

Close Reading Visual Art

As you examine your artwork, consider each of the following categories of analysis. This process will produce reams of raw notes and observations that will then need to be filtered, edited and organized into the paper according to the development of your argument. Your paper need not address all of these categories, but should rather focus on those observations that you found most interesting, surprising, and productive for the development of your argument.

- 1) **Materials, fabrication:** Can you tell the way the paint is applied? Is the surface of the work smooth and glossy or does it have texture with visible brushstrokes? What is the significance of one or the other?
- 2) **Line:** Identify all the linear elements, actual and implied. Are lines emphasized or de-emphasized? Is there emphasis on smooth or rough lines, short or long lines, nervous, choppy or confident, sinuous lines, etc. Where are the prominent horizontal lines? Vertical lines? Diagonals? Are there lines (actual or implied) that connect different parts of the painting or different objects represented?
- 3) **Geometries and formal echoes:** Look for an emphasis or de-emphasis on basic geometrical units like circles, triangles, cones, squares. Look for patterns: repeating shapes, nesting shapes, symmetrical arrangements, etc. Identify relationships of scale and number among similar items.
- 4) **Organization of forms in three-dimensional space:** How is three-dimensional space implied? What about “negative space”?
- 5) **Color:** Identify the different colors used, their brightness. Examine patterning, distribution and echoes as with the geometric shapes.
- 6) **Light:** Where is the lightest light and the darkest dark? Where is the implied light source and how can you tell? Look at the shadows.
- 7) Look closely at what is actually **represented** in the painting – you can make an inventory of represented objects for yourself.
- 8) **Relation to the viewer:** Speculate how the object creates its viewer, how it engages him or her? Where is he/she? What is the implied viewpoint – from below, from above, head on?
- 9) **Temporal extension:** Think about the painting’s relationship to time. Does it imply a narrative or a sudden action? Does it attempt to evoke timelessness or a specific moment? If so, how?