

Facilitating opportunities for adolescents to engage in meaning making allows them to invest in their own idea development through their exploration of materials and subject matter.

# Processing Film, Processing Meaning

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**A**dolescents are at a ripe age to make meaning and think abstractly (Kerlavage, 1998); yet, they are not “born knowing how to get ideas into materials, or how materials can be manipulated to shape ideas and meaning” (Burton, 2012, p. 14). Adolescents need guidance in understanding abstract concepts, and art teachers play an important role in helping students see the relationships between materials and ideas—not only in the analysis of artworks, but also in the process of their own artmaking.

Artmaking offers adolescents the invaluable process of joining material with meaning, of integrating life experiences and constructing narratives that have personal significance (Burton, 2012; Gilligan, 2011; Zander, 2007). This article discusses the concept of meaning making and its significance for adolescents, highlighting the process of scaffolding high school students for the construction of their own meaningful narratives.

## Why Do Adolescents Need Meaning Making?

In the context of artmaking, meaning making is the process by which one expresses imagination, feelings, and experiences through visual forms—expressions that become sources of language and symbols or embodiments of other meanings (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2002; Carroll, 1998; Stewart & Walker, 2005). Adolescents especially need to channel their feelings, experiences, thoughts, and ideas—their own narrative voices—into visual form to make sense of their human experience and discover new awareness and meanings for and about their lives (Burton, 2012; Zander, 2007). Even among late adolescents, according to Salazar’s (2013) study on the needs of first-year art college students, there is a desire to make meaning and a need for professors to help facilitate this learning in their pedagogy and curriculum. This need exists in high school as well. Creating and facilitating opportunities for adolescents to make meaning in their artmaking can support the development of students’ own ideas in their work.

## The Teacher’s Role: Understanding Meaning Making

Are all art educators aware of how they generate ideas for or about their own artwork? Reflecting on the artistic process—and particularly personal meaning making—offers art educators insights on how to guide students along their journeys of meaning making. In the process of meaning making, the artmaker’s imagination, feelings, and experiences become embodied in the artworks, taking shape in symbols, metaphors, and visual language (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2002; Carroll, 1998; Efland, 2004; Stewart & Walker, 2005). Essentially, meaning making is the work of mind, body, and spirit (London, 2004). The perceptual, physical, and affective experiences that reside within us are initiated and brought forth as we work with materials.

With this understanding in mind, I became conscious of my own artistic process as a photographer and painter while developing a series of narrative images about my life journey. One clear wintry morning, while traveling a familiar landscape, on impulse I pulled off at a scenic overlook and got out of my car. As I walked around assessing the snow-laden hill with sunlight shining on it, I recalled a memory from my youth: standing on an open hill, feeling the power of the landscape and its vastness. Inspired by this “sensory experience” (Burton, 2012)—an impression of sight, touch, and affect—I took out my camera and got to work, considering setting, lighting, and intentionally slow shutter speeds as I photographed a visual metaphor for



Figure 1. The artwork derived from the author's sensory experience (oil painting from digital photography).

times when my life felt foreboding yet full of possibility. I realized this process reflected the kind of personal meaning making that I wanted my students to experience in their artmaking.

### *The Teacher's Process: Designing a Story-Based Unit*

In the context of the second half of a semester-long darkroom photography elective, I designed a unit in which all of my female students, grades 10-12, could explore meaningful ideas through narrative elements. The use of storytelling and narrative thinking—supported by Efland (2004), Johnson (2006), Olson (1998), and Zander (2007)—is a humanly accessible form of making meaning. I incorporated Stewart and Walker's (2005) form of unit design with the enduring idea of *Experiencing Story*, to scaffold students in realizing their own life experiences and the works of others in narrative forms. The following key concepts and essential questions framed the unit:

- We characterize people in our personal life story. Who are the people in our life stories? How do we “characterize” them in relation to ourselves?
- We share a group story. What is our group story? How can I (we) tell a story about a high school girl in our culture, to which other girls would relate?
- Settings tell a story. How can a setting help tell our story?
- We share a universal story. What universal story do we share? How can my photography convey a universal story?

