

LOOKING TO WRITE GRADES 8-12

Mapping Your Neighborhood: A Photography + Poetry Project



Image: Alejandro Cartagena, *Fragmented Cities, Escobedo*, 2008. Inkjet print, ed. 3/10. SBMA, Museum purchase with funds provided by Stephanie and Fred Shuman, 2014.34. © Alejandro Cartagena.

INTRODUCTION

Alejandro Cartagena was born in the Dominican Republic, but has lived most of his life in Mexico where he uses photographs to tell the stories of the people and places he observes. This powerful photograph belongs to a series in which the artist documented the construction of housing around Monterrey, Mexico. Cartagena creates a wide sweep of vision and a dramatic contrast between the grand wildness of nature and the rigid geometric order of a building site. Cartagena's precisely registered composition raises questions about land use and housing supply, providing a record of a place-in-progress that, by now, has no doubt been completely transformed. The following lesson was created by the artist as part of an installation at SBMA in 2014.

ACTIVITY: TELL ME A STORY

*“Walking is mapping with your feet. It helps you piece a city together, connecting up neighborhoods that might otherwise have remained discrete entities, different planets bound to each other, sustained yet remote. I like seeing how in fact they blend into one another, I like noticing the boundaries between them. Walking helps me feel at home.” —Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London**

A story helps us understand our surroundings and feel closer to the people we live with. Usually when we tell someone a story we use words, but this time we are going to use pictures. For this project, go for a walk around your neighborhood. As you walk, take photographs of the things you see using Cartagena’s advice as guidance:

When I try to tell a story through images I am always trying to share things that interest me. I think about the way it will look and how it might make people feel: do I want to give a sense of awe or a feeling of the every day? Will the story be a personal tale or something connected to history? Or, is it a story about a problem I see in the community, something I’d like to change? Will the story be contained in one image or revealed by pairing images—creating new meanings and relationships between them?

Keep a journal. When you are walking around your neighborhood, write down all the things you notice. Try looking at your neighborhood as if for the first time. You may use one or more of the following prompts as inspiration for your observations:

- Find something small that you never looked at closely before. Describe it.
- Find something growing. How is it growing?
- Find something broken. How is it broken?
- Observe people doing things. Describe what they are doing using lots of details.
- Imagine something in your neighborhood didn’t exist. What would be there instead?
- Listen quietly for 60 seconds. List all the things you hear.
- List everything you smell, see, and feel.
- Make a list of things you see that you don’t like in your neighborhood. Now, imagine that you have the power to change those things with a wish. List your wishes.
- You may want to use this model in your journaling:

I am standing...	I am hearing...
I am looking...	I am feeling...

Finally, have some fun reimagining your neighborhood or describing it in ways you’ve never done before. If your neighborhood was a spice, which one would it be? If it was music, what genre? If it was ice cream, what flavor? If someone made a movie or wrote a book about it, what would the title be?

Once you have taken your photographs and finished journaling, choose **one photograph** to use as inspiration in the next step of the project.

ACTIVITY: MAKING POETRY

To complement the photograph you have taken of your neighborhood, write a poem that tells us something about it and about you. This worksheet is meant to help you come up with ideas and “word pictures” to include in your poem.

First, put yourself in the picture. Looking at the photograph you chose, describe it. Where are you in the picture? If you are not in the picture where would you like to be if you were in it? What happened just before the picture was taken? Just after? What is happening just outside of the picture frame?

Using the ideas and details you have written in your journal make a list poem about your neighborhood. Include places, things, people, memories, and feelings.

STUDENT POETRY EXAMPLES

Ortega Park

Old men with tattoos were talking and gambling
Some were skinny
Others pudgy with dark skin, wrinkles, wearing sombreros
Speaking Spanish and cussing at each other
Behind them was the Virgin of Guadalupe
On the right side was a poem which said the meaning of the Virgin
Faith
Love
Hope
Standing here in the park I see my culture
I see the mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the old men
At both times I feel scared and hopeful

Liz M.

The Mustang

When I was walking
From Fatburger back to school
I saw a Mustang
I was on Ortega Street and I took the picture
I was standing on the curb
And I was looking at the car
And the glare of the car caught my eye
Like a flashlight at night

Michael R.