



## DECONSTRUCTED MARK MAKING

A Research-Based Art Lesson with Outstanding Results

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2 years ago Debi West      0 Comments

We all have people throughout our careers who inspire us to be our best. For me, one of those people is Dr. Elliot Eisner. Dr. Eisner was a professor of Art and a professor of Education at Stanford. He was a leading mind in the field of education, winning numerous awards throughout his lifetime.

One of my favorite quotes of his is about the lessons art teaches. In *The Kind of Schools We Need: Personal Essays* he says, “The arts inform as well as stimulate; they challenge as well as satisfy. [...] This is, perhaps, the largest lesson that the arts in education can teach, the lesson that life itself can be led as a work of art. In so doing the maker himself or herself is remade. The remaking or re-creation is at the heart of the process of education.”

I first came across this quote in one of my graduate courses, and it led me to develop a lesson I’d love to share with you.

student work



The following lesson is inspired by the work of John Dewey and Elliot Eisner, as well as the artist Cy Twombly. Here’s a look at the steps needed to create this type of a research-based art lesson.

### Materials Needed

Large drawing paper

Various drawing, painting, and collage media

Adhesive

Step 1: Look and Make Marks

Begin the lesson by having your students look at the works of Cy Twombly. It is always my hope that students will be inspired by his marks. They also question his work and consider if it is indeed “art.”

Consider the images you use as you create a slideshow of his work to share with your students. As slides of his work emerge on the screen before them, have your students make marks of their own on their large sheets of white drawing paper. Remind them to experience various media with no particular direction in mind. At this time, their art is solely about the experience of mark-making.

students making marks



## Step 2: Experiment

Remind your students that this non-objective art experience will help them understand art in a new way. They will see how it can act as both an informative tool and as a creative stimulator! It will go beyond a direct observation lesson. This experience will motivate, inspire, scare, and confuse your students. But it will also give them the opportunity to become one with the art of making art and experience it on a different level.

As I was watching my students begin this lesson, I took notes so I could reflect on the process and experience I was witnessing.

Here's an excerpt from my reflections:

“I quickly told my students I wanted them to feel the piece, and show me how this image inspired them. I encouraged them to go “big” and be bold. I encouraged them to explore the elements they saw and enjoy the act of mark-making with no fear of “mistake-making.” As they worked, the lights were dimmed, and light background music played. The art room took on a new feel. A feel of renewed energy – experimentation – excitement – a bit of trepidation. Slowly more art media was laid out before them at each table, and they were silently dared to explore it and play with it and learn from it. From graphite sticks, thick cones of black lead in all shades of grey, a myriad of value before them, to ochre-colored chalk pastels, oranges, yellows, browns, and beiges. Then oil pastels in more warm hues to choose from, maroon, red, pink, and more chalk, and, slowly, simple pencils and erasers were added to the mix for fine line quality to appear. Every few minutes the next slide would appear, disturbing the students’ comfort zones while pushing their creative juices as they experimented with imagery, media, and mark-making with curious urgency. Finally, white paint appeared, but only one brush per table. “Use your fingers and feel the art.” I was energized, and I was channeling Eisner and



Dewey and Twombly, and as I jumped on the tables to get better views, I continued to walk around the fury of artmaking. I knew that this was what learning was about! (West, 2011, p. 4)

