn a technique for creating image transfers using acrylic medium.

Regarded as a founder of photo-conceptualism (what is now referred to as the Vancouver School, made up of peers Jeff Wall, Ken Lum, Vikky Alexander, and Stan Douglas, among others), Ian Wallace is internationally recognized as one of Vancouver's most prominent and important artists. His work frequently blends photography and painting, deconstructing their material associations and creating intersections of not just the two mediums, but also of narratives personal and public. In his body of photo-based monochromes he has brought about the collision of these two realms of art, where painting and photography inhabit and share the same space – the canvas surface. Wallace implements constructed narratives and modernist minimalism to create a new language of modern art.

Ian Wallace was among the first to use large-format photography in the 1970s, equating photography with the scale of cinema, advertising, and history painting. This has been significant in elevating photography to the status the medium represents today. For Wallace, pairing fundamentally contrasting media—the visual emptiness of the painted monochrome against the visually dense, documentary nature of the photographic image—demonstrates a thorough and sustained reflection on the nature of representation as a method to construct meaning in the world.



Ian Wallace, *Blue Field*, 2007, photolaminate on canvas, 60 x 60 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist.

BIG IDEAS (What students will understand):

- Photography is a unique art form that captures images for artistic expression. (Photography 10)
- An artist's intention transforms materials into art. (Art Studio 11)

CURRICULAR COMPETENCIES (What students will do):

- Intentionally select and combine materials, processes, and technologies to convey ideas
- Describe and analyze, using discipline-specific language, how artists use materials, technologies, processes, and environments in 2D art making

CONCEPTS & CONTENT (What students will know):

- Image development strategies
- Influences of visual culture in social and other media
- Elements of visual art; principles of design

ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) (What students will keep considering):

- How can you combine photography and painting in a composition to create a narrative?
- How can you express ideas about public and private spaces through photography?

FIRST PEOPLES' PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING:

Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).

MATERIALS & TECHNOLOGIES:

- digital image of Ian Wallace's print *Blue Field* (see end of document)
- digital projector/computer
- construction paper (8.5" x 11") in a variety of colours
- student sketchbooks
- rulers
- scissors
- cradle panels/canvas/paper (Opus Watermedia) approximately 16" x 20" (1 per student)
- glue sticks
- acrylic medium
- acrylic gel medium
- water trays
- brushes
- small paint rollers (optional)
- exacto-knives
- watercolour paint
- acrylic paint
- painters tape
- access to printer (laser) and photocopier

VOCABULARY:

Semiotics, Modernism, Postmodernism, Conceptual Art, Photo-conceptualism, Minimalism, Monochrome, Abstraction, Juxtaposition, Conceptual Photography

RESOURCES & REFERENCES:

- Images of artwork by Ian Wallace: <https://catrionajeffries.com/artists/ian-wallace/works>
- Illustrated instructions for creating image transfers with acrylic gel medium: <https://www.instructables.com/id/Image-Transfers-with-Acrylic-Gel-Medium/>

- Instructional video showing image transfers with acrylic gel medium: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozLJpsJ9wjU>
- Art terms glossary: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms>
- Vancouver Art Gallery Teacher's Study Guide on Ian Wallace: [https://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/pdfs/Ian Wallace TeachersGuide.pdf](https://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/pdfs/Ian%20Wallace%20TeachersGuide.pdf)

ADAPTATIONS & MODIFICATIONS:

Students with hand function difficulties may carry out the assignment using a computer and design software such as Adobe Photoshop.

DISCUSSION & ACTIVITIES (Teacher Action/Student Action):

LESSON #1 (intro and composition planning):

