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Building a Just and Sustainable World

EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LEARNING

Images, photos, and pictures stimulate the mind. For the viewer, they offer a chance to connect and question. They also offer potential for play and imagination, and pulling the observer into purposeful messages.

Most often, newspaper and magazine readers quickly glance at photos and their captions. With this YES! lesson plan, you and your students can luxuriate—and pause—to truly understand an image, its message, and why it's interesting (or not).



EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LEARNING

Step One: What do you notice? (before the facts)

Ask your students to make sense of the image by trusting their instincts of observation and inference. In doing so, the image offers possibilities and interpretations beyond a typical reading where the reader glances at the picture to reinforce their interpretation of the picture's title or caption. Do not introduce any facts, captions, or other written words outside of the image. You may hear: *rust-colored crocheted fabric, someone's hands, hanging hair, light brown bulb thing, string.*

Step Two: What are you wondering? (thinking about the facts)

After you've heard what your students are noticing, you'll probably hear the peppering of questions: *What is that bulb thing? Why is fabric wrapped around it? When it's all done, what will this thing become? Is this someone's special or traditional process?* This is a good time to reveal the picture's caption, accompanying quote, and facts about the actual situation. Watch how the conversation shifts from what they believe to be true to discerning the facts about the photo.

Image caption:

Untitled, Mike Keefe, 2011. Digital Photo. Kelp wrapped in a shirt is slowly unwound after being pulled from the dye vat.

Image facts:

Untitled is part of a series of photos compiled by Rebecca Burgess, depicting the making of a "fibershed." Rebecca tried "the fibershed challenge"—to live for one year, in clothes made from fibers (and natural dyes) that are solely sourced within a geographical region no larger than 150 miles from her front door.

Author, educator, and textile artist Rebecca Burgess was inspired to take on this project because according to her website, "The textile industry is the number one polluter of fresh water resources on the planet." The World Bank has identified 72 toxic chemicals that have seeped into our water source solely from textile dyeing. Also, the average CO₂ emitted for the production of one T-shirt is up to 40 times the weight of that shirt. Rebecca's goal is to show that "beauty and fashion can function hand-in-hand with sustainability, local economies, and regional agriculture."

Designers, farmers, ranchers, natural dyers, and ethnobotanists gathered on Drake's Beach in California to dye clothing with local and benign materials. In this particular photo, kelp is used to dip seawater-soaked fabric into a vat of dye. The reddish, orange, and pink tones were created with leaves, branches and toyon, a coastal sage shrub native to California.

More resources around the image

EXPLORE: [Eco Outfitters: The Making of a Fibershed](#)
VISIT: [Fibershed: Local Fibers, Local Dyes, Local Labor](#)
READ: [Fibershed Moments](#)

Step Three: What next? (jumping off the facts)

Learning more about an image leads to bigger questions and an opportunity to discuss broader issues and perspectives.

1. Before dyeing the fabric, Rebecca and her friends constructed most of the clothes themselves. How do you think your clothes were made? Has anyone ever made you clothes?
2. In the United States, less than 5 percent of clothing bought here is made here. Why do you think that is? Do you think it's important to know where your clothes are made? Why do you think it's important?
3. A single mill can use about 200 tons of water for each ton of fabric it dyes. Millions of tons of unused fabric are burned or sent to landfills each year when dyed the wrong color. What do you do with the clothes you don't wear anymore?
4. Recently, kelp pills have been selling out on the West Coast since the nuclear disaster in Japan. Seaweed contains high levels of natural iodine which, when the thyroid absorbs it, prevents the thyroid from uptaking harmful levels of radioactive iodine. Where does kelp grow? Is it thriving or in need of protection?