

A Studio Project Based on the Events of September 11

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Agnes Scott College is a small liberal arts women's college in Atlanta, Georgia. The class involved in this assignment is a basic design studio.

The Idea

A week after the 9/11 WTC event, the collage project that we had been working on in my basic design class lacked relevance. We were working from master works, analyzing hue and value relationships, color schemes, shape and composition. The master works seemed unimportant because of the immense emotional impact of the event that had permeated our community and our world.

Two ideas came to me. First, although the administration had asked the faculty to try to "go back to normal life", I was having trouble thinking about anything unrelated to the incident and its impact on my consciousness. Second, it is strong emotions like these that are the impetus for great art. If I could tap into this emotion and successfully guide the class through the process of creative visual expression, the learning could be profound. Certainly this was a teaching opportunity.

I saw changing the project to focus on current events as both a chance to keep myself focused on teaching during this critical time and as a lesson for students about how emotion can be experienced, distilled and expressed.

At best, I thought, they would make art. And at least, they would learn basic design principles and techniques.

The Project

I introduced the following project to preempt the current project:

Create two solutions that reflect your reaction to / or experience of the events of 9/11. The first solution will be abstract (no images or specific symbols) and in black and white. Use value and composition to emphasize meaning. The second solution will use color and may be a specific subject. Both designs will be based on a "design statement" that you will distill from your writings of the event.

Step 1: Write.

Write down your feelings, conversations, understandings, and questions concerning the event. Write stream of consciousness, include everything. Do not edit.

Step 2: Analyze/edit

Come up with one major general idea or theme that you want to concentrate on. From

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this idea invent a design statement. In general terms describe what your image will be about. For example: “A state of intense confusion”.

Step 3: Do.

Using techniques learned from your readings, manipulate color schemes, levels of contrast, form and composition to visually describe your verbal idea.

The initial work required each student to write about the event and to process information. At our next meeting we would have a discussion and presentations of the ideas distilled from this research. In designing this assignment I called upon techniques that I use in my own creative work to solve visual design problems. If I have to write down my idea I am forced to truly understand it. Writing requires both general and detailed analysis of the subject. Once one has sentences, it is a fairly straightforward process to represent specific words with visual symbols. For example, a harsh line is depicted differently from a sweet line. Visual language agrees with written and verbal language. The student’s writing affords a clear way to illustrate this idea. Through writing students are able to see what they think and control what they state.

Concerns

I was excited about delivering the project. I thought that like me, the students would be happy to get back to class (back to “normal”) while having an opportunity to continue processing the event. But the project was received coolly.

The lack of enthusiasm caused me to doubt myself. I reflected on facts I had learned about trauma: that one processes emotionally when one is ready, in her own time, in her own way. I felt that perhaps I had put my needs first, forcing the students to consider the event without respecting their possible needs for quietude or private reflection.

At our next meeting, I opened our discussion by disclosing these feelings. An intense two-hour discussion ensued. I was uncomfortable to learn that about 70% of the students were “irritated and annoyed” by the official reactions to the events. They were annoyed that classes had been suspended and thought that too much attention was given to their emotional well being. One student said she “put up a front” that she was upset, because she felt that she ought to be, but then felt guilty both that she didn’t care enough and that she wasn’t being honest. Another student shared that she was annoyed at her mother for waking her up in the morning with the news. After she hung up she went back to sleep. Later she felt “obligated” to call and “listen to her talk about it”. Others spoke of being put off that their regular TV programs were being interrupted. Many spoke of guilt about not feeling sad enough.

I listened carefully to this discussion. Trying hard not to divulge my incredulity, I used the technique of mirroring to validate their sentiments. I expressed surprise at their feelings and I tried to be honest about expressing my own. I told them that I felt very differently from them, maybe because I have children, maybe simply because I am older.

I saw from this discussion that the students were angry that I was forcing them to work on such a grand theme. They feared I was expecting profound results for which they felt technically and psychically inadequate. To alleviate their misgivings, and to get the ball rolling, I did two things. I encouraged them to work with whatever “theme” they came up with, however mundane. I told them that irritation or a feeling of being left out were perfectly valid ideas to use for their design theme. And through a demonstration of cutting paper and how to develop thumbnail drawings, I gave them a way to begin.

