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Fish'in 3-D

Arts & Activities, May, 2006 by Gary Kohl

Sometimes an art teacher's basic ideas can be combined together with astonishingly beautiful results. This simple premise was proven to be true with our three-dimensional underwater fish scenes that our grade sixes made along with the students in the lower grades. We do various activities throughout the school year to encourage interaction between the grades, from sports events to quiz competitions; an art project seemed to be a splendid fit that would build on inter-grade friendships.

The art project that I chose was one that could be done by any class in the school as it involved a series of quite basic strategies that would be combined to produce beautiful underwater scenes.

At the onset of the project, I had anticipated that the older students would help the younger ones to measure and mix the salt dough (many fine salt dough recipes are available on the Internet). However, most students proved to be very adept at thoroughly mixing their own salt dough.

Some older students expressed concerns that their work did not look right during the creation process, while many younger children did not concern themselves with the end results, choosing instead to simply enjoy each step and the materials employed along the way. In short, the older students modeled some skills and techniques, but it was the attitude expressed by

younger artists that reminded the older students to relax and enjoy the process.

Since all children are familiar with a fish's basic shape, we shared some fish tales with one another, and then began what would be a series of simple art tasks; simple enough for the younger grades and still challenging for older students.

Our first step was to draw some seaweed, rocks and other items that might appear underneath the water. The students did these using oil pastels, as these would later repel the wash that would be brushed over the paper.

Our background was sturdy watercolor paper that would support the weight of the fish that were to enter the scene at the end. This step did not take too long, and we moved on to the wash before the period ended.

I opted for mildly diluted dye rather than watercolors because they offered rich colors that the older students would find interesting to experiment with, while younger students would have easy success covering the backgrounds--no unwashed paper was to be visible. As the dye pooled, the papers were put aside and left to dry.

Both younger and older students enjoyed seeing the dye separate from the pastel images, but some of the best fun was still to come. It was now time to head for the kitchen (our facilities include a large kitchen, but the next steps could easily be done in a classroom, so long as there is access to an oven).

Flour, salt, cooking oil and water were the simple ingredients that would be mixed together to make our fish, along with a fun mess on the work space (the ingredients and dough clean up easily with warm water and encouragement for helpers). I explained to the students that our dough had to be used mostly for our fishes, and only leftovers could be used to make other ideas and suggestions, of which there were many.

Texture implements were basic spoons, Lego[R] pieces, fingers and various items some children produced from their pockets. Smoothly shaped fish, rough-textured fish, and many chubby "cute" fish were produced and placed on our greased baking pans. The ovens were heated, our fish were baking, and so we all tackled the mess and were done surprisingly quick.

The next period was greatly anticipated since all of our projects were about to come together. The only thing left to do was an easy bronze acrylic glaze on the

cooled and oven-hard fish. Some teachers may want to add to the project by examining realistic fish colors and patterns, but ours were to be "bronzed" for sharp contrast and enhancement of the students' textures. Once painted, students decided where their fish were to be placed on the background scene, and I glued them down using hot glue.

Once the completed scenes were collectively displayed, many parents expressed enthusiasm for the project, and several commented how well their child's fish would look at home on the wall. The results were strongly and brilliantly colored and exceeded the initial expectations I had for the project. Both age groups loved their art pieces.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will ...

- * combine a variety of media and processes to create a final work.
- * experiment to see oil and water repelling.
- * manipulate tools to create three-dimensional effects. explore background and foreground.
- * attempt layout design with image placements.
- * have fun exploring a variety of media.

MATERIALS

- * Sturdy watercolor paper (11" x 17")
- * Oil pastels
- * Blue food dye
- * Salt dough recipe and ingredients
- * Mixing bowls, baking trays
- * Texture tools (various)

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