

ANIMALS IN ART

ARTIST: Joseph Ostraff (1957-) Provo, Utah
TITLE: *Albino Trout* 1989
MEDIA: acrylic on board
SIZE: 48" x 24"

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Joseph Ostraff, a native of Southern California, has been a resident of Utah since 1986. After graduating from Laguna Beach High School in California, Joseph attended Brigham Young University, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in painting. After his BYU experience, Joseph married Melinda Weston and moved to Seattle, where he attended graduate school at the University of Washington, and completing a Master of Fine Arts Degree in painting.

Since then he has done everything from lumberjacking in Idaho, sweeping floors in a department store, selling his paintings on the streets of Seattle for gas money, and building a house on the Kitsap Peninsula to traveling the South Pacific on funds collected from art commissions. He exhibits nationally and internationally, and most recently, he and his wife, Melinda, made a documentary film on the traditional art of tapa cloth making in Tonga. Joseph has also taught in the public school system for seven years and is currently an assistant professor of art at Brigham Young University.

Joseph's mother has been quoted as saying, " What happened to my boy? He used to be so good at art." Allan Fern, curator at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC and juror for the 1993 Utah Arts Council Fellowship Competition, is quoted as saying upon his selection of Joseph to be one of the fellowship recipients " Joseph seems to have some pent up anger and uses nature as a metaphor to address social concerns." Joseph's

response to these two statements is, "When you're doing something you feel is really important many people and especially your mother may not understand you." Secondly, "I consider myself to be a friendly, easy-going artist, but my work does express a frustration towards the way we treat nature and each other. Hopefully the things I do as an artist will have some positive impact on the people within my community."

Joseph is best known for his paintings of fish, birds, and other animals taken out of the context of their natural environment. You find his animals swimming down a street or passing through a window or door opening. Along with the uncommon placement of nature and man-made architectural forms, you may find other objects such as I-beams, pop cans, springs, and children's toys scattered around. All this is put together in his paintings in an effort to suggest alternative ways for us to look at the world. *Albino Trout* is a painting about natural selection.

Within nature, albino traits are based upon mutant genes that occur randomly within a species. Many animals that have this genetic trait are singled out by predators and have great difficulty surviving. Joseph says, " It fascinates me that we would take this trait and use it to develop albino trout in our fish hatcheries so that people who fish for sport can catch these mutant trout in our rivers, lakes, and streams." *Albino Trout*, the painting, questions humanity's constant reversal of natural laws and the motives for such actions.

"The fact that our culture has a word like nature implies some sort of separation between ourselves, our culture, and our view of nature. As I peer from my comfortable position of security out towards this wilderness, I see a multitude of complex patterns and ordering systems that are intriguing to me. I see a world that is perplexing and unpredictable.

"Painting is my way of developing a personal sense of pattern and order in response to what I see. The repeated act of painting solidifies my place in nature, while decreasing my need to manipulate, possess, or control nature."

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

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QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

(History, Aesthetics, History)

Do you know what albino trout are? (Explain albino if they don't know) Does anyone know why trout fisheries deliberately raise albino trout and what they use albino trout for? (If no one knowsÑthe white fish are easily seen and fish hatcheries use a certain percentage in releases because they are easy for fishermen to see and know that the hatcheries have released fish in that stream or lake. They are marker fish.)

What kind of paint has this artist used? How might the painting have been different if he had used watercolor or oil paint? What style is this painting? What other artworks do you know that are a similar style? Would you judge this painting the same way you would judge *Big Boys* or *Sunny Day*? What would you use as criteria?

Why do you think the artist chose to call the painting *Albino Trout*? How would it feel to be an albino trout or an albino person? Do you think that had anything to do with why the artist painted albino trout? If the painting makes you think about what it would be like to stand out and be different from other people, does it matter whether the artist wanted you to? Why? Do you think the artist approves of fish hatcheries breeding albino trout? What about the painting makes you feel that way?

What do you like about this artwork? Do you think it is a good painting? Would it be a better painting if the fish looked more like real fish? Why or why not?

ACTIVITIES

Art-Making, Expressing, and/or Contextualizing

Objective: Students will demonstrate their understanding of texture, color, value, or unity by creating a collage or a sculpture of a fish. (This activity can also include science knowledge such as the parts of a fish or can focus on the environment and how changes in the environment impact fish.)

