

PICTURE OF PRACTICE

EXPLORING CIVIC POVs

Educator Michael Kozuch routinely brings his passion for the environment and human rights into his teaching at Newton South High School in Newton, Massachusetts, US. He also recognizes that works of art offer uniquely powerful ways to stimulate discussions of these themes, both in his classroom and in the wider society. This picture of practice offers a glimpse of how Michael used an artwork and an ArtC thinking arc to engage his high school students in a discussion of how human actions impact our planet.

The context for this discussion was a 12th grade elective course on Sustainability, which explores critical questions such as: Can economic development and environmental protection co-exist? What culturally sensitive actions are necessary to create a more sustainable planet? The artwork was [*Tamara Dean's Wormwood \(Artemisia absinthium\) in Spring, 2017*](#). This work is part of Dean's *In Our Nature* series, which explores the relationship between humans and our natural world. The learning experience was based on the ArtC thinking arc, Exploring Civic Points of View with Art. The routine has four steps.

Exploring Civic Points of View with Art

- Notice the artwork: What do you see?
- Make a Civic Connection: What might this work be saying about a specific civic topic?
- Explore Points of View: What are different points of view on this topic?
- Reflect and Revisit: What ideas had you not considered before? What new observations or questions do you have?



Tamara Dean, *Wormwood (Artemisia absinthium) in Spring, 2017*
Courtesy of Tamara Dean and Michael Reid Gallery, Sydney + Berlin

Michael opened up his class with their usual routines – a mindful moment and sharing of personal updates. He then turned to what would be the focus of their time together today: a close look at a work of art. Why look together at art? Because “art is a way to spur important discussions not just in the classroom but throughout society.” He clicked on the projector and an image of Tamara Dean’s *Wormwood* appeared on the screen at the front of the room.

Notice

Without sharing any background information about the work or artist, Michael invited students just to look: **Notice the work. Look silently at it for a few minutes and record your observations.** He advised, “Resist the temptation to interpret what you’re seeing. Just record what you see.” The image quality and lighting weren’t optimal but students in the class could see well enough and Michael invited students to get out of their seats and approach the screen for a closer look if they wished.

After a few minutes of silent looking, Michael asked students to share some of their observations. The first comments focused on the natural setting: *“It’s very, very green.” “I see trees, shrubs, not a lot of sky.” “The sky is blue but kind of dark.”* Students then began to share what they noticed about how human beings appeared in the work:

“I see children or young people with hands over their eyes, looking up.”

“Some people have their hands over their eyes like they are looking through them but others don’t.”

“It doesn’t look like people are wearing clothes.”

“People spaced out. Some are standing. Some are squatting.”

Their comments then turned to observable features of people’s identities. One student noted, “All the kids are white.” Another chimed in, “Some are boys, others are girls.” In response, a third student wondered, “Is saying boys or girls an assumption or an interpretation?” Michael chimed in to acknowledge the good question and suggested it as a point for further discussion in subsequent steps of the arc.

Make a Civic Connection

Leading the class into the next step, Michael paused to share a bit more information about the artwork.

Wormwood is a 2017 piece by Tamara Dean, an artist whose work explores the relationship between humans and the natural world. What might this work be saying about humans and the natural world? Michael asked his students to think-pair-share as they explore this question. Students self-organized into pairs and began to talk. A buzz of conversation filled the room.

After 7-8 minutes, Michael brought the class back together to share their ideas. One student pointed to the date of the artwork, 2017. Noting how digital technologies are so central to our lives today, she offered an interpretation that the work was about *“Young people who can’t see or appreciate nature.”* Several other students jumped in to agree: *“They are blind to nature.” “Children’s eyes are covered. They are blind to how we are impacting the planet.”* One elaborated, pointing to a contradiction: *“Young people tend to be supportive of environmental issues but don’t want to spend time outside.”*

Michael encouraged the students: “Keep going.” One offered a further perspective: *“The people are not fully representative of humans because these are eight white humans.”* Another student speculated that the work was referencing the Garden of Eden: *“After Adam ate the apple, they hid their bodies like the people are hiding their bodies here.”*

The discussion then turned back to the topic of human culpability for the environment. *“This reminds me of an apocalyptic scene. Something’s coming but you’re blind to what it is.” “It’s speaking to climate anxiety. The younger generation will bear the brunt of climate issues. They look like they’re afraid and taking shelter in the environment.”* In agreement, another student shared, *“The composition and body language is tense. Like they’re bracing for it.”*

Explore Points of View

Turning to the next step, Michael asked the students to step away from the image itself in order to discuss the broader theme of human impacts on the natural world. Sending students back to their pair-share conversation, he asked them to consider: **What different worldviews or attitudes might people have about this topic? What causes someone to have a particular worldview on humans and the natural world?**

After a few minutes of pair-share conversation, Michael invited students to share ideas as a whole group. Picking up on the keywords, “blind” or “blindness,” from their last share-out students first described worldviews that were about denial: *“Not seeing what’s in front of you.” “People don’t want to accept that they’re part of the problem.”* Then they speculated about where these worldviews might come from and what factors might contribute to them: *“Different cultures influence what you value.” “Religion.” “Monetary success.” “Social status and income.”* One student offered: *“Your profession. What if your job is tied to the problem? Say you work for an oil company. You have a vested interest there.”* A lively exchange ensued about human accountability and its challenges: *“People don’t want to take culpability.” “They ignore how they’re part of the problem.”* One student pushed back a bit: *“But it’s hard to see how you are involved.”* Another echoed, *“It can be a lot to take in. It’s easier to ignore than to take on.”*

Michael then inserted a provocative question: “You’re all saying it’s about human actions. But how would a climate change denier view this and enter into this picture. You may not know but try to imagine.” After reflecting for a moment, students shared some ideas: *“Climate deniers say, I’m just one person. How can I be impacting [the planet]?” “[They might also think that] this is meant to be – humans influencing nature. This is natural.”*

Reflect and Revisit

In the final phase of the arc, Michael first invited students to reflect independently on the discussion. **What ideas and points of view came up that you hadn’t considered before? Was there something that came up that you want to think more about, or dive into for deeper discussion?** Students quietly wrote out their reflections.

“I had not considered the perspective of a climate change denier.”

“I hadn’t considered the idea of blindness. Cultural blindness. Individual blindness. Also complacency. And the purpose of human’s relationship to the environment.”

“The next generation is on the hook and will have to deal with problems that current leaders are causing and not doing enough to fix.”

Finally, Michael invited students to turn their attention back to *Wormwood* for another look. **Do you have any new observations or questions? Is there anything in the work that you are seeing that you didn’t see before?**

A few students stood up and approached the screen to give the work one last look. As the bell rang signaling the end of class, an exchange unfolded between two students about the dichotomy between human and nature. *“Who decided that humans aren’t a part of the natural world? If everything comes from the earth, aren’t we actually part of nature? Aren’t we from nature?”* The discussion continued as they headed into the hallway and on to their next class.