My ability to pinpoint and address the problems of insecurity and resentment stemming from this frank and lengthy discussion was a turning point in both this specific assignment and in the energy of the class as a whole.

Analysis

My pedagogical reasoning and the results.

Idea 1

Through the creation of a personal statement, the student makes an ego investment in the project. The oral presentation of the statement is a way to express a private thought publicly, a common and crucial task for an artist.

(Example of student's design theme development)

Emily Brinkley:

I had a lot of conflicting emotions about the WTC attack on September 11. However, after the initial shock, it became very easy to detach myself from what had occurred. The sensationalism, the special effects type explosion and the distance between myself and where the events occurred made it difficult to identify with the strong emotions everyone else was feeling.

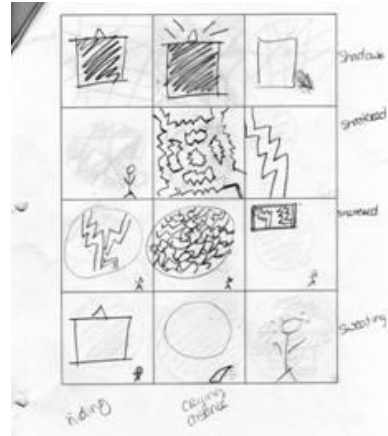
Days later, as I continued to watch the news, I found that I did feel something quite strongly. I felt fear. I feel the word "war" is an extremely strong word and I am afraid of the way politicians and the media have been throwing this word around. I fear the way that our representatives could bring the rest of the country into a long, emotional and difficult war. And I feel vulnerable because there is nothing I can personally do to protect myself and the people that I care about from the decisions of others.

Design sentence: Fear because of vulnerability

Idea 2

The visual investigation of words helps a student hone her critical skills. What does language look like? The idea here is to learn to manipulate design principles to pinpoint specific connotations. For example, if one is trying to express the idea of "lonely", how many elements should be in the frame? What should be the scale relationship between elements? Should they be high or low, black or white, big or small, hard or soft-edged? Is an asymmetric composition more effective than one that is static? Each decision should reinforce the idea of loneliness

Emily Brinkley: Visual synonyms (left); thumbnail drawings (right)



Another student, Mary Osterbind makes subtle visual adjustments to emphasize the distinction of being separate but remaining complete:

I didn't really react to the actual incident, rather my reaction has concerned those around me. It seems as though everyone else has been shaken out of their own lives and have now been inspired to act, to become part of a greater whole. I didn't feel the need to get closer to my fellow human. I am still content to go on with my life as though nothing has happened. I am not part of the whole but this realization does not make me lonely - I am still complete. The cold gray of the circle expresses that lack of involvement while the frenzy of the white mass shows the unity and action that is occurring outside of the sphere.

Detachment from the whole, but remaining complete.

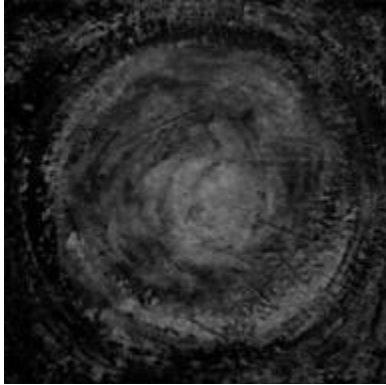


Kayla Cantlebury

I decided to use a circle because I feel that a circle is the saddest shape. It has no beginning no end. I used varying shades of black because black is a sad mournful color.

Sorrow

(Media: charcoal and eraser - indistinct, easy to blend)



Jill Carson

I decided to represent the fragmentation of my view of the world that occurred on September 11. I chose to create an image of a broken square, because squares are stable shapes, as I thought the world was stable. Once the square is broken, it cannot be reassembled, because the pieces do not quite fit and colors have been changed. This represents the impossibility of reconstructing the safety and idealism that I used to have.

