

Louisiana Mudbugs

Ellen T. Vercellotti

The Louisiana state crustacean, the crawfish, or mudbug, is very familiar to my students. Crawfish season occurs in the spring and their “chimneys” are seen on lawns and in ditches. The crawfish makes a chimney as it digs a hole and tunnels through dirt and water, depositing the mud for the chimney at the opening of the tunnel.

A university-based art camp with a Louisiana wildlife theme asked me to create a lesson using a lightweight air-dry modeling material and whatever else I could find in the building. A sculpture professor had rescued from the biology department 12” (30 cm) mesh sleeves for protecting cypress seedlings. I grabbed these, Styrofoam cups, packing peanuts, and tape.

Form vs. Function

We began the lesson by exploring form and function by discussing everyday objects designed for purpose and appearance. For example, are chairs just for sitting? Can they be art? Then we looked at images of real crawfish holes with chimneys and an artistic crawfish hole. Students next sketched a dream crawfish and chimney.

I gave each student on piece of mat board, color side

down, and asked students to write their names on it. Later they flipped it over and discovered it has a color on the reverse side. I had evenly distributed blue, red, yellow, green, and tan mats for contrast and variety in the sculpture displays.

I provided 4” (10 cm) pieces of packing tape, stuck on the edges of table containers, or clear contact paper, cut into four strips and stored in zipper bags. Separating the contact paper can be frustrating while attaching the cup to the mat board.

Constructing the Chimneys

Students each placed and taped an upside-down Styrofoam cup to the board to make a stable base. They represented the hole of the chimney at the top with a dark color of modeling material.

Next, they each stretched a recycled mesh sleeve over the cup. Packing peanuts were then wedged between the pliable mesh and the cup, creating an irregular surface.

The mesh should be cut to cup height plus a couple of inches extra to fold over (like a turtleneck) on the top. (Use only Styrofoam packing material and not the starch type, which dissolves when wet.)

The crawfish makes a chimney as it digs a hole and tunnels through dirt and water, depositing the mud for the chimney at the opening of the tunnel.

Looking at images of real crawfish, students made the three main structural parts: claws, tails, and antennae. Plastic-covered craft wire made

flexible antennae and legs; the claws were connected with wire and positioned as desired.

Mixing Colors

On day two, I distributed fist-sized pieces of white and primary color modeling material. Color wheels were consulted to guide color mixing with the modeling material. Students could mix smaller pieces of colors into the large pieces of white material to extend it.

Small quantities of black and white can be mixed to make eyes for the crawfish. Black and brown can be made by combining the white modeling material and paint, though this process is messy and should be done in advance wearing rubber gloves.

On day three, students used wire cut into four short pieces for eight legs and two long pieces to make pinchers and antennae. I prepared the wire ahead of time, twisting each set of wire and placing them in table containers, one set per student.

Extension

I taught this project most recently in Jefferson Parish, in southeast Louisiana. The best part was being a host at the student art show in the mall. The table with the crawfish and their homes drew the attention of both children and adults. Kids were really enthralled and wanted to touch and play with the crawfish. (The crawfish shifted to different parts of the table when I wasn’t looking.) Adults stopped, read the “Crawfish Holes” sign and then with a smile, came closer. This art combined the natural with the humanmade for a delightful result. ☺

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www.crawfish.org

