Exploration and Documentation:

Art as Research/Research as Art

Teacher Guide to the Addison’s Winter 2011 Exhibitions
THE ART OF RESEARCH

Following a step-by-step procedure. Collecting data. Experimenting. Using multiple methods of investigation. Inventing. These sound like activities a scientist might conduct in order to work out a problem. They are also often the activities of artists. And some historians, too!

The winter 2011 exhibitions at the Addison offer varied examples of the investigatory nature of artists. From the extant documents from John La Farge’s (1835–1910) expedition through the South Pacific in 1890–91, it is possible to view the artist as also part social-scientist and part historian, as he defines a time, place, and people through sketches, watercolors, paintings, notes, letters, and essays. Artist Sheila Hicks’s (b.1934) fiber-based sculptures and installations investigate places and traditions through innovative methods of working with culturally-specific materials. Her experimentation with stainless steel fibers, such as in *Menhir* (1998–2004), extends the possibilities of new, manufactured materials.

Like scientists, artists develop tools to conduct research and collect data. Many of these tools overlap. Some artists use computers and microscopes in the study of their subject and/or the creation of their work. Tristan Perich (b. 1982) programs a computer chip that drives two motors to create his “machine drawings” that mathematically explore the relationship between structure and randomness. Ethnographers record cultural activities with pencil and paper, and still and moving cameras. Microbiologists use cameras to capture cellular structure and functioning; while artists use cameras to explore and express a people, place, or time.

Artists and scientists share more than their tools. Developing research methodologies, problem-solving, continual experimentation, and ingenuous invention are all included in the work of innovative artists, who often conduct intensive preliminary research and draft forms of their ideas before going public with their work.

**Activity Idea Everyday Research**

In what ways do you do research everyday? Make a list of the small research projects of your daily life. Maybe you experiment with a new set of building toys to discover what blocks can be combined to create the highest tower – or test a set of colored pencils to find the most brilliant color – or adjust the left and right faucets so they are balanced for the perfect temperature bath or shower. Select three daily life research projects and make notes and/or images that describe your objectives, methods, and final results. See Keri Smith’s book in Resources for many creative ideas.
Eadward Muybridge (1830–1904) is best known for his Motion Studies of the 1870s and 1880s, a comprehensive collection of photographic plates illustrating the physiological movement of humans and animals. The compilation of nearly 1,000 plates serve as a testament to the photographer’s tireless, twenty-year investigation of motion and form. The history-changing innovations in camera and film technology invented by Muybridge to capture motion with unprecedented speed and precision have influenced everything from horse and athletic training to animation and film production.

John James Audubon’s (1785–1851) renowned four-volume *Birds of North America* folios started with years of close observation in nature and his studio of bird forms, color, plumage, behaviors, and habitats. Using ink and pencil to record his research findings (left, middle), Audubon trekked North America working towards his goal to document the male and female of every species of bird. He then presented his comprehensive research as a collection of hand-colored prints, some editions of which had pages large enough to show many birds true to size (left, bottom).

In order to complete his accurately scaled and proportioned drawings, Audubon created a system including a handmade graph to which he pinned his subjects. He also studied and included the foliage and activities of the birds in their natural habitats so that his representations would be both correct and educational. The detail and method with which Audubon executed his precise studies allowed him to create the definitive ornithological text of his time; one that remains a model of scientific illustration and bird identification to this day.

**Activity Idea Tools & Methods**

Fascinating people, things, objects, and operations are all around you. What would you like to know more about? The construction of your desk? The many types of hair color of your classmates? Do you ever wonder which plant species grow in your neighborhood and why? How would you develop a research project to answer such questions? What tools would you need? In what form/s would you report your findings? Make a research plan that includes a question, procedure, tools, and a report. Execute your plan allowing for changes along the way. Present your findings to the class.
TELLING A CONVINCING STORY

In 1890 artist John La Farge (1835-1910) and historian Henry Adams (1838-1918) set off on a year-long journey to the South Pacific islands. When they arrived in Hawaii, their first stop, they were disappointed to find that this distant land had been modernized by colonization. Thus La Farge turned his keen eye and experienced hand to portraying lush tropical landscapes and dramatic volcanoes to share with his viewers back in Boston and New York.

Having expected to encounter “exotic” and “primitive” cultures and environments such as those mythologized by Captain James Cook and novelists Robert Louis Stevenson and Herman Melville, Adams and La Farge focused much of their attention on the indigenous peoples living away from the westernized ports. While their observations, images, writings, and theories served for those back home as documentation of faraway people and places, today we see the work of both the historian and the artist/amateur ethnographer as reflecting a distinctly colonial point of view.

Although painter Edward Hopper (1882-1967) traveled to scenic vacation areas to inspire his compositions, he studied familiar landscapes with a similar sense of discovery and invention. In the visual research leading up to Manhattan Bridge Loop, from his home base of New York city, Hopper observed, sketched, looked again, and re-addressed the scene. Through preliminary sketches we can follow Hopper’s data collection process and consider how and why he settled on the painting’s final composition, which lends a lonely emptiness to an otherwise bustling urban location.