Each key concept was addressed through presentations on contemporary photographers. Adolescents are curious about “how and why artists produce the works they do” (Kerlavage, 1998, p. 57); referencing contemporary artists can meet this need, because of the research and integration of ideas and experiences many bring into their art (Stewart & Walker, 2005). To companion the first key concept, I referenced intimate photography, showing works by Nan Goldin, Richard Billingham, and Annelies Strba; for the second concept, I shared Eleanor Antin's artistic process and tableau-vivant photography (Cotton, 2009). During the presentations, I facilitated questions

to provoke students' thinking about the narrative elements and feelings that the photographs evoked.

Following each presentation and still corresponding to a key concept/essential question, the class received a photo assignment in the form of a prompt—sometimes with additional requirements and questions to guide their idea development and formal intent. Incorporating narrative elements with the fluency of an elegant problem (Kay, 1998), I created the following open-ended narrative prompts, given their stage of social and emotional development, hoping to elicit students' personal and collective investigation of ideas through narrative thinking. Over the course of the unit, I assigned the prompts in the following sequence.

- Using the concept of intimate photography, photograph family and/or friends as “characters” for your own reality story.
- Using the concept of tableau photography, restage and photograph the sequence or moments that lead up to and include an “uncomfortably emotional” social conflict at school (group project).
- Create a series of four to six photographs using altering techniques (photographic effects) that tells a story and evokes some universal human feeling.

## Guiding Students in Processing an Artist's Meaning

Before assigning the final prompt, I presented works by photographers Barbara Ess, James Casebere, Duane Michals, and Shadi Ghadirian, and asked students to discuss the feelings evoked through the form and effects employed in their photographs. I slipped in my own photographs as well, to share my process of meaning making. While my students interpreted feelings and inferred narrative ideas in many photographs, they did not grasp the metaphors in Shadi Ghadirian's narrative photos by the end of class. Shadi Ghadirian's (2011) *Miss Butterfly* is a series of black-and-white photographs that portray a female figure in a variety of interior settings, handling the threads of a large spider web in front of a window. Light pours in, backlighting the figure. The photographs illustrate her artist statement, written as a folktale; yet, on another level, the pictures speak metaphorically of a societal story of women caught in oppression (Hawkesworth, 2012). Ghadirian's work reflects meaning generated from her experience as an Iranian woman.

During the next class, students took a closer look at the relationship between the story and the symbols in Shadi Ghadirian's (2011) series *Miss Butterfly*. In groups, students were to view Ghadirian's series and read her artist statement. Then, based

on deconstructive questions I posed in a handout (Who could Miss Butterfly represent? What could the light symbolize? How does the photographer visually express the feelings and themes of the story? How could the feelings of the protagonist be universal?), the groups were to discuss and interpret the symbolism. As I finished directions, a student questioned whether there was a right answer. After I said, “No, there isn't,” the room freely filled with murmuring, as volunteers read aloud.

After reconvening, groups shared interpretations of the symbols such as: “the web is like the society” and “the butterfly [represented by the woman] could be anyone.”<sup>1</sup> Another group that discussed light as a symbol shared, “It's always there but beyond her reach.” A student in that group spontaneously asserted, “She's searching for the light, and because the photographer made the light the focal area, we're also searching for the light!” Students had begun to recognize more archetypal symbols and connect material with meaning.

As the sharing concluded, I stated their final prompt: Create a series of four to six photographs, using altering techniques, that tells a story and evokes some universal human feeling. Referring back to *Miss Butterfly*, I said, “[Ghadirian] is metaphorically speaking about her own experience of oppression as an Iranian woman. It could be a feeling within you that is universal—it's almost like you're masking an idea, but sometimes, symbols speak more.” I encouraged them to think carefully about symbols in the context of a story and to write their artist statement as a short story.

