Geoff's Story

I've always had the good fortune to be able to design my own curriculum, but this project has offered me some unique opportunities to think about and engage students in learning about Black history in Philadelphia. I wanted to focus on Black artists from this area, finding ways for students to "read" the history and culture reflected in paintings as well as ways for students to understand the impact they had.

When I joined this project, I kind of had to massage what I wanted to do to fit the criteria of the project. I knew I wanted to do a project on black visual art. One artist that has Philadelphia roots was Barkley Hendricks, and then the other artist I chose was Mickelene Thomas, who is from Camden. I considered the " Philadelphia area" as opposed to purely Philadelphia. But I thought it was good to have one male, one female artist. They're both mostly known for their portraiture and they're from different periods. I think Barkley was mostly rooted in the '60s and '70s. He's now deceased and Mickalene is contemporary. (01:18):

I wanted to help students learn about the depictions of intersectionality, to see how their cultures are reflected in art, fashion, and interior design, and to understand how these artists intentionally transformed Western Classical Art traditions by locating Black people in spaces usually reserved for Europeans. This has been a long interest of mine, and I have had some experiences making connections across literature for students as well as bringing in other forms of art along with the literature.

Once I conceived this idea about art for my project, I had to dig more into teaching about Black art. We're doing other artists besides Barclay Hendricks and McLean Thomas, but I realized that I would need to encourage students to look below the surface of a painting and to find out what the story is. The artists I selected are intentionally storytellers. So I would need to help students ask questions about the art and the artists and figure out how to find the clues in the art work. What do we look for? How do we find connections? So I just think the idea of studying art as a text has been really interesting to me. (06:29):

Another interest I have is learning some new uses of technology. Actually, that's part of the reason I thought about ways that this project could be a collaborative effort between the students in my classes, other students and teachers in this project, and myself. In this way, we are all involved in some learning together.

I also like the idea of being able to have the students embed their research into an image of a painting and in that way make it more interactive with technology. It occurred to me that this was certainly the first time that my students have ever read any kind of art criticism or scholarship. So it was a new form of literacy that we will be learning from together. It is surprising that so many of these artists are consciously modeling themselves after classic art, and I was surprised to know that some students really love that old European classic art,

that dramatic art with warriors, angels and battles. It has been a surprise, so I have been able to get to know my students in new ways. (9:03)

I decided to design this project so that students would do lots of research themselves, although I was able to focus them on some particular artists whose work we can find and some of whom have been featured recently in museums. Students researched Philadelphia and Philadelphia-adjacent Black visual artists, Mickalene Thomas and Barkley Hendricks. While their aesthetics differ, their roots are intertwined with the spirit of Delaware Valley. Hendricks was a Philadelphia native and a graduate of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts(PAFA), while Thomas was born just across the bridge in Camden, New Jersey, and has maintained deep ties to the Philadelphia art community throughout her career.

I think that the artists that we're studying are challenging dominant historical narratives about the long history of white representation in art. But interestingly, they both are rooted in classical Western art as well. So they're inspired by Western art, but they're putting black people in spaces that were, for obvious reasons, the exclusive purview of white artists and white subjects. And so I think that they're saying that, "we can stand with any great classic European artists. We're doing it just as well, but we're making it about our own culture."

Giving people and young people in particular a voice in how history is told and representative is definitely a form of justice. They're so used to receiving dominant narratives, now they're creating an alternative narrative. (16:00) Students created interactive research-based Canva that allowed viewers to "read" the history and culture reflected in the paintings. Consequently, students learned that visual art can be "read" in the same way as other texts.

I wanted students to be able to connect with the artists in ways that they haven't experienced before, and I think that students are beginning to realize is that there is a really rich variety of contemporary black artists working, and many of them have the same interests and concerns, but they're addressing them in very different ways and very unique ways. But it's also interesting that there's so many parallel motivations among these different artists. And so I think they're beginning to see that black artists can make really important statements of black life and culture in America when, for the most part, their contributions have been ignored or really put down. (10:35):