student work

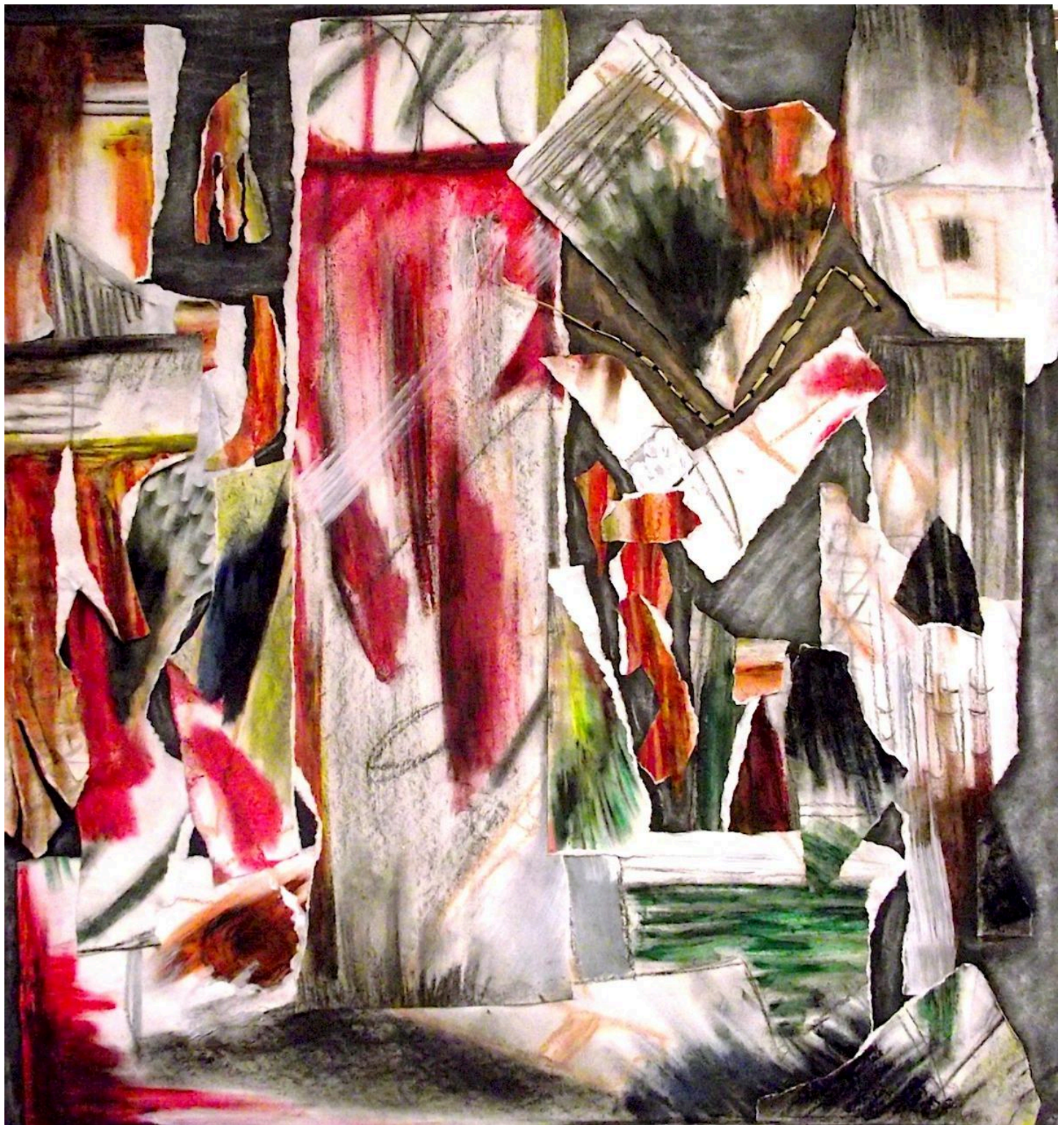


### Step 3: Deconstruct

When the mark-making process is complete, have students spend a day or two deconstructing their papers and turn them into something new. They will re-create their art by changing its composition, thus remaking it into new meaningful personal artwork.

student artwork





#### Step 4: Reflect

This art process will be a new experience for many. I know it was new to me as a visual art teacher. The work was truly about my students connecting with their mark-making, making their own choices about the elements and principles, and creating from within. When students create with their hearts and souls and realize there are no mistakes in this project, the art room begins to palpitate with “good,” with “happy,” and with “life”!

#### Step 5: Share

Have your students mat and exhibit these works in a collaborative installation. Or better yet, have them use these works to raise money for a cause. Eisner’s words in *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* always inspire me. Eisner says, “But even more, the medium we choose to use and the particular form of representation we elect — say, sound rather than a visual form—affect our perception of the world. If we are to represent



something through a medium, we try to find qualities of experience or features of the world that will lend themselves to the medium we have selected. Thus representation influences not only what we intend to express, but also what we are able to see in the first place.”

#### hallway display



#### Using the Results to Do Good

Eisner’s words propelled me to take this experimental lesson one step further. The culture of our high school is steeped in community service, so my students held a Relay for Life Art Auction and put these new works in the exhibit. These artworks were extensions of each of them, and they wanted to give back to the community and help others. They wanted to turn this art into a purposeful experience on multiple levels. As the bids came in, my students began to glow knowing their art was touching the lives of others. They lived Eisner’s words through this art experience.