A solid object is irrevocably broken

(media: cut paper, distinct hard edges, high contrast)



Idea 3

One of the most difficult lessons for students to learn is to suspend the literal. Whether it is subjective or not, the strength of any image is in its abstract qualities.

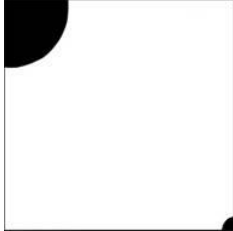
By restricting the parameters of the solution so that the student must rely on the abstract design principles, the fundamental importance of contrast, composition and line quality can be seen.

Successive projects where color and subject are added tend to be less heavy handed. In Christy Boulrier's color solution below, we see the primary narrative as describing "distance" rather than describing the story of a balloon. She uses the light as a tool - backlighting the balloon and rendering it less red and cheery, less symbolically a balloon and more the specific moment of this

balloon on this day. The sky is not a traditional or obvious blue sky, but one textured by clouds; the position of the balloon is not centered in the middle but off to the side. In creating a moment rather than a symbol, the balloon is imbued with a human spirit to which the viewer may personally relate.

Christy Boulier

There is loneliness in distance



Idea 4

I try to leave space for something unexpected to happen during the creative process. Sometimes this results in projects where individual voices make themselves heard. In Jan Frazier's solutions, her translation of the specific events into general terms for her black and white solution become very personal - and very strong - in her color solution. The overall design statement remains the same:

There was order. There was a disturbance. There is a new order.

Janyata Frazier

Black and white solution:

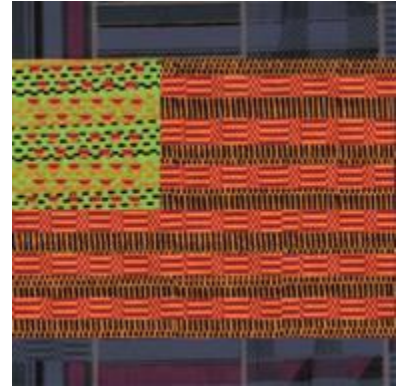
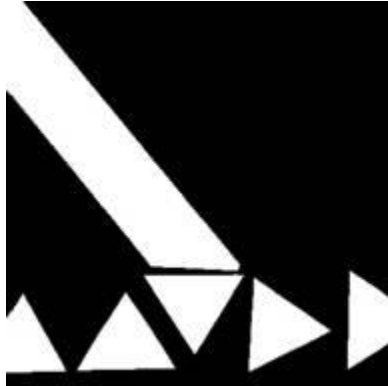
I woke up September 11, 2001, Janyata Frazier. The world fell apart. The United States of America "Big, Bad, USA", got a surprise attack, and it crumbled. My day was disrupted. There was no music on my radio. Real World did not air. I went to bed, September 11, 2001, Janyata Frazier

Color solution:

It is no secret that the continent of Africa historically is responsible for the shaping of the world, as we know it. From this rich continent, we get math, the paper we write on, and the diamonds that allow us to "Bling-Bling." Prior to the arrival of Europeans, the Africans of all nations had order. There were kings and queens; currency systems were in place, and other fundamental structures in society. Unfortunately, a disturbance occurred, and to make a long story short -- some people were removed and through their blood, sweat, and toil the United States of America—the land of the *free* was built from not so free labor. With the passing of time, a new order has come about. Currently, the remnants of the original African slaves have taken their broken past to create a new future. Although African Americans are not currently kings and queens, we are your mayors, your senate and house representatives, your secretary of state. This piece shows the result of the

forced immersion of the African culture into what later became American culture - you can't have one without the other. I am an African *American*.

(The color solution below is the pattern of the American flag pieced together with traditional African Kente cloth.)



