Learning to Look Lesson: Modern Photography

This resource will allow you to lead your students through careful observation and analysis of a photograph by Joel Sternfeld entitled *McLean, Virginia*.

It is based on the *Learning to Look* method created by the Hood Museum of Art. This discussion-based approach will introduce you and your students to the five steps involved in exploring a work of art: careful observation, analysis, research, interpretation, and critique.

How to use this resource:
- Print out this document for yourself.
- Read through it carefully as you look at the image of the work of art included below.
- When you are ready to engage your class, project the image of the work of art onto a screen in your classroom with an LCD projector. Use the questions provided below to lead the discussion.

**There is no substitute for seeing the real thing!**

Please visit the Hood Museum of Art to see a wide range of original works of art from around the world. There is no charge for admission, and the museum is open every day of the week except Monday. Free tours for K–12 school groups as well as programs for adults, teens, and families are available. Visit the museum's website to learn more.
Step 1. Close Observation
Ask students to look carefully at this photograph and describe everything they see. Start with broad, open-ended questions such as:

What do you see or notice about this photograph?
What else do you see?

Become more and more specific as you guide your students’ eyes throughout the work with questions like these:

What do you see in the background?
The middle ground?
The foreground?
What do you notice about the people in this photograph? What are they doing?

What do you notice about the composition or arrangement of this photograph?

What lines do you see? What shapes do you see?

What leads your eye into the background?

What do you notice about the colors?
Step 2. Analysis
Once your students have listed everything that they notice about the photograph, begin asking simple analytic questions that will deepen their understanding of the work.

For instance:

- What time of year is it in this photograph?
- Where in the world was it taken?
- Was it taken recently or long ago?
- What seems to be going on in this photograph?
- How does this photograph make you feel?

After each response, always ask, “How do you know?” “How can you tell?” or “What makes you say that?” so that students will look to the work for visual evidence to support their theories.

Step 3. Research
Now that your students have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming their own ideas about this work of art, feel free to share with them the background information at the end of this document. It provides a context that you cannot get simply by looking at this photograph.

When you have finished sharing the information, consider the following:

- Does this information reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own?
- Did it mention anything that you did not see or think about previously? If so, what?
- How would your experience of this photograph have been different if you had read the background information first?

Step 4. Interpretation
Interpretation involves bringing your careful observation, analyses, and any additional information you have gathered about an art object together to try to understand what a work of art means. There are often no absolute right or wrong answers when one is interpreting a work of art, but there are more thoughtful and better informed ones. It is important to challenge your students to defend their interpretations based upon their visual analysis and research.

Some interpretative questions for this photograph might be:

- When we see photographs, we tend to think of them as representing the truth—something that actually happened. How is this photograph intentionally misleading?

- Why does Joel Sternfeld want to mislead us with his photograph? What does he want us to think about photography?
What other “truths” does this photograph ask us to question—perhaps about fall in the country, the heroism of firemen, or our response to fire?

5. Critical Assessment and Response
Critical assessment and response involves a judgment about the success of a work of art. It is optional but should always follow the first four stages of the Learning to Look method. Art critics often engage in this further analysis and support their opinions based on the careful study of and research about the work of art.

Critical Assessment involves questions of value. For instance:

Do you think Joel Sternfeld accomplished what he set out to do? Is this a successful photograph? Why or why not?

This fifth stage can also encompass one’s response to a work of art.

Do you like this photograph? Why or why not?

Do you think this photograph’s message is relevant? Why or why not?

One’s response can be much more personal and subjective than one’s assessment.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Joel Sternfield, American, born 1944

*McLean, Virginia*

1978

Dye transfer print


This photograph by Joel Sternfeld is from his project *American Prospects*, a photographic tour of America, published in 1987. This project involved a search for the essence of America, not as it exists in any particular era but simply as it is. The photographs together are rather sad but also funny and generous, recognizing endurance, beauty, and determination within the sometimes tense, often ironic juxtapositions of man and nature, technology and ruin.

In crystal clear and brilliant color, Joel Sternfeld captured with an eight-by-ten-inch camera images of everyday scenes caught in surreal moments. The destructive fire that sets the scene for a fireman perusing pumpkins for purchase in *McLean, Virginia* is one such image. The photograph seems to show a fireman nonchalantly ignoring a crisis. In fact, he is merely taking a break from a carefully orchestrated training exercise. The image is humorous but at the same time slightly disturbing. The careful composition of this photograph, with its strong, central pyramid anchored by repeating horizontal lines and vibrant oranges, gives the event a weight and monumentality that the real situation does not warrant.

Representative of a group of photographers working in the 1970s who took a less idealized approach to nature and culture, Sternfeld challenges us to consider the “truth” of documentary photography and our ideas about the modern American landscape. As Sternfeld commented, “It’s been very fashionable to focus on the weakness and the banality of America, but what I wanted to say is that it’s also a very exciting and fascinating place.”