

Open Studio

A Collection of Art-Making Ideas by Artists

Alice Channer

“Negative Space”

Aspen Art Museum
February 2017

About Open Studio

Open Studio makes contemporary art education accessible to educators and students around the world by offering a collection of classroom activities created by noted international artists. The activities cover a wide range of materials, media, and subject matter, and can be tailored to students of all ages. This project was originally conceived by Los Angeles-based artist Mark Bradford for the J. Paul Getty Museum and has since expanded to the Aspen Art Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Courtesy the artist. Photo: Jochen Lübke / EPA

“Power comes from the shadows and the margins. Our hope is in the dark around the edges, not in the limelight of center stage.”

—Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*

AAM exhibitions are made possible by the Marx Exhibition Fund. General exhibition support is provided by the Toby Devan Lewis Visiting Artist Fund.

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AAM education programs are made possible by the Questrom Education Fund.

Background

This simple lesson is about the ways in which we look. When I was a teenager, I had an art teacher called Mr. Howard. One day, Mr. Howard told me to think about what he called the “negative space” in the picture I was making. He didn’t explain what he meant by “negative space,” and by doing that, he set off a little bomb in my mind, which is still exploding several decades later. I realized that there were whole areas of the picture that I wasn’t really seeing. I also realized that every time I made a picture or an object, I was also making a hierarchy in the way the parts were arranged. He changed the way I looked at, experienced, made, and arranged pictures and objects, and beyond that, he changed the way I understood the world.



Questions

When we look, where do we look and how?

What do we choose to see and not see?

Can we learn different ways of looking?

Can we see differently using our peripheral vision?



Practice looking at the edges of an object or a picture, rather than the center. Look around the part of the picture or object that is telling you it is the most important element. Focus instead on the “negative space.”

Find objects that are hollow or have holes. Can you look through or into them? Many objects are not solid, even though they pretend to be, and by looking into them, we are looking *with* them rather than looking *at* them.



Are there ever holes in pictures?

Alice Channer, *//Every//Separation//Is//A//Link//*, 2017. Eleven mirror-polished bronze and aluminum bangles, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Konrad Fischer Galerie. Photo: Tony Prikryl



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Exercises

1.

Pictures are composed in order to make us see in particular ways, but we can find ways around this.

Using old magazines and newspapers, cut out the pictures. From each image, cut out what you think is the central subject or focus of the picture and discard it. Focus instead on the “negative space”—the background or the periphery. Tape the part you are left with to the wall. Carry on adding these “negative spaces,” peripheral visions, and image edges to the wall until you have made a vast patchwork pattern full of holes that include the wall surface beneath.

2.

Our two human eyes are at the top of our tall, vertical bodies, on just one side of our head. This particular position influences the way we look, and what and how we see. Other animals, for example, have eyes that see very differently and from a different perspective. Make drawings imagining that you have the eyes of the animals described below. How would you see and experience differently?

A snake has two eyes at the front at ground level and can see better at night than in the day.

An octopus can see with its skin, and can smell and taste with its arms.

A spider typically has four pairs of eyes.

3.

It is possible to make pictures using holes that describe the space *around* our bodies.

Using old clothes, cut out the collars, waistbands, and armholes—any of the circular openings where a body might enter and exit the piece of clothing. Pay attention to the details of the cloth and exactly where you are making the cut, these will become important later. What are you choosing to keep, what are you choosing to discard? Using a roller, roll printing ink onto the collars, waistbands, and armholes (any color of ink will work). Place the inky fabric onto a piece of paper on a solid, stable flat surface (any color or texture paper will work). Then place another piece of paper of the same size on top and push down hard on the fabric. Pull the two pieces of paper apart and discard the inked fabric. You have made a picture of a “negative space.” Repeat, playing with the ways in which different fabric parts are arranged on the paper.