

# Conceptual Still Life

## Introduction

This activity includes three exercises that focus on different artistic techniques. Each is accompanied by an artistic analysis of artworks that display the technique from Erika DeFreitas's exhibition *an object, a gesture and a scene (II)* which is currently on display at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington.

Some of the first things we learn about in the visual arts are the basic elements and principles. These are the foundational aspects in a work of art, but how do these elements affect the message or story of the art piece?

We will be exploring how to use visual elements and principles to not only create visually pleasing and engaging works of art, but also how to use those techniques to convey feeling, emotion and mood.

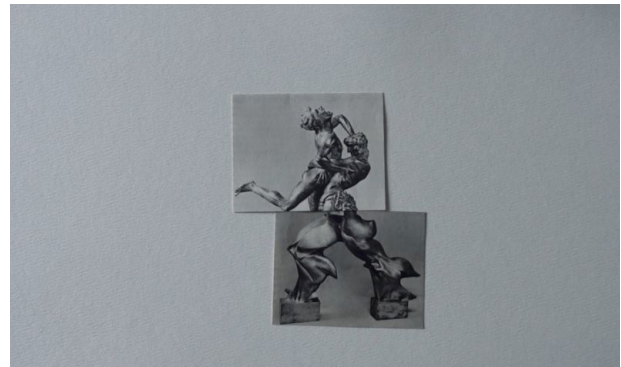
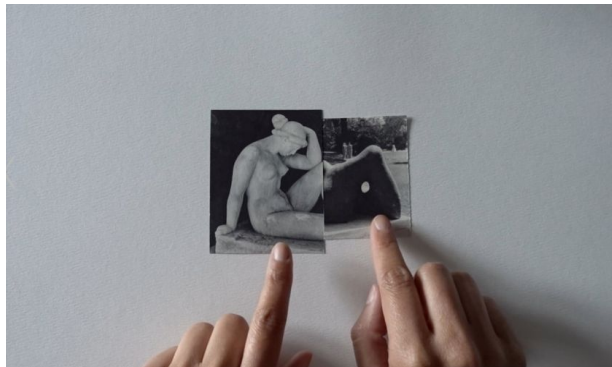
## **Exercise 1 : Composition**

Composition is the set up of objects, shapes, light and colours in an artwork. It is the foundation which other techniques are built upon. Composition not only makes your artwork pleasing to look at, but it also subconsciously guides viewers on how they should be looking at or 'reading' your art piece and gives them clues as to what they should be thinking about.

There are a lot of different elements to composition, many of which are used simultaneously. Techniques like the rule of thirds or leading lines impact the overall layout of your artwork. Within that, there is a hierarchy of objects. The focal point is supposed to be the most prominent object, however the surrounding objects also have an important role in supporting the picture. They give context to the image, telling you where to look and why certain things are significant. This is also where you can be the most creative. Traditionally in still-life paintings, objects were used for their symbolic value. Contrasting objects can create dynamic relationships and forge new visual messages.

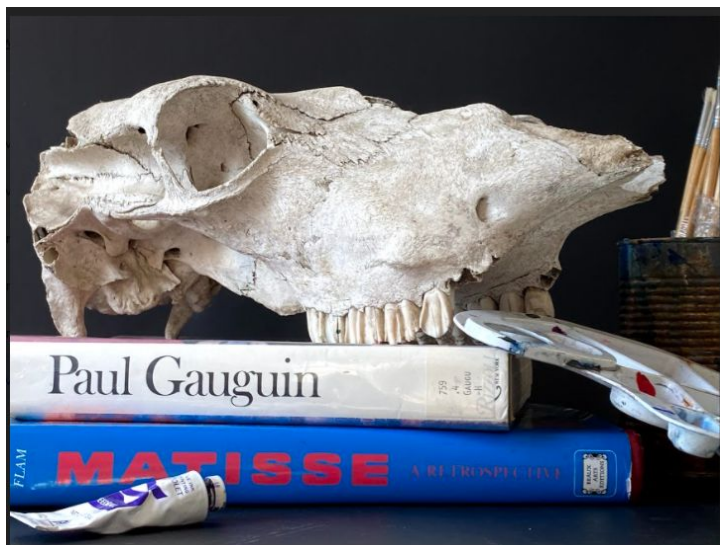


Erika Defreitas uses contrast as the key compositional technique. In her video *on a more monumental scale* (2019) she combines images of two separate sculptures together to create a new image and a new meaning. The combination of two conflicting subjects speaks to a deeper message that the artist is trying to achieve.



### Activity

Gather some items from around your house or from outside. Look at them individually and think about what message each object might convey. Start to put the objects together to create a still-life composition that you will later draw. Try out different arrangements! Creating a composition is a careful balance of using the visual and symbolic elements of each object to convey a particular message!



### Questions

- What object did you want to be the focal point and how did you show this?
- What objects can go next to it in a way that will compliment it or contrast against it?
- How does it feel to try and convey a certain message or theme using objects instead of words?



## Exercise 2: Light and Shadow

Light and shadow add depth to an artwork, not just visually but also conceptually. The use of light and shadow has many practical uses in a work of art, such as adding clarity or realism by creating the illusion of depth and defining the shape. It can also be used metaphorically and artistically to convey a message or emotion.

