

VISUAL NARRATIVE LESSON 2

The Visuals in Visual Narratives



Untitled, Alexander Cook, 2018

Grade Levels: 9–12

Duration: One 45-minute to one-hour classroom period

MESSAGE TO EDUCATORS

What does it mean for student artists to think of themselves as storytellers?

Students arrive in class with diverse levels of formal arts training, passions and confidence. When they learn to analyze the work of other artists, they can begin to incorporate new techniques and ways of expression in their own works. And when they understand storytelling methods, their photographs become more thoughtful, layered and nuanced. Presenting their own work and constructively critiquing and exploring others' work is an opportunity to develop strong speaking and listening skills. When you enhance students' skills and align them to their passions and talents, you empower new storytelling abilities and new confidence.

This lesson plan includes photographs to spark discussion, a list of materials, and cues to help you foster a brave space and lead confidently, as students create and present their visual narratives. The Getty Museum is committed to supporting meaningful dialogue through art, and the lesson plan was created with educators to carefully walk you through the steps.

ABOUT THIS EXPLORATION

In this lesson, students will identify photography skills that lead to effective visuals. The first part of this lesson is an opportunity to understand and establish students' prior knowledge of photography. Some students may bring years of formal practice with photography, while others may be more self-taught. The Unshuttered Skills videos offer many tactical tips for developing photographers. The lesson begins with an introduction to the skills, which students will explore further in the Practice section.

In group discussions, the students will consider photography skills and how they can be used to construct or suggest a narrative. After discussing a photograph by an Unshuttered photographer, students will then look at a work from the Getty collection to analyze a story moment together. Next, students exercise their own storytelling abilities, using a sequence of photographs from the collection.

Following the discussion of each of the three works, the practice assignment can take place in class, or more fruitfully, out of class. The assignment brings back the idea of photography skills, and marries those skills to a storytelling or sequencing project. In the final reflection, students tell their own stories, respond to others' stories, and begin in earnest to see themselves as artists and storytellers.

Getty Visual Narrative Learning Objectives

- Analyze how photographic images convey messages and tell stories
- Manipulate a visual sequence
- Prep Time: 2–3 hours

Notes on Group Discussions Good classroom discussions can take different directions. It is important for students to make observations and construct their own knowledge in a way that connects to principles of photography or art history. It is equally important for students to go down new paths and support their ideas using their own powers of observation. We are committed to the idea that both directions, and many in between, are valid and worthwhile.

After each work of art, the lesson provides further context. We encourage you to use the context provided when and as needed to further classroom discussions. When possible, the context provided is in the artist's own words. Even so, art histories carry bias and are rarely the complete story, so please use them with that knowledge in mind. There are times when a classroom discussion doesn't need context because it is fueled by student responses, observations and interpretation of the works. These conversations, especially when ideas are well supported, are as much the goal as those that make use of more context.

ASSOCIATED STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1: Citing evidence to support analysis and inference

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.B: Working with peers to promote discussions

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C: Propelling conversations with questions, a full hearing of ideas, and the promotion of multiple perspectives

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4: Presenting ideas with clarity and support, using digital media

MATERIALS

- Projector/ Screen sharing abilities for remote classrooms
- Photo from the Unshuttered platform
- Unshuttered 2.0 Essential Photo Skills
- Photo from the Getty photography collection
- Handout: Visual Sequences
- Scissors
- A digital camera or smartphone

VOCABULARY

Background The choices made by a photographer about visual elements behind the subject. Background adds depth to a photograph and may show context.

Composition How the subject is arranged in the frame; and how different elements relate to each other.

Foreground The choices made by a photographer about elements in front of the subject. Foreground can further the illusion of depth, and it can also flatten the perspective. It can call attention to something of interest.

Framing The choices made by the photographer about what to include, and leave out, of the photograph.

Leading Lines One or more lines, edges, or other visual elements in a composition, which point the viewer's eye where the photographer wants them to go, usually toward a focal point or main subject.

Light The origin and qualities of a photograph's light source(s); e.g., outdoors or indoors; natural or artificial light; directional or diffused; colored or neutral; filtered or unfiltered.

Pattern Design elements, including lines, shapes or colors, which repeat. Patterns can add visual depth and zest to an image. Repetition creates a dialog between related visual motifs.

Perspective Where the photographer stood to take the photograph, e.g., eye level, high level (looking down), low level (looking up), or canted (at an angle).

Portrait style How the subject is shown, e.g., traditional (focused on the subject's personality and mood), environmental (incorporating more clues about the subject by showing their surroundings), candid (with the subject unaware), lifestyle (with the subject going about their day), or self-portraiture.

