Lesson Title: Creating an Emotional Palette
Grades: 6-12
Subjects: Visual Art, Empathy/Social Justice

Lesson Summary: Artists often harness their emotions to create powerful works of art. Students explore how looking at art can cultivate a mindful awareness of your emotions. Then, drawing inspiration from the Abstract Expressionists, they build an “emotional palette” to create a visual map in response to a contemporary social justice or personal issue of their choice.

Standards Addressed:
National Core Arts Standards:
VA:Cr1.2.1a
Shape an artistic investigation of an aspect of present day life using a contemporary practice of art or design.

VA:Pr6.1.1la
Make, explain, and justify connections between artists or artwork and social, cultural, and political history

VA:Re8.1.7a
Interpret art by analyzing artmaking approaches, the characteristics of form and structure, relevant contextual information, subject matter, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed.

VA:Re.7.1.1la
Recognize and describe personal aesthetic and empathetic responses to the natural world and constructed environments.

Learning Objectives:
Students will be able to:
- Learn the basic techniques of mindfulness meditation and apply them in looking at and creating art
- Explore the expressive qualities of mark making
- Create a visual vocabulary to express their emotions
- In an extension, build empathy skills by exploring the emotions of others.

Artworks in Focus:
Click on the links below to access these images through the Wadsworth’s Public Portal. Once on the portal, click on the image to view the object information. Click on the image again to download a jpeg version of the work. NOTE: Works of art used in this lesson may not currently be on view.

Mark Rothko, Untitled, 1949
Jackson Pollock, Number 9, 1949
Theodoros Stamos, Untitled, 1958
Willem de Kooning, Montauk 1, 1969
Clyfford Still, Number 5, 1951
Helen Frankenthaler, Sea Picture with Black, 1959
Materials:
- Access to the images for the *Emotional Palette Lesson Plan*
- Projector and screen, SMART board, or equivalent
- Guided Meditation Script (attached) or computer to access https://app.stopbreathethink.org/
- Sketch paper
- Pencils
- Copies of the *Emotion Mapping Worksheet* (included in this lesson)
- List of emotion words (included in this lesson)
- Chart paper
- Art materials of your choice, such as crayons, colored pencils, markers, pastels or paints

Lesson Procedures:

**Part One: Introduction to Abstract Expressionism**

1. Project one of the abstract paintings from the *Artworks in Focus*

2. Allow students time to quietly observe the work for a couple of seconds then do a whip around, where you ask each student for one or two words that immediately come to mind when looking at this work.

3. Then tell students you are going to practice slowing down and noticing today.

4. Lead your students through a short meditation, using the script (attached) or one of the mindfulness exercises found at https://app.stopbreathethink.org/

5. Now tell students they are going to mindfully scan this painting, just like they mindfully scanned their bodies.

6. Distribute sketch paper and pencils. Tell students they are going to pick one line and follow it through the whole painting. Just like they noticed each part of their bodies, encourage them to notice each curve and crook of their chosen line.

7. Mindful drawing share out: what new things did they notice by slowing down? Tell students the name of this style of art is Abstract Expressionism. Ask what that name calls to mind. Then give students a short background on the movement. See *Background Information* section.

8. Emphasize that the artists were using abstraction as a way to express complex emotions largely in reaction to World War II and believed it spoke visually to a collective human experience. Read them this quote from Barnett Newman:

   "We felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world destroyed by a great depression and a fierce World War, and it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of paintings that we were doing—flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing the cello."

9. Tell students that some "Abstract Expressionists" even rejected that their art was "abstract" because it expressed something primal about the human experience. Read this quote from artist Mark Rothko and ask for student responses:
“I’m not an abstractionist. I’m not interested in the relationship of color or form or anything else. I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on.”

10. After this discussion, return to the painting and now try to “read” the work emotionally. What emotions are evoked in that detail you focused on? What about in the work overall? What formal qualities [line, shape, color, texture, pattern, medium, etc.] does the artist use to evoke those emotions? Jot down student responses on chart paper.

11. Repeat this process with a couple of abstract works.

12. After you have a good list of emotions, tell students to think of the formal qualities they discussed as the artists’ “emotional palettes”. This was how Abstract Expressionists used art to convey complex human emotions.

13. Tell students they are going to create their own “emotional palettes” to express their feelings about a personal or social justice issue.

Part Two: Art-Making Activity

1. Distribute copies of the Emotional Palette Worksheet A and list of emotion words. Ask students to choose either a personal or societal issue that is important to them, and first scan their emotions. How does this issue make them feel?

2. Students will fill out the worksheet in response to this issue, using the list of emotion words to help guide them.

3. Then think about how they can express this emotion using the elements of art. Emphasize that they are not trying to “copy” abstract expressionists, and can feel free to use symbols or representational imagery in their work if they wish.