Closing Remarks

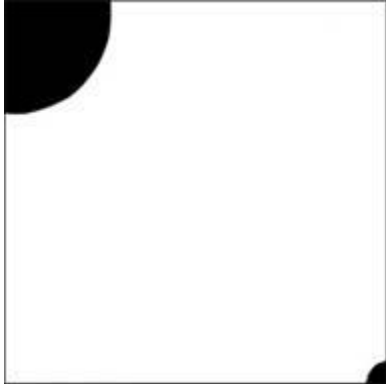
A rigorous approach to the project resulted in technically strong solutions that show a sound understanding of the principles of design and form. And in the end the results are more profound than mundane. But for the teaching experience it is not the results that are important, but rather active involvement in the design process. The WTC event provided a direct and meaningful impetus for my class' engagement in the creative process. We were able to develop ideas both physically and emotionally - the mundane physical challenges (how to use an x-acto knife proficiently, how to mix the right gray) tempering the emotional intensity. My fundamental idea was to illustrate the way that humans use art to create meaning from seemingly meaningless events. Information is analyzed and distilled and then expressed. The resulting image contributes to the ongoing cultural dialogue related to the event.

The students and I will create a book which will include each students' solutions, and selected written and visual explorations. The book will be a record both of the event itself and of ways to visually process and express ideas.

The class works follow, each preceded by a design statement.

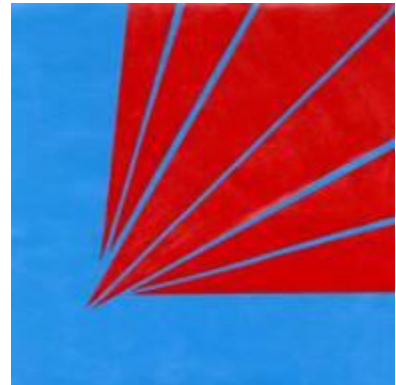
Christy Boulter

There is loneliness in distance



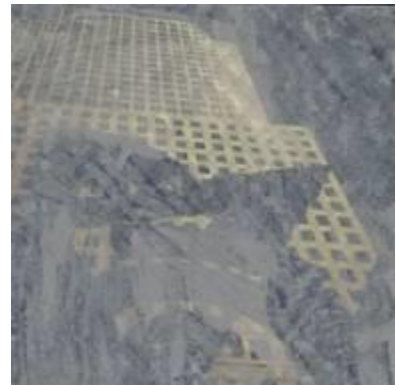
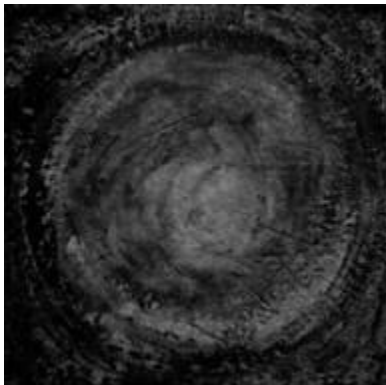
Emily Brinkley

Fear because of vulnerability



Layla Cantlebury

Sorrow



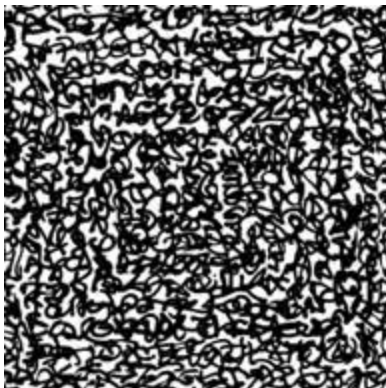
Jill Carson

A solid object is irrevocably broken



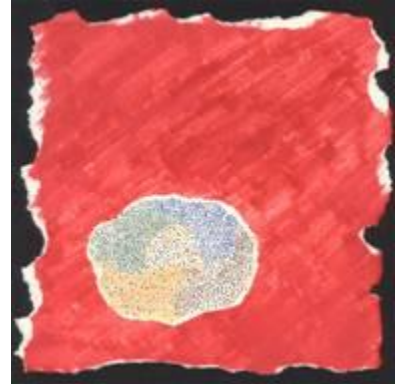
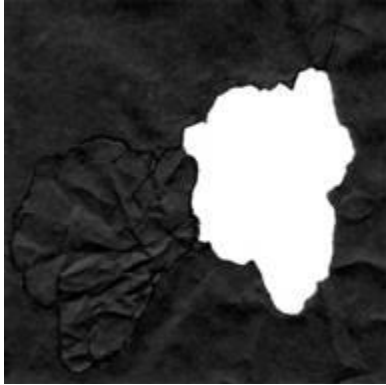
Courtney Davis

