

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

High-school students will ...

- use the grid system to enlarge a photograph of themselves.
- experiment with spray paint to achieve different color schemes and paint effects.
- establish a visually interesting composition using positive and negative space.
- create a series of paintings/prints with stencil and spray paint.

MATERIALS

- Various colors of spray paint
- Art/craft knives
- Large paper (about 20" x 26")
- Rulers
- Pencils
- Digital camera
- Black and white printer
- Tracing paper
- Masking tape
- Step-by-step teacher example for reference

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I have found that many of my students are interested in less-than-traditional forms of art, and are particularly fascinated with graffiti and anything involving spray paint. A number of them have quite a talent for it, but lack a safe environment in which to use it.

After countless requests, I decided I would try to incorporate this interest into my Art 2 classes, made up of intermediate students who have taken the intro-level Art 1 class. What started out as an attempt to let them express themselves in a more legal, less destructive way turned into an exciting experience with amazing results that the kids still cite as one of their favorite projects.

My solution was to do “spray-paint self-portraits” as a form of printmaking from a stencil. Working from photographs, the students created large drawings of themselves and turned them into stencils,



SPRAY-PAINT P O R T R A I T S

by Jennifer Edgley

which they later took outside and from which they made several “prints.”

To begin the many steps of this project, I had to take a photograph of each of my students. I set up a studio light in a dark-room (to create the strong contrast needed for stencil making) and allowed the kids to express any emotion they wanted (i.e. happy, silly, pensive, serious).

I also told them it did not have to be a completely frontal photograph of their face; poses used included profile, three-quarter view, looking up or down, and some incorporated their

hands into the picture. This flexibility is key, as not all students enjoy having their picture taken and I wanted them to be as comfortable as possible.

After I had everyone photographed, I exaggerated the contrast in Adobe® Photoshop® to make the next step of the project easier for them. I printed each photograph the same size (in my case, I used 5" x 7") and handed them back to the kids.

When everyone had a photo they were satisfied with (a much easier task with the instant results of a digital camera), I gave each student a piece of



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Nico thoughtfully experimented with color for an interesting composition.



Michelle peeled back her star-strewn stencil to reveal her self-portrait.



High-school student artists spray-painted their self-portraits outside on a tarp.



▲ Tony created negative images by placing leaves on top of his stencil.

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tracing paper big enough to cover their entire photo, a piece of masking tape and a ruler. The students taped the tracing paper on top of their photos and used a pencil to break their photos into *only* “black and white” (or positive and negative space)—no gray values.

This is the most difficult step for many students, but the most important, because they will be creating stencils from these drawings. In this step, they are essentially tracing, but they will have to draw from their tracing in the next step. The key thing to remember in this step is that *all* the areas they leave “white” must connect; if they don’t, the stencil will fall apart.

It is helpful for students to find the shadows (obvious “blacks”) and color them in first, and then decide if the neutrals are going to be “black” or “white.” This takes some artistic

license, which is why I do this with a more advanced level of students. Once they have completed their tracing paper drawings, they are ready to grid.

Since the students’ photographs were all 5" x 7", I had them create a 1-inch grid over the entire photo. On a 20" x 26" piece of paper, this translates proportionately to a 3.5-inch grid, which I also had them create. When the grids are complete, the students can begin enlarging their tracing paper drawings onto the larger paper.

These larger, gridded drawings are what will eventually become the students’ stencils. For this reason, it is important that the paper be thin enough to cut with an art/craft knife, but not flimsy. As they draw, they can shade in the “black” areas and leave the connected “whites” alone.

When the enlarged drawings are finished, the students are ready to

begin creating the stencil to use for spray-painting. They will each need a knife and a scrap piece of cardboard or mat board to place under their drawings to save their desks from being cut up. Since the white areas are all connected, they will use the knives to remove all the areas they have chosen to be black. Any mistakes made by cutting through the white areas can be easily fixed with tape. When they have done this, the remaining areas will form one large, connected white area, which will be the actual stencil.

Once the students’ stencils are completed, they are ready for the fun part! I purchased a long roll of painter’s tarp (to protect the grass) and with the permission of our maintenance team, staked it into the ground outside of school. I brought a large stack of more 20" x 26" paper outside, along with tape and spray paint (you’ll go through quite a bit), and let the kids loose. Some students used the masking tape to lightly affix their stencils on top of the new paper to keep them from blowing away, but most went without.

The students experimented with using several colors of spray paint, and also took advantage of the different effects it is possible to achieve with this new medium. Holding the can close to the paper gives a pooled, saturated look, while holding it further back creates a fuzzier, softer effect. They also found ways to make drips and used things like leaves to create negative space designs. They had a blast! When we returned to the classroom, each student had a series of self-portraits to show for their hard work over the past few weeks.

Not only is this a fun project with great results, it is also a great way to get the students outside for a change in scenery. ■

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