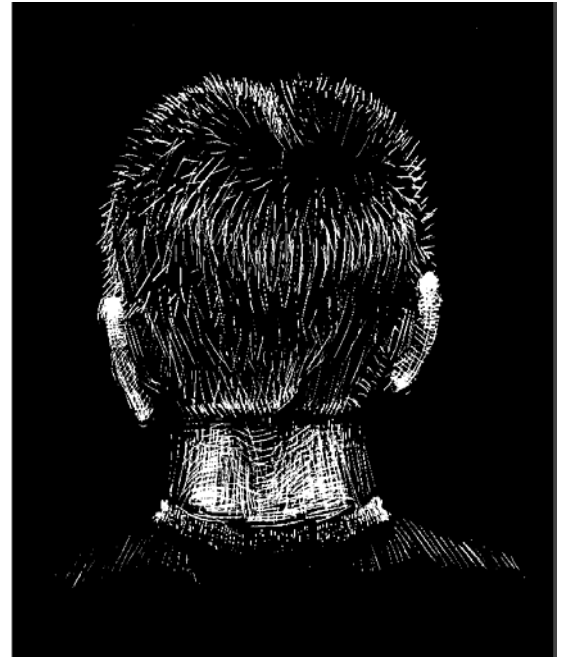




HAIR TODAY

Created by art teacher Sandra Campbell in collaboration with students of Oak Park & River Forest High School in conjunction with the University of Illinois at Chicago, Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative.



This project combines teaching basic drawing skills with investigating a vital subject in teen's lives—hair. The project encourages students to investigate the postmodern notion that identity is performative—we are who we act. In many societies, one of the most basic acts of establishing identity is choosing how one manages (or doesn't manage) one's hair.

This project is related to the work of the contemporary photographer, Lorna Simpson. The ambiguous portraits she creates and the way in which she juxtaposes text, image, and sometimes, actual hair, introduce students to contemporary artmaking strategies that question received ideas about race and gender. Through her work, students see that though much contemporary art may seem weird to them at first, it may in fact, address issues in which they have a compelling interest.

Students enjoy and are interested in images of themselves. This interest in self-portraiture can be extended beyond interest in visual verisimilitude to include explorations of how culture and language shape personal identity and perception. The Hair Today project investigates these notions in several ways using basic media such as pencil drawing, scratchboard, photography, and text.

After discussing contemporary hairstyles and watching clips of movies that prominently feature hair, students fill out a questionnaire designed to get them thinking about their personal, family, and cultural associations with hair. After considering how drawing hair can add to or ruin a portrait, the students use magazine photos or fellow classmates as models to begin practicing strategies to depict the visually complex subject of hair.



In a later phase of this project, students take photographs of the back of each student's head. Students use these as source material for drawings in scratchboard. This aspect of the project also encourages students to play with image and text. They make a list of "hair" words from the descriptive words on their questionnaires. They cut out the words and begin to arrange and rearrange them under the photos. Students are excited and amused to observe how the words take on different meanings when juxtaposed with different photos.

This project uses Lorna Simpson's work as an impetus to consider how we look at others and how others look at us. The seemingly superficial subject of hair leads to in-depth and subtle conversations about the formation of identity. How hair is styled has a lot to do with how we perceive and categorize others and ourselves. This project encourages students to consciously consider the cultural and political ramifications of hair and hairstyles.

DISCUSS

Begin a discussion on contemporary hairstyles. How do we "see" others and ourselves through a style of hair? How do others see us?

COLLECT IMAGES OF HAIR STYLES

Find images in magazines to create more discussion about the choice and significance of hairstyles.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Fill out *Hair Today Questionnaire*. (A pdf file of the questionnaire is located at the end of the Hair Today Process Chapter on the Spiral Art Education website.) Remind students to interview their parents and grandparents about hair styles "back in the days."

LIST

Brainstorm hairstyle names. Make a list of hairstyle names and inspirations.

SCREENING

Hair

Watch the first 45 minutes of the movie or perhaps just the "Hair song."