Scale How much the subject fills the frame, or is shown from a distance, e.g., close up, medium shot, long shot.

Sequence A sequence of photographs is intended to be viewed in a particular order. To build the story, the viewer begins with the first image and continues in the order selected by the artist.

Series In contrast to a sequence, a series denotes multiple images related by a theme or idea, which may be viewed in any order.

INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN

Introduction

Photographs can be compelling tools for storytelling, incorporating concepts and skills from the traditions of the visual arts.

The questions for inquiry at the center of this lesson include:

- How are principles of visual art and design applied in photography?
- How can photography tell a story?
- Does a photographer need a sequence of images to tell a story?
- Can a single image tell a story?
- Can the same images tell a different story? (Can a single image tell multiple different stories?)

Set the Stage



Untitled, Alexander Cook, 2018

Begin by projecting the image shown here, created by Alexander Cook, a photographer from the Unshuttered teen program. Initially, do not include the caption and ask the students to look at the photo quietly. The discussion can then begin by simply asking students what they notice about the photograph above.

Essential skills for photography include considerations of perspective, composition, scale, light, and type of portrait. Using the photograph, work with students to identify how these elements are at play in this photograph. For an explanation of any of the elements, refer to the Unshuttered Skills videos link.

Suggested questions for discussion

- What do you notice first about this image?
- How might you describe the subject of this photograph? (It shows a middle-aged or older woman wearing glasses, with a pattern on her face that obscures her features, and she wears a top with a high contrast floral pattern.)
- **Perspective** What is the photographer's literal point of view? How does their perspective work to make the image more or less dramatic? (The photographer appears to be to the side of the subject rather than directly in front of her. This angle and the high contrast of the lighting heighten the drama of the image.)
- **Scale** Is this a close-up or a long shot? Why do you think the photographer chose the scale used? (The photograph is a close-up. The crop of the image is close enough that the subject's hair is out of frame at the top.)
- **Composition and Framing** How is the subject framed? What elements are emphasized by the framing? How was the photograph composed to balance or unbalance the elements in the image? (The photo is a very closely-cropped bust-length portrait. The subject is closer to the left side of the frame than the right. The close crop and the asymmetry give the photo a sense of candidness or urgency, like the photographer moved quickly to get the shot.)
- **Foreground/Background** What is in the foreground and background of the photograph? How does the lack of depth and detail affect your attention? (There is high contrast in the photo, with the background of the image in darkness, except for a portion of the lit projection on the wall behind the subject. This contrast emphasizes the prominence of the subject in the foreground.)
- **Patterns** Are there any significant repeated patterns in the composition? What do they call your attention to, or distract from? (The patterns on the subject's collar frame her face and the patterns of the project obscure her face and features, and are partially in view on the wall behind the subject.)
- **Leading Lines** Do you notice any leading lines that lead your eye through the image?
- **Lighting** Does the photograph use natural or artificial light? What atmosphere is conveyed with the light used here?
- **Portrait Style** What do you think the photographer's relationship to the subject is? Was this portrait taken candidly or was it planned? Does the photographer have something to say about the subject's identity?

Now that the group has fully explored the visual elements of the photograph, ask:

- What story do you think the photographer is telling?
- What questions does the photograph pose for you?

EXPLORE FURTHER



Dalí Atomicus, 1948, Philippe Halsman, gelatin silver print.
The J. Paul Getty Museum. © Halsman Archive

Using Photography Skills to Tell the Story

With photography skills and elements in mind, we will now consider how these can be used to construct or suggest a narrative. In this photograph from the Getty collection, the Surrealist artist Salvador Dalí is shown mid-air in a dream-like image. Students may have some prior knowledge of the Surrealist movement. Refresh prior knowledge or build foundation for the discussion with a few quick questions, listed below. (A summary of the Surrealist movement is provided below in the Further Context section below.)

- What were the origins of Surrealism?
- What were the goals of the movement?
- Who are some of the well-known leaders of the movement?

Project the image shown here. Share the caption, to situate the photograph in time and place.

Begin by taking a few quiet minutes to simply look at the Getty collection photograph. Some framing questions, to connect with the learning objectives of the lesson, may provide direction for contemplation: What photographic techniques are at play here? Is this photograph in the Surrealist tradition? What story is the artist telling, and how?