Something too chaotic to look at or focus on



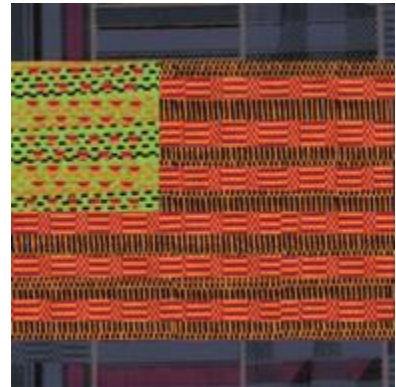
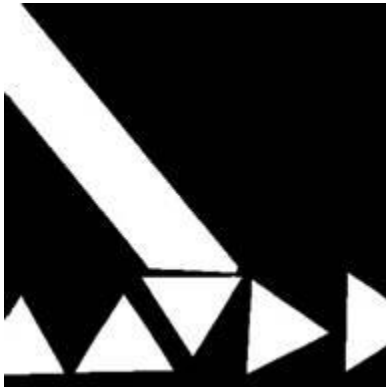
Sarah Fragale

Something strong that has been torn



Jan Frazier

There was order. There was a disturbance. There is a new order.



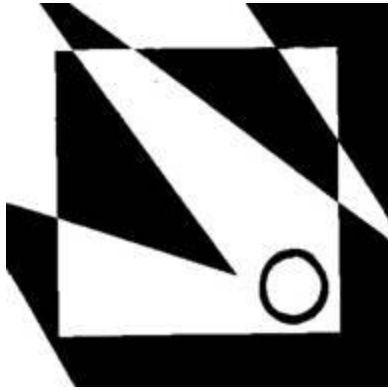
Mindy Killen

Perfection marred.



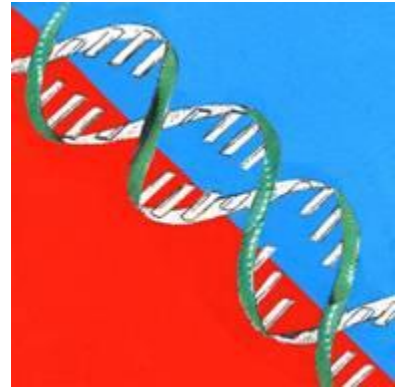
Nicole Ledbetter

The smaller our world, the more vulnerable we are in it.



Prya Mehta

The fall of one's morals



Sarah Murphy

Similar images that are different, changed



Mary Osterbind

Detachment from the whole, but remaining complete



Kristin Pittman

Point of view depends on being open or closed



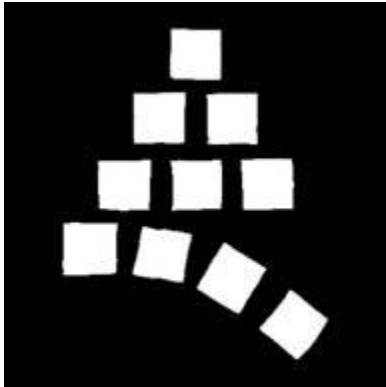
Meg Powell

Good turning in on itself but making it through to a higher purity



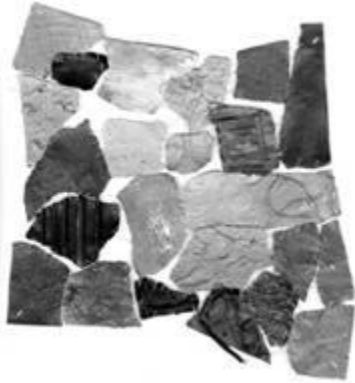
Reina Takebe

Sadness



Elysia Wheat

Unity through struggle



Contact Information

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