4. This worksheet will be their “palette” for their finished work.

5. Using the “emotional palette” they created with the worksheet, ask students to create an abstract work of art that maps the emotional responses to their chosen issue, considering the following. Challenge students to be thoughtful and creative in how they address these ideas in a visual way.
   - Which emotion is most central?
   - Where do emotions overlap?
   - Where do they conflict?
   - Which emotions to they feel more intensely? How will they represent that?

6. Have the students reflect on their experiences throughout these two lessons. Did completing these exercises affect their emotions? Did anything surprise them?

Extension: Students fill out Emotional Palette Worksheet B from the point of view of someone who would be affected differently by their chosen issue.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

For an overview of Abstract Expressionism, see the following article from Kahn Academy: https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/abstract-exp-nyschool/abstract-expressionism/a/abstract-expressionism-an-introduction

*Mark Rothko, Untitled, 1949*
As an Abstract Expressionist, Rothko evoked emotion through his use of brushstroke and color. The weave of the canvas is visible through the thin wash of red paint, giving the painting an ethereal quality. The sky blue and spring green passages could suggest the peace, hope, and quiet joy of a warm spring day after a cold, gray winter.

*Jackson Pollock, Number 9, 1949*
Pollock dripped, threw, flicked, and splashed various colors of paint onto this canvas to create a dense composition of textural color. The thick skeins of paint, looping around the canvas, are a palpable trail of Pollock’s process, conveying a sense of urgency and psychological drama as the viewer’s eye follows the path of the artist’s hand.

*Theodoros Stamos, Untitled, 1958*
Heavy brushstrokes enliven this abstract canvas dominated by white. Stamos believed that white suggested the infinite. By pairing white with rich orange-red passages, he created a balance between ethereality and the sensual density of color.

*Willem de Kooning, Montauk 1, 1969*
De Kooning’s broad brushstrokes of thickly applied paint, speckled with drips, evoke the physical action that took place in front of the canvas. The artist frequently portrayed women, and the vigorous smear of pink in the center of this painting suggests such a figure. The fleshy tones become another element in the network of swells and ridges that convey the fluid movement of the sand, sea, and hot sun at Montauk on the eastern tip of Long Island, NY. Many Abstract Expressionist painters, including de Kooning, had studios there.

*Clyfford Still, Number 5, 1951*
Still used abstract form and expressive brushwork to communicate universal themes about the inner psyche and human condition. Small splatters of red, black, and white appear to dance gracefully across the vibrant yellow canvas, balanced by the pale pink at the bottom right. Still leaves evidence of his palette knife and a thickly laden brush, adding texture and drama to the abstract composition.

*Helen Frankenthaler, Sea Picture with Black, 1959*
By spilling highly thinned oil pigments onto raw cotton duck canvas, Frankenthaler stained the fabric with color, introducing the transparent planes and layers of paint associated only with watercolor. In Sea Picture with Black, Frankenthaler evokes a sense of the ocean and surf through her choice of colors and lively composition.
Guided Meditation Script (3 minutes)

- Close your eyes. Notice your breathing. Is it fast? Is it slow?
- Put your hand on your stomach. Notice how your stomach goes out when you breathe in, and in when you breathe out.
- Take a long, deep breath in through your nose, and breathe out through your mouth, fully and completely. Breathe like this a couple more times.
- Now imagine your body. Notice parts that are hurt, or are tight or tense. Notice parts that feel comfortable and loose.
- Use your breath. When you find a part of your body that is tight or hurts, send your breath there. Breathe out. Your breath can make that part of your body relaxed, loose; soft.
- Feel your head......your face......your shoulders......your back......your arms......your hands......your fingers.
- Notice your stomach.....your legs.....your knees......your feet...your toes.
- Notice the sounds in the room. The people moving, the building.
- If any thoughts or feelings come up don’t resist them, just notice them and let them pass.
- Feel the chair under you where your body touches it. Feel your muscles relax as you breathe. Keep watching your breathing in and out, easy and peaceful.
- When you are ready, take a long, slow, deep breath in. Then breathe out completely and gently open your eyes.
EMOTIONAL PALETTE WORKSHEET A

Name: ____________________________

The personal or societal issue/event my palette is about: ____________________________

Think about a personal or social issue or event that is affecting you right now – how do you feel? Identify three emotions about this issue and write them on the lines below. You can use the emotion word list to help you. Then think about how to express each of those emotions using color, shape, line, form, and pattern. Sketch those in the boxes below each emotion.

Emotion: ____________________________

Emotion: ____________________________

Emotion: ____________________________

Emotion: ____________________________
EMOTIONAL PALETTE WORKSHEET B

Who is most closely affected by this issue? How do you think they may feel? Identify and draw up to three more emotions below.

Emotion: ________________________

Emotion: ________________________

Emotion: ________________________

Emotion: ________________________

Emotion: ________________________
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Unhappy</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Despaired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confused</td>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embarrassed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilty</td>
<td>Unhappy</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insane</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peaceful</td>
<td>Contented</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleading</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>Unhappy</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Unhappy</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shocked</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhappy</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upset</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Distressed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Intensity of Feeling Chart*