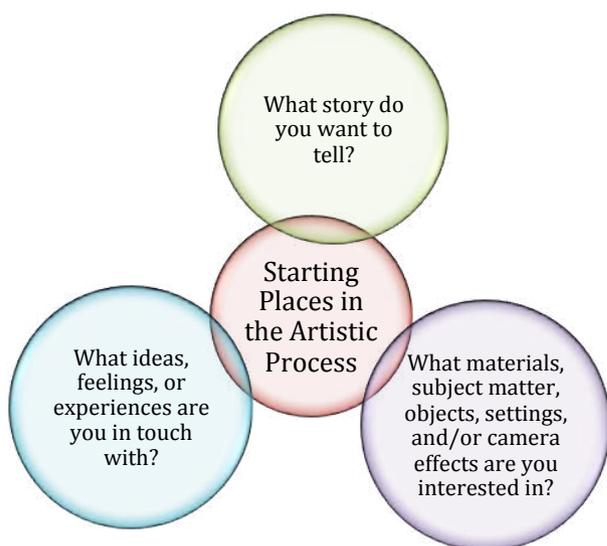


Figure 2. Places to start in the process of meaning making.

Students need a starting point from which to connect and grow ideas.

## Guiding Students in the Process of Meaning Making: Their Ideas and Responses

Immediately, a student questioned where to begin. Suddenly aware of my own process of meaning making, I made a quick visual, drawing three places from which they could start (see Figure 2).

Before I sent them on their own to think, I gave them a worksheet with similar questions to ignite their thinking: What story do I want to tell? What universal feeling(s) do I want to express? What settings, places, objects, and/or people could I use to photograph in order to evoke a feeling through a story? Students need a starting point from which to connect and grow ideas. I asked one stumped student if she had a favorite fairy tale character with whom she identified. I asked another student if there was a place she knew of that would interest her as a metaphor. Her mind clicked with her interest in nature, and she went off to write and sketch ideas.



### Millie

Millie<sup>2</sup> began her process by Googling “universal feeling.” After making a long list of feelings, she chose to contextualize “confusion” in a story about a girl who “felt as if she never belonged.” Millie called her idea an “*Alice in Wonderland* mix-up,” since she had thought of Alice as a character who experienced confusion and also recalled the scene in *The Lion King* where Simba looks at his reflection in the water and realizes his identity. Millie wanted to “create almost like a fairy tale but also relating to real life.”

Millie explored natural settings to help tell her story and indicated the contrast of light and dark settings she found in her sketchbook. After photographing her story, she shared: “I decided I would go in my backyard and find places that looked almost jungled up and kinda messy, and I found this area [pointing to an exposure]; it looked confusing and messy.” She was pleased that this particular exposure conveyed the feeling of confusion she wanted, and decided to print it. About another photograph in which the story begins to turn, Millie explained, “She finds someone who helps her, and she’s led out into the light.” The light became symbolic of the character’s shift, which in her story Millie wrote, “She begins to understand that all of the things that make her different are really gifts. She begins to have high self-esteem and is confident in herself. Paige won’t let others chose her path for her.”

### Aggie

“With photography, there is a machine in my way!” Initially, Aggie struggled making meaning with such a mechanical device, as opposed to paints and pastels. However, after completing her images for the first prompt, she reflected that the assignment

helped her to “relate to photography more... make it more personal.” As she developed her ideas for her last assignment, Aggie referenced this experience and an image she found successful because of the mood captured: a photograph of her father, reclining and withdrawn after a day’s work. This image and a conversation in another class about “being alone and avoiding loneliness” led Aggie to generate her narrative around the feeling of loneliness. After working in her sketchbook one day, she approached me to see if her ideas made sense. She showed sketches of two figures outside, flanked by trees and sunlight; in another sketch was a figure, alone and indoors, surrounded by furniture in a darker domestic setting. Dialoguing and observing her sketches, I pointed back to the sketch of the pair outside seeking clarification and asked, “What’s the opposite of loneliness that [is evoked] in these sketches?” Aggie came up with the word *companionship*.