Suggested questions for discussion

- What do you notice first about this image?
- How might you describe the subject of the photograph? (A man is the subject of the photograph. He has a wide-eyed expression, wears a suit and is shown midair as he jumps. He holds in his hands paintbrushes and a palette, and is near an easel—suggesting he is an artist. His upturned moustache was a distinctive feature of the artist Salvador Dalí, and the title confirms this is the artist.)
- What is the subject doing? Is this a portrait? (Dalí is jumping, while other items and creatures around him are also shown mid-air. Besides being the only person within the photograph, he is shown with many of the items of an artist—paint brushes, easels and a painting.)
- How would you describe the setting? What are the other objects in the photograph? What is in the background? The foreground? (The scene appears to take place in an empty corner of a room with all

object suspended midair. The artist, his easel, a painting and a stool all appear to be behind the cats, water and chair in the foreground.)

- What do you know about when and where the image was created? (Considering the bare walls, open space and floor, it would appear that the photo was taken in a photography studio, or empty space rather than Dalí's own studio.)
- What choices did the photographer make about framing the photograph? (The photographer creates the effect that the scene can barely be contained within the edges of the photograph—some objects are partially cropped by the framing and the water spout and cats seem to have entered view from the sides.)
- How do you think the photograph was made? (Halsman wanted a portrait of Dalí that showed a moment suspended in time. For the photo shoot, he used thin wires to suspend Dalí's easel, stool and the painting *Leda Atomica* in the air. Wires are visible in the top right of the photograph, holding up the painting and in the center of the composition, holding the framed canvas on the easel. An assistant held up the chair at left, while other assistants threw three cats and a bucket of water in the air as Dalí jumped).
- **Perspective** Where do you think the photographer stood to take the photograph? Why that angle? (The angle of the photo suggests that the photographer was on the ground, with their camera either on a tripod or at eye level.)
- **Composition** How do the different elements relate to each other? (The instant captured shows Dalí's face perfectly framed between the chair and the water, the cats are aligned with the water and are silhouetted against part of the bare wall behind them and the water obscures just a portion of the painting behind it, creating an intriguing view of the canvas.)
- **Leading lines** What edges or visual elements point the viewer's eye to the subject?
- **Focus** Are any parts of this picture out of focus? How does the sharp focus affect the mood? (There are areas that seem slightly blurred, most notably the cats, which emphasizes the sense of movement and spontaneity.)
- **Lighting** How is the photography lit? Is it filtered or sharp? Natural or artificial? How does the light contribute to the "surrealism" of the photograph? (The photograph is brightly, and most likely artificially lit from the left side of the frame and above, directing light on the bright empty canvas at the center and the painting on the right side. The lighting creates bold shadows on the floor which emphasize the fact that the photographer captured things, and the artist, in midair.)
- How do you feel when you look at this photograph? How do you think the photographer wanted you to feel looking at this photograph?
- What story do you think the photographer is telling?
- What questions does the photograph pose for you?

FURTHER CONTEXT

Surrealism began in Paris in the 1920s, as both an artistic and literary movement. Surrealist paintings and art often included dream-like scenes, distorted objects, symbolic images, and unusual juxtapositions. Following the brutality of WWI, artists eschewed logic in favor of fanciful imaginative explorations of the

subconscious. Its goal was to free thought, language and human experience from the oppression of rationalism. Influenced by Dada, Marxism, and Freud's idea of the unconscious, its focus on dreams and fantastic images spread throughout Europe and the Americas along with artists fleeing WWII. Leaders of the movement included Andre Bréton, Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, Joan Miró, Jean Cocteau, and Frida Kahlo.²