Synopsis of *Hair*: *Hair* is an entertaining and powerful tribute to the turbulent spirit of the '60s. Fresh from the farm, Claude Bukowski arrives in New York City for a date with the Army Introduction Board, only to walk into a hippie "happening" in Central Park and fall in love with the beautiful Sheila. Befriended by the hippies' pacifist leader, Berger and urged to crash a formal party in order to declare his love for Sheila, Claude begins an adventure that lands him in jail, Central Park Lake, and finally, in the army. Berger's final effort to save Claude from Vietnam sets in motion a bizarre twist of fate with shocking consequences.

(Total length of *Hair* is 121 minutes.)

School Daze

Watch the scene from the movie *School Daze* where the cast sings "Good and Bad Hair," a lively music and dance number that brings up serious questions about standards of beauty.



Synopsis of *School Daze*: At an African American college, amid gala coronations, football, fraternities, parades, and parties, a group of buddies find themselves caught up in romance, relationships, rituals, and rivalries during one outrageous homecoming weekend. The story follows two cousins who have opposing attitudes when it comes to the purpose of college: learning versus partying. Spike Lee's sprawling exploration of the tensions that are present on black college campuses is an exhilarating blend of surreal musical comedy and poignant social criticism.

(Total length of film: 114 minutes.)

DISCUSS

What are the “politics” of hair? Can hair make a statement about who we are? Has hair ever been a “battleground” in their homes?

TEACH

Poorly drawn hair can ruin a portrait. Show students various artworks in which the artist has represented hair in a convincing and beautiful way. An eclectic selection of artists whose drawings elegantly and concisely represent hair: Elizabeth Catlett, Luis Jimenez, Stanley Spencer, Vincent Van Gogh, Charles White, and Grant Wood. Point out various strategies for drawing hair. Comic books are also a good source of interesting styles of depicting hair.

DRAW

Using pencils on white paper have students draw “portrait heads” without the faces. Concentrate on creating the specificity of shape and texture of the hair. Students can work from each other as models or from magazine photos. A fun alternative is to choose only celebrity images and see if students can recognize familiar characters by hair alone.

PHOTOGRAPH

Using a Polaroid camera or digital camera, photograph each student from the back.

WORDS

Review the students’ Hair Today Questionnaires and the lists made during discussions. Choose words that describe the students’ hair. Write the words on slips of paper.

Play with the words and images. Pair words with various photos. This will provide a springboard for further discussion as students consider the ways in which meaning shifts when words are juxtaposed with different pictures.

DRAW

Have each student choose a photograph of a head seen from the back. These can be found photos, family photos, or photos taken of themselves or their classmates.

Each student will create a drawing on black scratchboard. Begin the scratchboard drawing by making a very light pencil sketch directly on the black scratchboard.

Demonstrate how to use the scratchboard tools. Provide small pieces of scrap scratchboard so that students can practice for a few minutes before beginning on their final piece.

Hints:

- Don’t draw an outline around the hair—it will look like a helmet.
- A series of lines can create a strong sense of edges and of the overall form.
- Most hair can be drawn with many, almost parallel lines.
- Experiment with the length and kinds of line needed to create a feeling of the texture of the hair.
- Create a sense of dimension and shine by removing a lot of black in some areas.



INSTALLATION

Learning to draw hair well is an important facet of students developing confidence in drawing the human figure. One of the great things about the Hair Today project is that by spending only a few extra days of class time on the project, the unit becomes more than a detail-oriented drawing exercise. The work becomes an interesting and fun cultural exploration that the art students can share with other students and teachers in the school.

Create a display in a public place in the school. Be ready for lots of comments and conversations.

There are many ways in which this project could be extended:

- Students write down the most dramatic or revelatory story or idea they encountered during the project and make these statements part of the installation.
- Enlarge the scratchboard drawings using a Xerox machine to create a bolder scale installation.
- Have students create narrative drawings or comic strips that tell a personal story related to hair.