Materials:

magazines, books, various kinds of paper

sturdy paper for the backing

scissors

YES paste, acrylic medium, or thinned white glue (paste and medium can be purchased at craft and art supply stores)

plastic wrap

Show the class the slides of *Albino Trout* and *A Tension to Detail*. Discuss the way the artists have depicted the fish in their paintings. Then assign students to create a fish out of pieces of images cut from magazines, maps, encyclopedias or other kinds of old books. This activity can focus on creating visual texture, on color, value, unity, or can be focused on creating art which makes a statement about something. For example, the illustration below accompanied an article in *Sierra*, the magazine published by the *Sierra Club*. The article was on how to reduce your chances of catching and eating fish that contain hazardous chemicals.

Extension: For advanced students, offer them the option of adding paint to the collage after the papers have been glued down. Use oil or acrylic paint. The paint is particularly effective if thinned so it is transparent and looks like a wash, allowing the papers to show through.

Sculpture Variation: Have students bring assorted found objects to class and create sculptures of fish using those found objects.

Materials:

pictures of fish
found objects
trash such as tuna fish cans or other clean food containers
wood scraps or flattish items for displaying or mounting fish
wire, twine, sturdy thread
nails or an awl for punching holes
drill (optional)
pliers, scissors, large needles
glue
paint

Students should make a sculpture out of the found objects, attaching items to each other or to the item chosen for backing in whatever way works. The items can be mounted on a sitting base, a base that will hang on a wall, or can be hung with wire from the ceiling.

Set up an exhibit of the completed fish.

Science/Art-Making, Contextualizing

Objective: Students will demonstrate their understanding of ecosystems by creating accurate visual representations of various kinds of habitats. (Ecosystems, State Core)

Materials--choose from among the following suggestions:

large sheets of construction or other sturdy paper
large pieces of cardboard
large shallow boxes
large pieces of styrofoam
small scraps of styrofoam

clay--salt dough, ceramic, air-hardening, or oil base (oil-base clay has the disadvantage that if bumped, it will deform)

Show the class the slides from this packet and ask them which animals are shown in their natural habitats. (Some clearly are, some clearly aren't, and some are depicted in isolation and therefore, aren't clearly one way or the other.) Ask students to identify what kind of habitat each of the animals would normally live in. If they don't know, encourage them to think through what they do know and to make reasonable guesses. (The students may be interested to know that Clark Bronson, who sculpted *Big Boys*, which depicts natural habitat, spends a lot of time in the wild, getting up very close to the animals he photographs and later sculpts. Another artist who included accurate habitat is Carel (pronounced Carl) Brest van Kempen. He too has spent a lot of time in the kinds of tropical forests he depicts.)

Then divide the students into groups. Each group is responsible for researching what kind of plant and animal life can be found in one specific habitat such as the desert, a tropical forest, mountains, plains, etc. After completing their research, each group will create an accurate habitat including animals, plant life, and nonliving components.

When the habitats are completed, the students in each group should explain the habitat to the rest of the class so all the class members learn about each kind of habitat. You can choose to have students identify the consumers, producers, and decomposers in each habitat as well as to describe the different food chains in the habitat. (See Third Grade Science Core Curriculum, Ecosystems)

Provide the students with several possible ways to create the habitats. For example, a tropical forest habitat could have a complex mural as the background, with a few items in front, while it might work better to use a large shallow box for a desert habitat. Let students bring items from home such as small animals appropriate to the habitat or rocks and pieces of wood.

Another possibility is to provide some kind of modeling clay for the students to use. (If you use ceramic clay for this activity, it can either be allowed to air dry and be used as is, or you can fire it and allow students to paint the fired clay.) Or, students could draw animals and objects on paper and then cut them out. To make them stand upright, create a base out of sturdy paper, a small piece of clay, or a scrap of styrofoam; or tape the items to bamboo skewers, which can be stuck into whatever students are using for a base. (A large scrap of styrofoam sheeting makes a good base and can often be gotten for no cost by asking for scraps at construction sites.)

Because the ecosystem project is a complex and time-consuming project, it would be a good showcase for student work for parent teacher conferences or other times parents will be coming to the school. You also may be able to arrange to have other classes visit your classroom and have the students explain the habitats to the visitors, giving students another chance to demonstrate their knowledge and providing added reinforcement of the

students' learning.

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