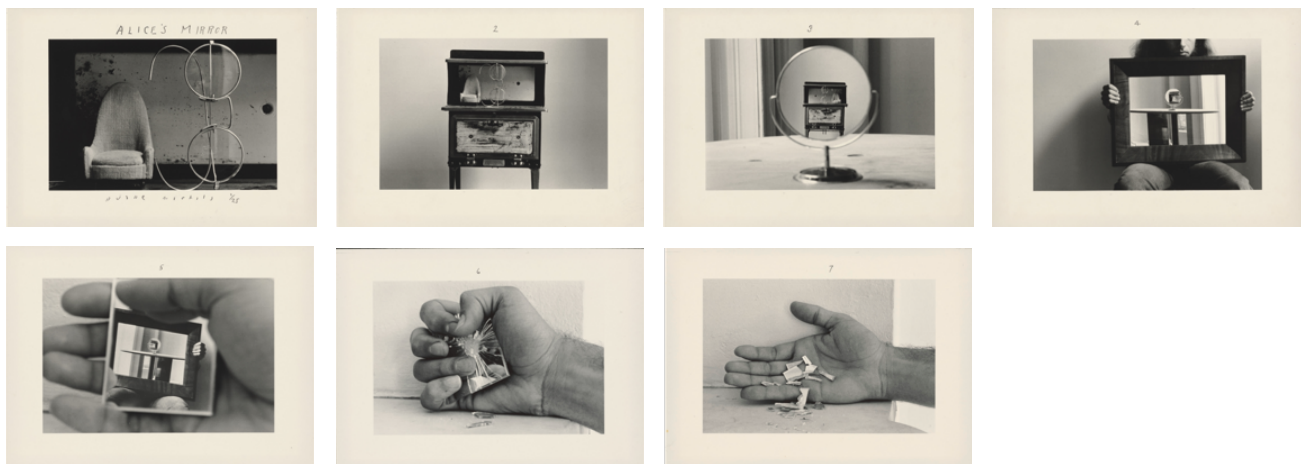
The artist Salvador Dalí is the subject of the photograph. He and Halsman had a decades-long creative relationship. Dalí is jumping, which was the idea of Halsman, who coined the term "jumpology." He asked many of his subjects to jump, explaining, "When you ask a person to jump, his attention is mostly directed toward the act of jumping and the mask falls so that the real person appears."³ Halsman wanted a portrait of Dalí that showed a moment suspended in time. For the photo shoot, he used a neutral background to turn the focus to the subject and the foreground objects, which are included to emphasize the idea of suspension. Thin wires suspend Dalí's easel, stool and the painting *Leda Atomica* in the air. An assistant held up the chair at left, while other assistants threw three cats and a bucket of water in the air as Dalí jumped. Twenty-six takes were required to perfect the position of the water and the cats, which draw the viewer's eye to the subject.⁴

EXERCISE: VISUAL SEQUENCES

In contrast to the single Halsman image previously discussed, this exercise looks at a sequence of photographs from artist Duane Michals.

Project the images shown. Share the caption, to situate the photograph in time and place.

Share the Visual Sequences handout, available below in "Resources." Have students choose to work individually or in a group. Each group should look closely at the images, and discuss the questions posed on the handout. Following the breakout discussions, have students come back together to share their conclusions and discuss the results of their inquiry.



[*Alice's Mirror*](#), 1974, Duane Michals, gelatin silver print. 2016.50.2.1-7. The J. Paul Getty Museum.
© Duane Michals, courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

FURTHER CONTEXT

Duane Michals is influenced, in part, by the Surrealist movement. His work rejects the idea that a single image should carry a full story. Instead he uses photographic sequences, with no obvious central image. *Alice's Mirror* pays homage to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, featuring seemingly huge eyeglasses and mirrors within mirrors.⁵

[View Duane Michal's photographs in the collection](#)

EXPLORE FURTHER

Practice: Using Photography Skills to Create a Visual Sequence

The first two discussions in this lesson focused on identifying photography skills while examining the use of those skills in single images to tell or suggest stories. The third discussion builds on the linked ideas of photography skills and storytelling, extended from a single image to a sequence of images. In their own projects, students demonstrate photography skills and connect them to visual sequences. If possible, assigning this practice as homework affords students time to work on the assignment and the opportunity to use context from their daily lives.

Ask students to choose three photography skills from the Unshuttered Skills videos, such as framing, composition, perspective, background, scale, proportion, or lighting. They should create photographs that demonstrate the chosen skills, and that also work in a sequence to tell a story.

Reflect

This reflection is set up as a group critique, followed by a reflection or statement from each artist. Ask students to share their visual sequences with their peers. They can each choose to speak about their intention with the photo(s) or not. Having the viewers provide positive feedback is key to the exercise. However, sharing can be a vulnerable moment for students. Use your best judgement about whether a group reflection is appropriate, and enlist the support of your students to create a brave space.

Students may be ready to discuss and have their own questions for the artist. If prompting is needed, some possible questions might be

- What is the first thing you notice about the photographs?
- What skills do you observe in the photographs?
- What do you feel looking at the photographs?
- What stories is the photographer telling?

Questions for individual reflection or artist's statement

- What did you discover about yourself and others, in the course of the project?
- What was challenging about taking the photo, and why?
- What detail are you most proud of, and why?
- Is there anything you would do differently?

ASSESSMENT

Observe the group discussion during Discuss and Exercise. Assess contributions to the discussion.

Did students pose thoughtful questions? Did they respond to questions with reasons and evidence? Did they listen to different points of view? Did they clarify and challenge ideas and conclusions when appropriate? Did they synthesize evidence and ideas?