Having focused her narrative on loneliness and companionship, Aggie wrote: “I believe everyone faces these feelings at some point in their life.” Her series, tied together by a short story about one friend who grew apart from the other two, juxtaposes photographs of herself isolated with photographs of two teenage girls “absorbed in intimate conversation.” She noted the lonesome girl “never makes eye contact with the camera because of her lack of connection with any other being,” whereas the pair “deny eye contact with the camera for an entirely different reason.” Like her sketches, Aggie photographed the two friends outdoors, because the “sense of space and a presence of naturalistic symbols define the possibilities that friendship provides.” Aggie’s photographs and writings reveal her meaning making,

Figure 3. Millie’s narrative portrays a girl’s inner transformation.





Figure 4. Aggie's narrative juxtaposes companionship and loneliness.

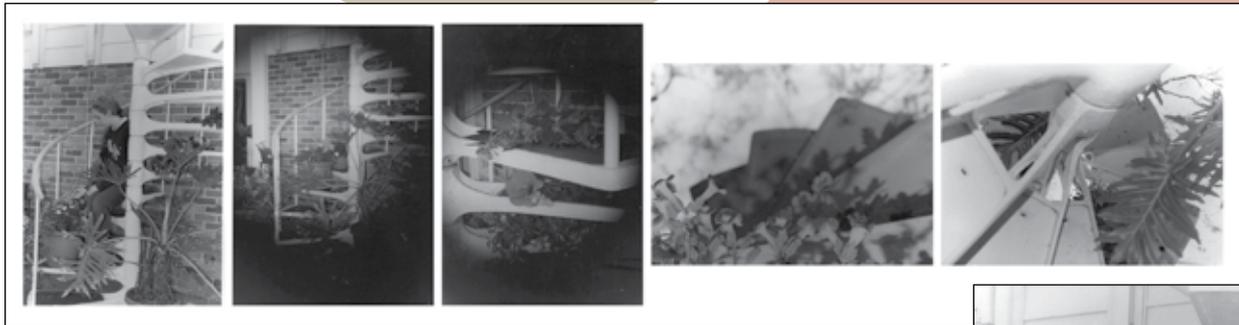


Figure 5. Nadja utilizes a staircase as a metaphor for one's life journey.

setting and approach of subject matter. Furthermore, Aggie's interest in achieving a personal feeling in her work also suggests her own sense of purpose in artmaking.

### Nadja

"I had an epiphany!" exclaimed Nadja as she took out her sketchbook and materials for class. "I don't have them often." Speaking with urgency, she asked, "What was the name of the artist who did the pinhole effect, again? How do you do the pinhole thing?" She handed me her sketchbook, and at first glance, blocks of writing and sketches filled several pages—an outpouring of ideas. A closer look revealed the human feelings, symbols, and artistic influences that later shaped the meaning and form of Nadja's photo narrative.

Inspired by Duane Michals' *Annunciation*, Nadja wrote, "I am going to turn a common belief and idea into how I portray it.... I am trying to portray the questions we may have about God and heaven." She had revisited a past experience when questions about her beliefs had surfaced—an embodied experience that fed her narrative. Nadja's first photograph

features herself sitting on stairs, looking downward, about which "represents a time when I had to overcome a challenge in my life and questioned my faith."

Nadja also identified with a feeling evoked by a pinhole photograph of flowers by Barbara Ess. She applied a pinhole effect on several exposures, photographing her grandparents' spiral staircase as a metaphor for one's journey through life and to convey feelings of "wonder and confusion" that come with facing epistemological questions. She continued to photograph the metaphorical staircase from different angles, reflecting the progression of one's journey.