- Prior to Lesson #1 have the students bring in 3 printed photographs that they have taken of family, friends, and urban landscapes (one of each).
- Make 2 photocopies of each student's images (keep the originals, as you will need them again).
- Engage students in discussion/brainstorming about the similarities and differences between photography and painting.
- Introduce the students to Ian Wallace's artwork and share with them a variety of images of his work, which can be viewed here: <https://catrionajeffries.com/artists/ian-wallace/works>. Project Ian Wallace's print *Blue Field* (see end of document for large image).
- Once the students have viewed examples of Ian Wallace's artwork, revisit the class's ideas about photography and painting using a critical contemporary art lens.
- Introduce terms from the vocabulary section to help frame and support the class discussion. Share with students that conceptual photography is a type of photography that illustrates an idea. Within this genre, photographs are often staged or constructed - documenting performances or restaging events.
- Emphasize to students that Wallace undercuts and intersperses photographs with large, single-colour painted expanses that encourage us to reassess the scenes we are witnessing. The photographs featured within Wallace's artworks are not simply documentary images, but are instead constructed and often suggest a narrative with layers of meaning.
- Use the following three quotes to help develop the students' understanding of the conceptual underpinnings of Ian Wallace's work:
"I wanted to create a new language of modern art," he says. "I wanted to draw on the tradition of painting, but embrace the latest

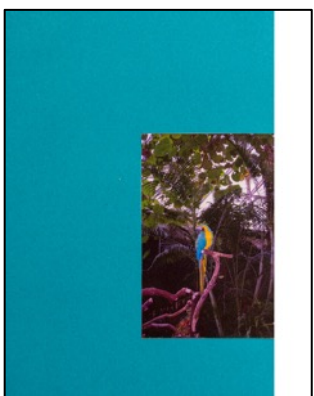


technologies and ideas in photography, and open art to the possibilities of new values and new ways of seeing." – Ian Wallace
"Does not the photographic stand as the end game of postmodernism as the monochrome stands in relation to the end game of modernism?" – Ian Wallace



"The crisp lines and geometric flatness of the compositional elements invoke hard-edge abstraction, an important element of Wallace's practice, which is characterized by its conjunction of photographic images with monochrome painting." – Robin Laurence

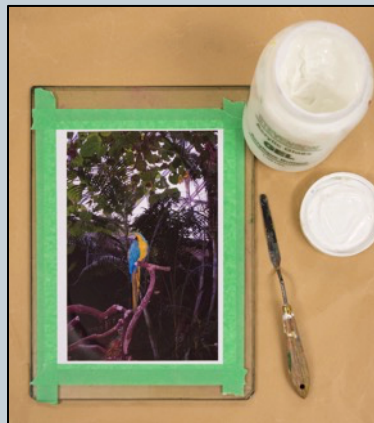
- Have the class write definitions in their sketchbooks for the words in the vocabulary section of this document.
- Project Ian Wallace's print *Blue Field* and pose the following discussion questions:
 - How has Ian Wallace combined painting and photography in this image?
 - How has Ian Wallace framed the image?
 - What kind of space is portrayed in this image (private vs. public)? Describe the architecture of this space. Why do you think Ian Wallace has portrayed the space without any people in it?
 - Based on what you have learned about Ian Wallace and the concepts he considers in creating his artworks, why do you think he has combined this image with monochromatic blocks of colour?



- Explain to students that they will create compositions inspired by Ian Wallace's print *Blue Field* and other images in which he combines photographs with painted monochromatic blocks of colour. They will select and arrange one or more of their photographs of family, friends, and urban landscapes. Students will pair their photographs with monochromatic blocks of colour. They will draft

Examples of draft compositions created using a photocopied photograph and construction paper in Lesson #1.

their compositions using construction paper but will paint the blocks of colour in their final



The photocopied image has been taped onto a plexiglass plate in preparation for Lesson #2.



Acrylic gel medium has been spread over the photocopied image in Lesson #2.

artworks. Students will use an image transfer process to adhere their photocopied images to their final artworks.

- In their sketchbooks, have each student create 6 compositions using their photocopied images, each on a separate page. Students should experiment with combining photographs and blocks of colour created using construction paper (see examples to the left). Students should define their image area using rulers. Once the students have decided upon their compositions have them glue down their images and construction paper.
- Have students leave their sketchbooks open and have the class circulate to view each other's compositions. Break class into small groups (3 or 4 per group) and have students critique and choose their best work.

- In preparation for the following class, create a larger photocopy of each student's selected composition.