An artwork that is well-lit and has little shadows can feel very soft, safe and dreamy. One with high contrast and sharp light and shadow, on the other hand, can feel intense. The technique of using high contrast light and shadow is called *chiaroscuro*. This was frequently used by Renaissance painters as a way to show what aspects of the painting were important, and showcase what was good or bad.

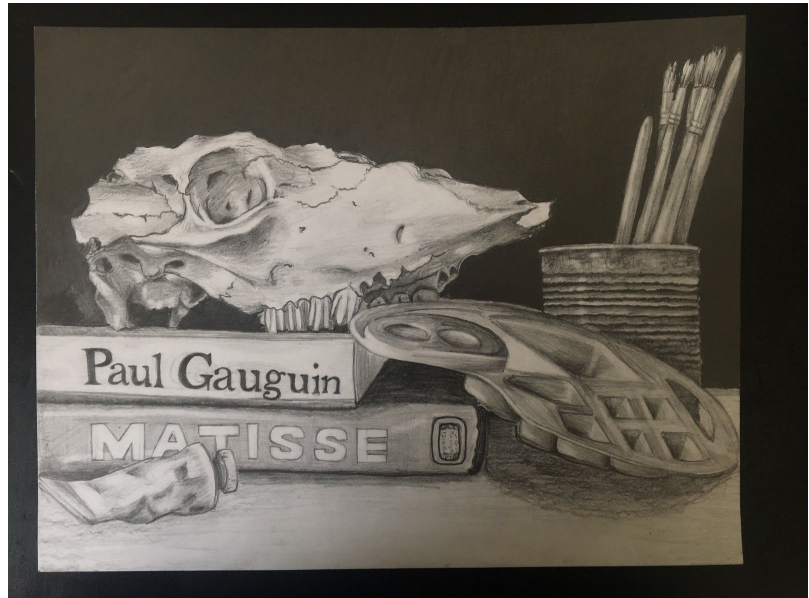


In DeFreitas' photo-lithograph prints of the shrouded sculptures, we can see the effect that light and shadow has by comparing the different uses of it on the same sculptures. What are some major differences in mood and tone that stand out to you based on the different light and shadows?



### **Activity**

The focus for this still life drawing is light and shadow. You can use the technique to create a hyperrealistic drawing or you can use light and shadow to affect the mood of your still life. It can be used to add significance to certain things or to try and hide messages within your artwork. Ask yourself what mood or message you want to convey and what methods are going to convey those messages the most clearly without words.



### Questions

- How does an artwork feel if it has a lot of shadows and very little highlights? What about if the image has little shadows but a lot of light?
- How does an artwork feel if it has super high contrast, harsh shadows versus a soft, blown out image?
- What mood are you trying to achieve with your still-life and how did you use light and shadow to achieve it?



### Exercise 3: Positive and Negative Space

Positive and negative space can be thought of as the space taken up by the main subjects of an image and the space that surrounds it. Ultimately, positive and negative space work under the idea that the image is always full and that no space is unused in an image because the 'empty' negative space can act like a frame to the main subject. This technique is mainly used to highlight specific things in an artwork, however it can also be used to purposefully hide certain parts.



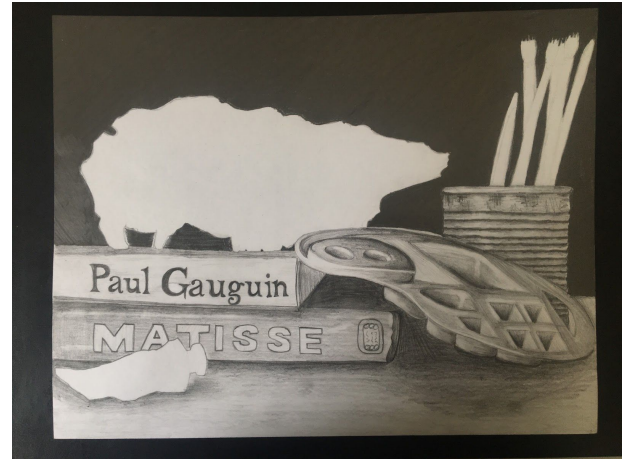
In the collages of *The Lady returned as well (a selection)* (2020), DeFreitas has purposefully removed certain parts of the image. She has brought the negative space into what would have been positive space. This creates a stark contrast between the two parts of the image. Typically, the face is the most identifiable feature, however in DeFreitas's works those sections are removed. Despite this, we can still figure out what imagery the artist is using, and the alterations lead us to fill in the blanks on our own and create new, personalized meanings and understandings.





## Activity

In this drawing, focus on positive and negative space. Use it to abstract your still-life by adding negative or positive space to unconventional spaces in your composition, similarly to DeFreitas's artworks. It can be used strategically to hide or highlight certain aspects of your image and shift the overall message or interpretation. Think about what spaces or objects people can easily identify with minimal detail, or even objects that will slightly confuse viewers and require them to think extra creatively when they view your still-life. You can abstract single items from your still life, or whole sections depending on what your artistic vision is!



## Questions

- What do you think the artist is trying to say by removing certain parts of the image?
- How does this change our understanding of the work and the original imagery used?
- How did you decide what you wanted to be positive or negative space?

We'd love to see all of your still-life drawings! You can tag us at @visualartscentre and use the hashtag #CreativeClarington to be featured on our page! If you want to know more about Erika DeFreitas' exhibition, *an object, a gesture and a scene (II)* you can come visit us 10:00-4:00 Tuesday to Sunday! We hope to see you soon!