Collect the Visual Sequences handouts to check for understanding and completeness, and to assess students' understanding of how artists use sequences to create visual narratives.

In the Reflection, assess student feedback for clarity and thoughtfulness.

Encourage students to share their work on the Unshuttered platform, and collect and display it as appropriate.

THANK YOU...

...for your commitment to inspiring young people to create art and tell their stories.

Please adapt and improve upon this lesson plan to meet the needs and age range of your group.

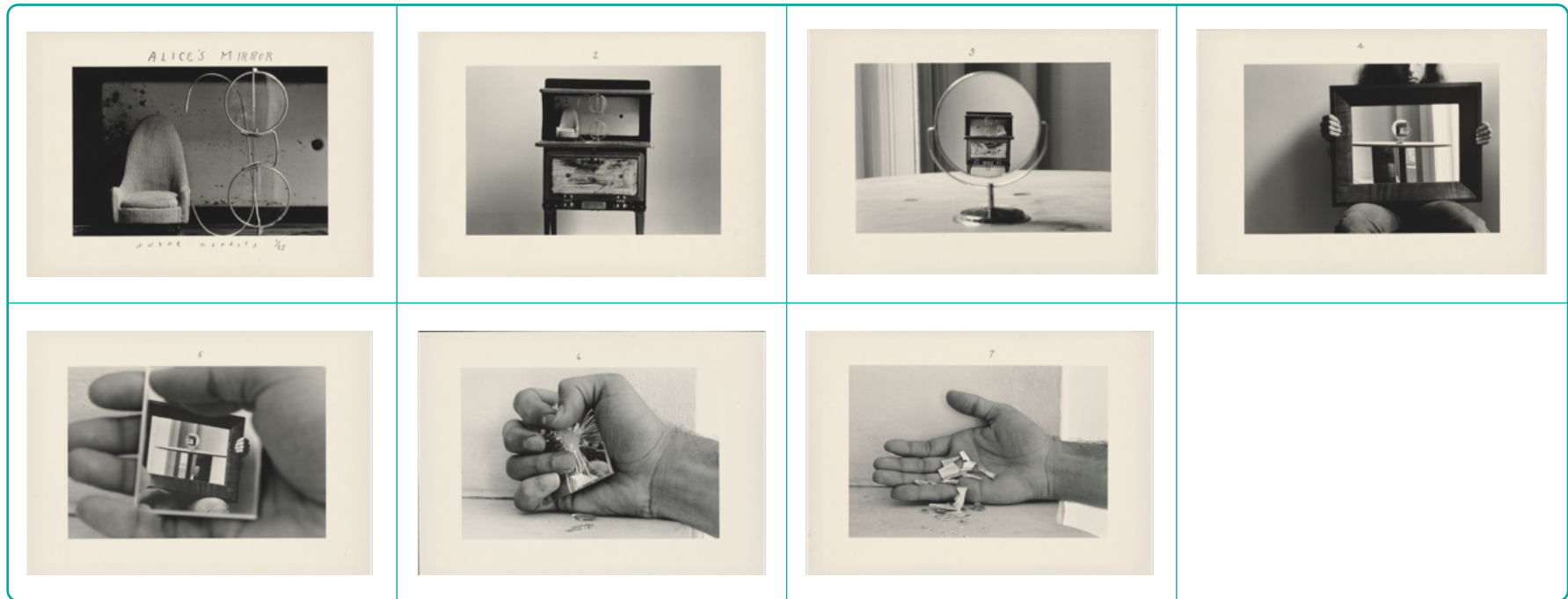
RESOURCES

- 1 Palumbo, Jacqui. 2018. "[The Story Behind the Surreal Photograph of Salvador Dali And Three Flying Cats.](#)" *Artsy*.
- 2 Mann, Jon. 2016. "[What Is Surrealism?](#)" *Artsy*.
- 3 Panzer, Mary. 1998. "[Portraits By Halsman.](#)" National Portrait Gallery
- 4 Palumbo, Jacqui. Ibid.
- 5 Hagen, Charles. 1992. "Review/Photography; Storytelling With A Deceptive Simplicity." *The New York Times*.

Visual Sequences worksheet [See page that follows]

Visual Sequences

Look closely at the following photographs by Duane Michals, then consider and discuss the questions provided below.



[Alice's Mirror](#), 1974, Duane Michals, gelatin silver print. 2016.50.2.1-7. The J. Paul Getty Museum.
© Duane Michals, courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

1. What story is this sequence telling? Why do you think so?
2. Is there another story that these photos could tell? Can you find a different story by reordering the photos?