Artists such as Hopper and La Farge, journalists, researchers, and scientists all employ keen observation, skillful execution, and astute editing to present a convincing theory that supports their particular point of view. When considered in the context of their place, position, and time, their perspectives can shed light on both the individuals and the cultures from which they come.

Activity Idea Tell a Story

Visit a familiar place in your school or neighborhood – a playground, a favorite street corner, a candy or coffee shop. Record (using pencil, markers, paper, camera, recorder, etc.) everything you see, observe, hear, smell, taste, think from various angles. Then through careful editing of all of the details of your experience, communicate in words, sound, and/or images how you would like people to understand this place. Consider how selective editing of your recorded data can tell a specific story of the place. Maybe even compare classmates’ perspectives of the same place.
Finding the peoples and cultures of Samoa and Tahiti somewhat less modernized than on Hawaii, John La Farge sketched, painted, and made copious notes on the personalities, behaviors, and rituals he encountered. Samoan rituals were of particular interest as evidenced in his repeated attempts to record in images and words the participants, their movements, the sounds, and the settings. Some notes were detailed accounts of the colors of dress and accessories of his subjects and others articulated the movements and sounds that could not be shown in pictures.

In La Farge’s portrait of their boat crew member, Maua, hand-painted text at the lower right of the canvas reveals information about the sitter and the colonial attitude with which La Farge entered into his relationship with his subject:

Maua is not tattooed. . . . He ought to be tattooed but I think is afraid of the pain. He will make believe that it is uncivilized or perhaps will trot out the Church, for he is a leader in prayer – in any small deviltry as well.

The text thus offers a window into La Farge’s understanding of his subject beyond what the lush colors and sensuous body of Maua’s portrait would seem to indicate.

Conversely to La Farge’s addition of text to his paintings, Sarah Charlesworth’s (b.1947) Herald Tribune series removes the text from newspaper front pages, leaving only the photographs to communicate the important stories of the day. By methodically removing the written stories and captions from twenty-six days of the newspaper in September, 1977, Charlesworth provides quantitative data about who does and does not get pictured and what stories are deemed the most important. The artist’s system calls our attention to the image-text relationship we experience daily in the media and prompts consideration of how the newspaper is read if one’s scans its images alone.

Activity Idea Words and Images

Select an image from the front page of a newspaper. Without reading anything at first, quickly write your ideas for the headline and caption of the story that the photograph could illustrate. Compare your impressions of the image with your classmates. Alternative/additional idea: Strip the front page of a current local or national newspaper of everything but the photographs. Have each student in the class write the headlines, news stories, and captions that they imagine would correspond to the images and compare to each other and the real stories.
EXPLORING METHODS & TOOLS

Prior to innovating motion photography, Eadward Muybridge (1830-1904) developed a multiple-image panoramic technique to capture the expanse of the rapidly growing metropolis of San Francisco in 1877. Strategically photographed from a high point at the city’s center, the dramatic 360-degree view was simultaneously artistic, fascinating, and informative for urban planning.

In the 1960s, artist Sheila Hicks (b. 1934) moved from weaving on looms and hanging tapestries from the walls to create a new art form that would challenge the traditional notions and limitations of crafts. Instead of running her yarns and threads over and under the warps of a loom, she began to bundle and layer them. She thus created sculptures that had a solid presence yet were soft and pliable and could be reconfigured each time they were exhibited.

Addison artist-in-residence Tristan Perich (b. 1982) works in marks and sounds to represent algorithms traditionally expressed through numbers and equations. Many of his music compositions use 1-bit technology, the simple on/off pulses of binary computer code. To visually represent his ideas, he developed a machine (see image page 2) with a left and right motor driven by self-designed code that creates both structured and random pen markings. This inventive yet relatively simple technology enables Perich to visualize mathematical concepts while creating engaging works of art.

Activity Idea Innovation

How might you explore the tiniest crevice of a rock or the highest peak in your area, or test the strength of nylon string? How can you use familiar materials in new ways (like Sheila Hicks) or create new tools (like Tristan Perich) to explore the unfamiliar? Develop an instrument and methodology to use in your research. What tools could you create from materials that are readily available to you? See what new uses for materials and tools you can discover through planning and experimentation.
RESOURCES

BOOKS


BOOKS FOR YOUNG ADULTS


WEBSITES

John La Farge’s South Seas Sketchbooks: http://artgallery.yale.edu/lafarge/
Exhibition website with click-through feature showing every page of eleven of La Farge's South Seas sketchbooks.

Tristan Perich: http://www.tristanperich.com/
The artist's website featuring visual art, musical compositions, and performance schedule.

Freeze Frame: Eadweard Muybridge’s Photography of Motion: http://americanhistory.si.edu/muybridge/index.htm

ADDISON TEACHER GUIDES (available free from addisongallery.org or by email request)

Reality and Representation: An Exploration into Intention, Perception, and History. Spring 2009

Eadweard Muybridge, Harold Edgerton, and Beyond: A Study of Motion and Time. 1 & 2, Fall 2008