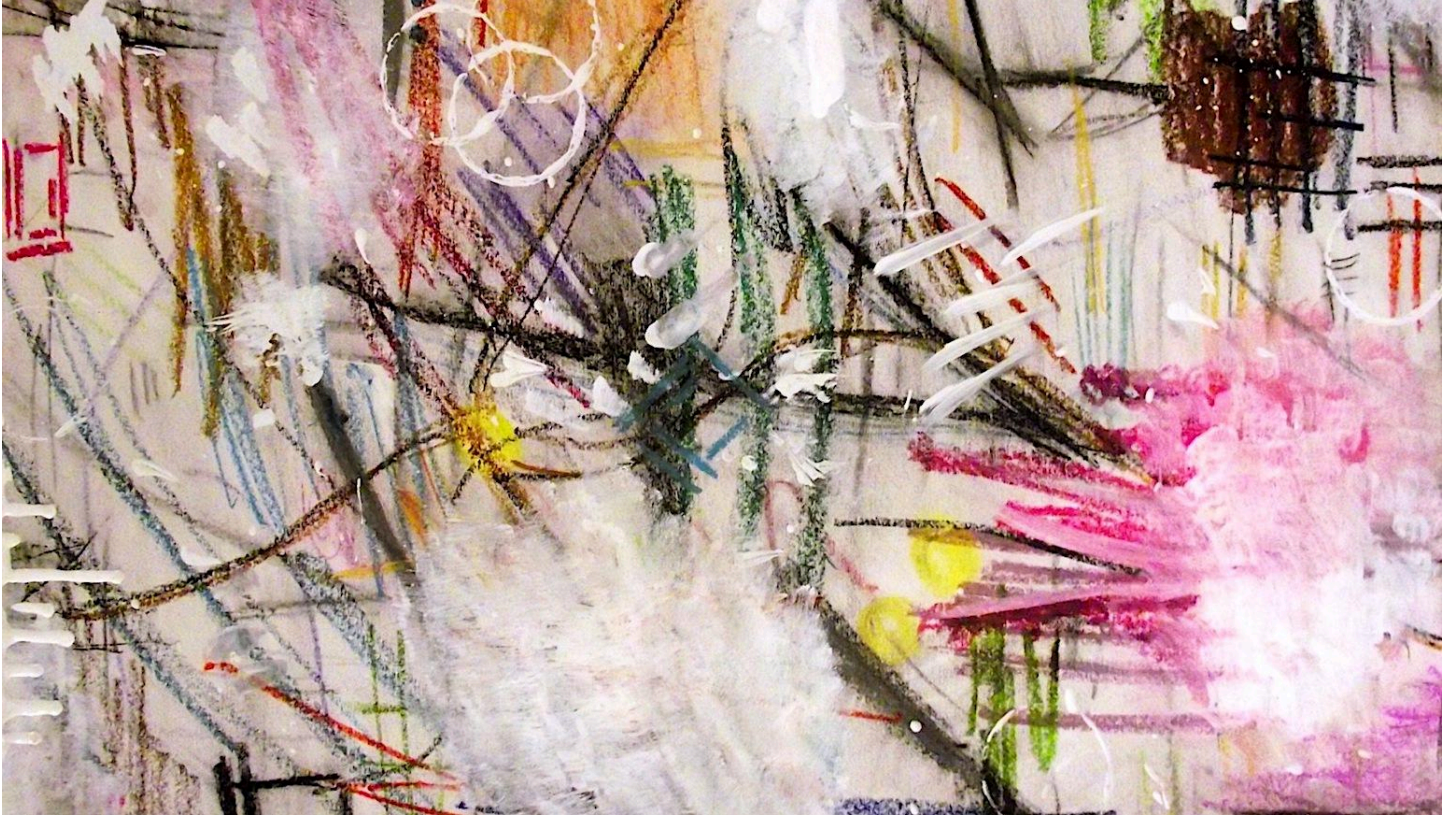
#### Lasting Lessons

Elliot Eisner taught me what it means to authentically teach students. I thank him for inspiring me to be the best that I can be, to be a life-long learner, and to never give up on our youth. As he reminds us in *Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered*, “When we define the curriculum, we are also defining the opportunities the young will have to experience different forms of consciousness.” Eisner, like Dewey, is clear that our ability to know is



based on our ability to construct meaning from experiences. Schools should help children create meaning from experience, and this requires an education devoted to the senses, to meaning-making and the imagination.

student artwork



My students said it best when I asked them to reflect on the experience:

“It was like a day of creative therapy.” (Rachel W. – age 17)

“I really liked that we could paint with our fingers. It freed up the fear I have of making a mistake. I don’t think I’ll ever use a paint brush again ‘cause I had complete control!” (Helen P. – age 15)

“This lesson taught me that my marks matter and they are right because they are mine” (Chelsea N. – age 15)

If you have never considered giving your students the opportunity to create with no rules or constraints, consider spring-boarding from this lesson. And consider doing some research to create your own contemporary art experience. I guarantee your students will love it!

If you’re looking for even more innovative drawing practices to bring into your art room, be sure to check out the AOE course Studio: Drawing. You will walk away with a fresh perspective, the inspiration to redesign and scaffold your drawing curriculum, and new strategies to teach the elements and principles of design.

Do you bring research-based ideas into your art room?

Do you encourage your students to reflect on the artmaking process more than the final works?

Debi West