Art Masterpiece: Desert Rain God, 2009 by Louisa McElwain

Pronounced: Loo-EE-suh Mack EL-wain

Keywords: impasto, en plein air, landscape, monsoon, texture

Impasto - the application of paint so thickly that it stands out in relief.
En Plein Air - a French expression which means "in the open air", and is used to describe the act of painting outdoors in natural light.
Landscape - A painting or drawing showing a scene from nature, often including mountains, trees, rivers, fields and other outdoor scenery.
Monsoon - A season of heavy rainfall experienced during the summer in the Southwest.
Texture - The element of art that refers to how things might feel if touched.

Grade: 6th grade
Project: Weather scape
Powerpoint: KGA website
Landscape painting step by step by McElwain:
www.artistsnetwork.com/articles/art-demos-techniques/painting-demo-landscape
Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIbOQwuh2fk (4:38 min) Watch Louisa paint

Meet the Artist (5 min):
- Louisa McElwain first learned to appreciate nature as a child on her family’s farm in New Hampshire. (Born 1953 - Died 2013)
- She’s a contemporary artist who studied art both at Pennsylvania State University and in Italy, moving to Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1985.
• McElwain usually paints off the back of a pick-up truck, which gives her access to many wonderful places, and provides a way to stabilize and transport large canvases.
• She uses intense colors to capture the dynamic spirit of the Southwestern landscape, painting outdoors in direct observation of nature. Working quickly on a large canvas, she uses wide, sweeping brushstrokes to capture the changing cycles of the climate and terrain. She applies paint with sticks, palette knives, and small shovels to create a rough surface texture. McElwain often allows dust, dirt and hair to drift onto her canvas.
• Sometimes McElwain intentionally places bits of bone and earth into the wet paint of her artwork.

About the artwork:
Desert Rain God depicts a desert storm in New Mexico just as a dramatic downpour is about to begin. The vibrant, blue background contrasts with the swollen, water-filled cloud to create a focal point in the painting. The broad directional brushstrokes lead the viewer to the funnel of a dark storm casting a dramatic shadow over the landscape. In the foreground, McElwain paints green plants and the soft, sandy earth of the desert that awaits the rain. The viewer can see how the artist moved her hand as she applied the paint to suggest a sense of urgency and excitement. The artist uses the texture of the paint to emphasize a sense of movement. McElwain’s process echoes how quickly a storm can approach during monsoon season, and the delicate balance of earth, water, and life in the climate of the Southwest.

Discussion (10 min):
• What is the first thing you notice?
• What is the subject matter of the painting?
• What colors does the artist use?
• Take an inventory of all the colors the artist uses and where she uses them in the painting.
• How many shades of blue are there?
• Think about the title of the artwork. How does the artist feel about this kind of weather? How might someone who doesn’t live in the Southwest view this painting differently?

Project: Weather scape

Project Materials:
- Tempera paint, white, yellow, blue, green, and brown
- White glue, gallon jug
- Corn Meal, 60-120 Tbsp per class (@ 50 Tbsp per pound, so @ 2-3 lbs per class)
- Tongue depressors, 10 per table plus 4 per student for cardboard support
- 5oz Dixie cups, 10 per table
- Paper Napkins, 1 per student
- 10”x15” medium/heavy duty cardboard, 1 per student
...continued...
Dark Blue construction paper for mounting, 12”x17”
Parent Letters, 1 per student
White glue for mounting, (6-8 bottles)
Scotch tape

Advance Preparation:
Cut cardboard to 10”x15”
Cut Dk Blue mounting paper to 12”x17”
Copy Parent Letters and cut apart

Process (30-40 min):
• **BEFORE** you begin teaching the lesson, please have your students do the following steps to help minimize the curling of the cardboard when the impasto technique is applied:
  - Flip your cardboard to the back and glue a tongue depressor along the center of each edge on all four sides. Use two pieces of tape to reinforce the ends of each tongue depressor to hold it in place while the glue dries. Set aside to dry and set as you present the lesson.
• While one volunteer is presenting the lesson, another should fill 5oz Dixie cups **1/4 full** of Tempera paint. There should be 10 cups per table, 1 of white, 1 of yellow, 3 of blue, 3 of brown and 2 of green.
• Next fill each cup with an equal amount of white glue and mix with a tongue depressor, keep one of these in each cup.
• Then add 1 Tablespoon of cornmeal to each cup while stirring, to get a thick consistency similar to a heavy cake batter. (You may add 1 more Tablespoon to make thicker and a little water to make thinner.) This will give the paint a thick ‘impasto’ texture. Cornmeal will thicken as it sits!
• Have students lightly draw with pencil, a quick sketch of their design. Encourage them to think about Arizona’s dramatic weather, especially during the monsoon season; massive cloud formations and dust storms.
• Pass out the paint mixture and 1 napkin per student.
• Have them apply paint to their canvas and explain that the tongue depressor is their palette knife and will be painting with this instead of a brush, like Louisa McElwain does. They should paint with a sense of urgency and excitement!
• They may mix colors on the canvas but make sure that they wipe off the palette knife on the napkin if they get another color onto it, so that the color stays pure in the cup.
• Have them sign their name on the Parent Letter, put glue onto the center of the mounting sheet and place canvas onto it. Cardboard buckles when wet, the tongue depressors will stabilize it somewhat.

Clean up:
Throw away paint cups, tongue depressors and napkins. Make sure tops are sealed on paint and glue bottles. Store upright in supply bin.
Examples: