

Improbably Probable: Finding Meaning in Fantasy



Philip C. Curtis, *Confrontation*, 1967. Oil on wood, 21½ x 35¼" (55 x 89 cm). Collection of the Northern Arizona University Art Museum, reproduced by permission.

Pam Stephens

SchoolArts editor Nancy Walkup and I have worked together since graduate school days. We have collaborated on so many projects that we can practically complete each other's sentences. When quite by coincidence the theme for the March issue of *SchoolArts* was named as "fantasy," it was only logical to for the Art Teacher Round Table to discuss a recent collaborative article that Nancy and I wrote for the *Journal of the National Art Education Association*. The instructional resource, titled "A Curious Reality: Exploring the Paintings of Philip C. Curtis," deals with Curtis's fantastical environments and provides activities for K-12 students.

The Artist

A favorite son of Arizona, Curtis became well known for his magical realism paintings. Today the Phoenix Art Museum, an institution that Curtis helped to establish, includes

a gallery dedicated to his paintings. These paintings offer a glimpse into a world that shows realistic objects and people in improbable stage-like settings. Paintings such as *Confrontation* seem to ask many questions, but provide few concrete answers. In this undefined realm there is ample opportunity for finding subtle meaning and showing artistic expression.

Our Collaboration


When Nancy and I began this project, she presented the material to elementary students who created "picture consequences" (an activity similar to Dada's *exquisite corpse*). At the post-secondary level, I tried out fifty-word stories (ideas garnered from Daniel Pink's, *A Whole New Mind*). Both activities required students to examine deceptively simple paintings that do not necessarily offer probable content or obvious intention.

For Nancy's students, a collaborative production activity provided

an experience of assembling four unknown parts together to create a unified—if not surprising—whole object. Similar to Curtis's concept of combining the probable with the improbable, this activity helped students to visualize complex ideas in a way that did not require them to duplicate the masterpiece. In other words, students were offered a learning opportunity with flexible parameters while still honoring the intent of Curtis's work.

My students, all future educators, met at the Philip C. Curtis Gallery in the Phoenix Art Museum. Before looking at the artworks, each student wrote an opening line. I collected the opening lines and instructed students to select paintings that most attracted them. After artworks were selected, I redistributed the opening lines so that each student had someone else's writing. Each student was instructed to write a fifty-word story that captured the essence of the selected painting while utilizing the opening line. The subsequent stories reflected thoughtful examination of the paintings, pointed out details that others might have overlooked, and made evident that students were gaining an understanding of magical realism.

Encouraging Fantastical Thinking

In Eisner's *Ten Lessons the Arts Teach*, it is proposed that "the arts teach students to think through and within a material." How do you encourage your students to think through and within material? How do you encourage fantastical thinking and art production? Please share your methods with *SchoolArts* on Facebook or at schoolartsroom.com. 

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