LESSON #2 (applying acrylic mediums to photocopied images):

- In advance of lesson, view the steps for creating an image transfer with acrylic gel medium using the links provided in the Resources & References section of this document.
- With the class, view the following video demonstrating the image transfer process:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozLJpsJ9wjU>

- Demonstrate the first stages of covering the image with acrylic medium and gel medium.
- Distribute photocopied images to students. Students will apply acrylic mediums and let cure overnight.

LESSON #3 (removing paper from acrylic medium and priming painting surface):

- Demonstrate for students how to cut the cured image off of the drying surface and how to wet and remove the paper from the acrylic medium.
- Students should then complete the process demonstrated by the teacher and let their images dry.
- If using wood panels or canvas for the final artworks, students could prime their painting surfaces with the remaining time in this lesson (working on unprimed surfaces is also possible, if desired).



LESSON #4 (adhering transferred image to painting surface and painting monochromatic sections):

- Once their transferred images have dried, students may optionally hand colour them. This process is demonstrated at the end of the following video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozLJpsJ9wjU>

- Demonstrate to students how to hand colour their images. Remember to let paint dry.
- Demonstrate to students how to adhere the dry image onto the painting surface using acrylic medium.
- Once the image is adhered and dry, demonstrate how to mask off a section of the painting surface with painters tape. Remember to seal the tape seam with acrylic medium to avoid leakage.

Acrylic gel medium layer is dry and paper can be removed in Lesson #3.

- Demonstrate how to use rollers or large brushes to apply the selected monochrome paint colours to the surface and to then carefully remove the painters tape.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT:

After Lesson #1 have students write in their sketchbooks about the composition they chose to use for their final artwork. Have students address the following questions:

- Why have you selected this arrangement of your photograph and monochromatic colour blocks?
- What makes this arrangement more successful than your other drafts?

- Why have you chosen the particular photograph(s) featured in your composition?
- In what way does the image represent and explore public or private space?
- What type of narrative might be suggested by your composition?

SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT:

Set up an exhibit of finished student works and facilitate a group critique. Have students write an artist statement to explain their concept and some of the formal art elements used in their work.

EXTENSIONS & POSSIBLE CROSS-CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS:

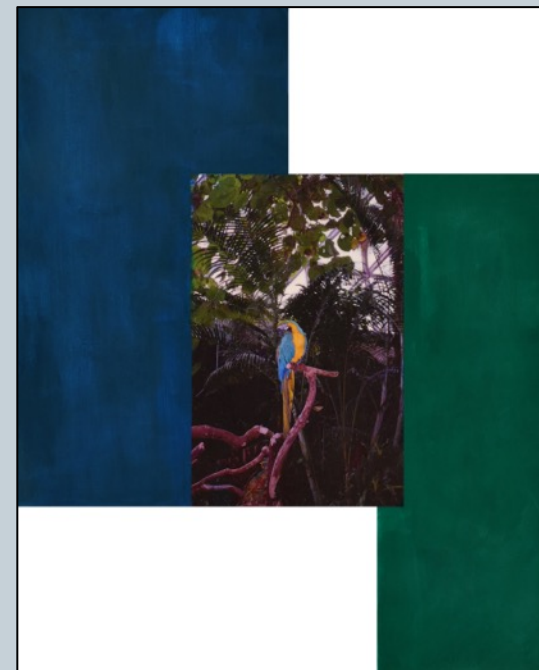
Have students research and present on photo-conceptualist artists. Examples of artists students might research include:

Jeff Wall, Ken Lum, Vikky Alexander, Stan Douglas, Christos Dikeakos, Roy Arden, Marian Penner Bancroft, Evan Lee, Henri Robideau, Barrie Jones, Karin Bubaš, Mike Grill, Arni Haraldsson, Barrie Jones, N.E. Thing Co., Henri Robideau, Sandra Semchuk and James Nicholas, Althea Thauberger, Paul Wong, Cornelia Wyngaarden, and Andrea Fatona

AFK RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS:

Looking for more art lesson ideas? Looking for ways to connect art to other areas of the curriculum? Visit the AFK Resources page to find lesson plans for all grade levels!

<http://tiny.cc/AFKResources>



Completed painting which incorporates transferred image adhered to canvas and monochromatic blocks of colour painted with acrylics.



Ian Wallace, *Blue Field*, 2007, photolaminate on canvas, 60 x 60 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.