



Debra Clem: Surface & Illusion

October 30, 2021 - January 15, 2022

Exhibition Resources for Middle and High School Teachers

About the Artist and Exhibition

Debra Clem has exhibited in more than 60 group, individual, and solo shows regionally and nationally since 1995. She has been the recipient of the Al Smith Fellowship from the Kentucky Arts Council, as well as five individual grants from the Kentucky Foundation for Women. Clem has also received many internal fellowships and grants from IU Southeast, where she is a full professor and heads the painting area in the fine arts program. She received the Museum Guild Purchase Award at the 55th Mid-states juried exhibition at the Evansville Museum in 2010 and has received residency fellowships to the Vermont Studio Center and the Virginia Center for Creative Arts.

Clem was awarded the Distinguished Research and Creativity Award for senior faculty at IU Southeast in 2006. She was a graduate assistant at Pennsylvania State University where she received her MFA degree in painting. She lives in Louisville, Kentucky and is the author of *The Painting Guide*.

Surface and Illusion is a solo exhibition by the Indiana-native painter, featuring eighteen paintings and pastels of her perceived environment, created over the better part of a decade. The exhibition underscores that a painting can be two objects at once. It is a physical thing covered in paint and hanging on a wall, and it is a representation--an illusion of something else, like a still life, landscape, or portrait. This doubleness is part of the painting's lasting allure.

The artist's choice of models, many of them her colleagues at IU Southeast, underscores her passion for her craft. They are people who have chosen to devote their lives to analyzing the visual world; the act of looking is central to their vocation.

The exhibition traces the artist's footsteps through her own personal act of looking, as she approaches an array of visually complex subjects to tackle: towering junkyard cars, deer in motion, digitally morphing textures, feathery palms, and cascades of folding patterns. The surfaces of these paintings range from whisper-smooth to thickly-textured. The smooth circular portraits resemble portals into the private world of the sitters. The monumental *K120* (90" x 84"), depicting a stack of compacted cars at River City Metal scrap yard, is made with a textured impasto technique.

Like arguably all of the works in the exhibition, *K120* is representational, allowing viewers to look beyond the painting's physical surface and focus on the depiction of the subject. Step close to *K120* to see the artist's brushstrokes, then stand back to feel the presence of the towering cars. Across the galleries, the paintings *GRE* and *Boxsprings* (both 48" x 48") also depict items at the scrap yard, but here, the artist's choice to zoom in at close range makes the images appear abstract. Paintings like *GRE* demand that we look at the juicy surface of the paintings, even more so than the junkyard tangles that they depict. These different ways of looking at painting are key to the genre's lasting, multi-layered intrigue.



Questions for Viewing and Discussion

The following questions can be used to guide viewing and discussion of any of the paintings or drawings in the exhibition.

- What is the first thing that you notice about the painting? Why do you think the artist chose to include this in the painting?
- What feelings does this painting or drawing bring out for you?
- What is your favorite work in the exhibition and why?
- What questions would you like to be able to ask the artist to know more about a specific painting or the exhibition as a whole?
- What can we learn about the people in the paintings from observing the styles and techniques used by the artist?



K120, oil on canvas panel, 84" x 90", 2016

Activities

Identity Acrostic (English/Language Arts)

Debra Clem's artwork has a strong theme of identity. Have students examine their own identities by creating an acrostic poem. Have students write their names in large letters down the left side of the page vertically or horizontally across the top of the page. They will then come up with words and/or phrases starting with each letter that describe who they are and how they view themselves. They can also decorate their paper to enhance the qualities they included in their poems.

Portrait-Inspired Poetry (English/Language Arts)

Begin by having students view the portraits and other paintings and drawings in the exhibition. Students will then choose one of the works from the exhibition to use as inspiration to create a poem. Students will compile a list of words and phrases that not only describes the chosen portrait but also describes how the portrait makes them feel. Students will then use this list of descriptors to create a sentimental or narrative poem about their chosen portrait.

Digital Collage Self Portrait (Art-Making)

Students will create their own self portrait collage using digital software. See the link below for a video guide made by a technology teacher on creating a digital collage using [Google Drawings](#) but other software could be used as well. Allow students to get creative in the ways in which they represent themselves through the images and effects that they choose. This activity could also be done as a physical collage as well. Scissors, glue sticks, and old magazines will be needed for a physical collage if you choose to go that route.

Triptych (Art-Making)

Give students 3 pieces of cardstock or illustration board about 3" x 5" in size. While viewing the exhibition at the museum students will choose one of the paintings to reproduce on one of their cards. This can be done using pencil and have color added later. On one of the other cards students will draw the scene they imagine happened directly before the painting was done and on the remaining card they will draw the scene directly after the painting was completed to create a timeline around the painting. Time permitting this can be done at the museum or finished back in the classroom. Once finished, have students hang their sequential triptychs in a class mini-museum and allow time for a gallery walk so students may observe their classmates' work.



Additional Resources and Related Artists

Debra Clem

<https://www.debraclem.com/>

Website of the artist that houses her works, including those in this show, broken down into categories based on years they were completed. Surface & Illusion is made up of artwork completed from 2013-2021. (Note to teachers: some of her artwork does include nudity)

Surface & Illusion Webpage

<http://carnegiecenter.org/exhibitions/debra-clem-surface-and-illusion/>

Information from the Carnegie Center about Debra Clem: Surface & Illusion as well as other events at the museum

The Painting Guide

<https://dclem.pages.iu.edu/ptggguide/ptggd.htm>

Educational resource from the artist with information on various topics related to painting

LoC, Primary Source Analysis

<https://www.loc.gov/teachers>

Guides for teachers and students for analyzing primary sources created by the Library of Congress which could be used to spark additional discussion about the artwork

Jordan Casteel

<https://art21.org/artist/jordan-casteel/>

Kehinde Wiley

<https://kehindewiley.com/>

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Thursday 10:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m.



Cover Image: *Self Portrait*, oil on dibond, 40" x 68", 2017

