

Deconstructing Destruction

A Lesson Plan for the Classroom

Chester Arnold, "Tailings"; American; oil on linen; 60"x 72"

About the Artwork

Chester Arnold presents the viewer with a landscape ridden with social and environmental commentary. Here is a shocking scene of nature transformed into a dull abyss of labor and destruction. The artist presents a view of an excavated pit that extends beyond the horizon where work trucks can be seen trailing down the *curvilinear* terraces of the pit. Our attention is drawn to the bottom of the canyon by pools of toxic water and devastating flame. The black and gray *values* emphasize the dismal and unsettling quality of this scene. As smoke rises from the sides of the canyon, contemplate not only the visual perspective of the canvas, but also the issues it attempts to bring to light.

About the Artist

Often described by art critics as a traditional painter, Chester Arnold creates technically and intricately narrative paintings. In response to contemporary issues, Arnold depicts landscapes which symbolize the struggles of humanity brought on by itself and compounded by the natural world.

Chester Arnold was born in Santa Monica, California in 1952. He received his M.F.A. from San Francisco Art Institute in 1987. He currently resides in Sonoma County and teaches at San Francisco State University and the College of Marin. As a teenager living with his family in Germany, Arnold initially decided on a career as a curator of vintage military artifacts. However, he changed his mind after attending an exhibition of works by the German artist Max Beckmann (1884-1950) at the Munich Museum. The mood of Chester Arnold's compositions is said to have been influenced by Beckmann's powerful depictions of Nazi Germany.

At first sight, Arnold's paintings are composed of beautiful *landscape* elements, where nothing seems out of the ordinary. However, upon careful scrutiny, the viewer will notice the state of barrenness and destruction of the land. Combining fantasy and reality, Arnold paints a story where human intervention is just as cruel and unforgiving as the natural world. Always painted from an aerial view, Arnold's landscapes provide the viewer with an honest, revealing insight into a different reality.

Discussion Questions

What is the first thing that catches your attention? Why? What did the artist do to make it stand out?

How would you describe the lines in this painting?

What words would you use to describe the colors used in this painting? What would be the effect if it were painted in pink and yellow?

Describe the subject matter in this painting.

How did the artist create the impression of looking down into a deep pit?

Vocabulary

Curvilinear: consisting of or bounded by curved lines

Landscape: artwork in which natural scenery is the principal subject – often depicted in a panorama or broad vista – although figures, animals, buildings, and other objects may be incorporated into the composition

Value: the degree of lightness or darkness of a color against a scale which ranges from pure white, through grey to pure black

Lesson Objectives

Grades 1-4

- Recognize that paintings can tell a story.
- Learn that landscapes can be depicted from different observation points (i.e. far away or close-up, a hill, mountain top, or ground level views.)

Grades 5-7

- Understand that human beings have a direct impact on the environment.
- Investigate the relationship between contemporary environmental events and the making of artworks about these events.

Grades 8-12

- Discuss how the style of the painting is appropriate for the subject of the painting.
- Discuss the use of art for political commentary.
- Identify some of the main problems that affect the earth's environment.

Activities

Art

Have the students create artworks that tell a story about an environmental problem. Have the class brainstorm on various settings or locations for the story. Have them work on a single-panel narrative.

Art activity satisfies Visual and Performing Arts Standards for the State of California in areas such as Artistic Perception and Creative Expression.

Language Arts

Discuss the title of the artwork. Have the students write a story about "Tailings" by examining the visual clues. Students can elaborate on where the event is taking place, describe the landscape and investigate the possible use for the pit. Have the class devise a conflict which interweaves the subject matter together, and provide a climax and bring closure to the story.

Language Arts activity satisfies English Language Art Standards for the State of California, grades 1-12, in areas such as Reading Comprehension, Writing Strategies, and Writing Applications.

Science

Compare and contrast the cause and effect of natural and human caused disasters. Identify possible methods of prevention.

Science activity satisfies Science Content Standards for the State of California in areas such as Investigation and Experimentation.

Social Studies

An art critic has pointed out that Chester Arnold's work confronts us with the concept that "humanity seems menaced by itself". Discuss the meaning of this concept with your students. Have the students investigate periods of history and/or current events where this is evident, and discuss the possible causes.

Social Studies activity satisfies History-Social Science standards in areas such as Chronological and Spatial Thinking as well as Research, Evidence, and Point of View.