### Lacey

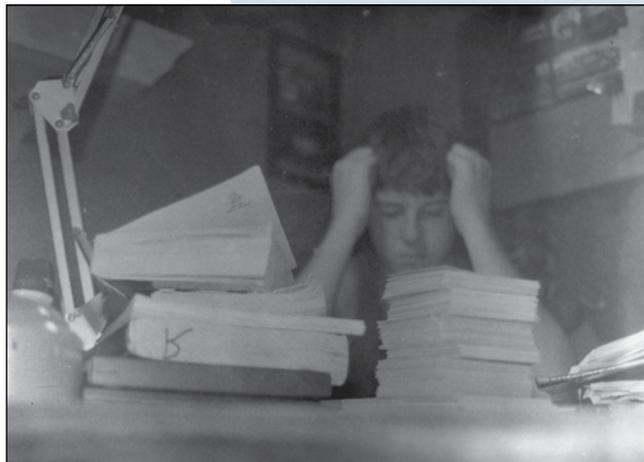
Lacey worked from feelings of stress she was experiencing at the end of the semester, deciding to tell her story about the struggles of being a teenager. She made use of everyday objects as material for her meaning making. One photograph is physically overwhelmed with notebooks and supplies, about which she wrote, "My desk is swamped with stuff because so much goes through my head, and I have so





Figure 6. Lacey represents the stresses of being a teenager.

As art educators, we can create and facilitate opportunities for adolescents to make meaning in their artmaking.



much to do that I never have the chance to relax and just be a teenager.”

One day, Lacey came in with her contact sheet to ask my opinion of two similar exposures of her brother grudgingly trying to concentrate at his desk with piles of books around him. Comparing them, I suggested the composition where I felt the impact of the books, whereas the other centered more on his face. Lacey agreed, liking that one too and commenting about the lighting. After she printed this one, she enthusiastically showed it to me, saying that it looked how she wanted—the way the desk lamp lit the books, the one direct light source in the dark bedroom. About the meaning of the lamp, she explained:

The lighting should be bright, but dark in certain places. Teens are searching for the light like they are trying to succeed, but it’s so hard because we have so much to do and so many extra stresses, especially in this economy.

Lacey integrated her feelings and experiences with the subject matter and materials, making a meaningful and personal, social narrative about being a teenager.

## Conclusion

Facilitating opportunities for adolescents to engage in meaning making allows them to invest in their own idea development through their exploration of materials and subject matter. Connecting to various ideas, experiences, and materials to form their photo narratives in meaningful and symbolic ways, students accessed feelings and experiences and explored materials in their local surroundings. They learned how other photographers conveyed feelings aesthetically. The process of meaning making, though challenging to students’ thinking, led to personal responses from each student. Each student found something for him or herself in the photography class: versatility in the use of materials, an awareness of angles and lighting, knowledge of how to use a camera (not just some “automatic thing”), joy, and satisfaction in artmaking.

Understanding my own process of meaning making and that of other contemporary artists, as well as learning to carefully craft prompts, has enriched my role as a teacher in how I relate to art with students and in how I guide and free them to engage

in their own creative process, connecting ideas with form.

Through meaning making, students can discover and integrate new awareness and understanding about their life experiences. Lacey shared that through her artmaking, “I learned that I am dealing with a ton of things that I didn’t even realize until I thought about it.” Nadja said, “It gave me new ways to look at art, new ways to give meaning in my life.” As art educators, we can create and facilitate opportunities for adolescents to make meaning in their artmaking. What greater gift could we give our students than to support them in the integration of their own life experiences, to support them in the pursuit of meaning?

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## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> All personal communication, observations, reflections and interviews are from 2012. The research for this article was conducted as part of the author's Master of Arts in Art Education degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA).
- <sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

## “Mama” Spider Sculptures



Lesson Plan for Grades 3-12

### Posable mâché arachnids in the style of Louise Bourgeois

Created as an homage to her mother, one of the largest sculptures in the world is Louise Bourgeois' "Maman," a bronze spider that stands 30 feet tall. These wire and tissue versions assume natural — and sometimes even creepy — poses!

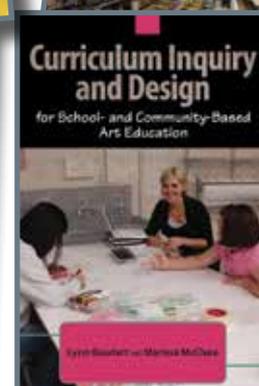
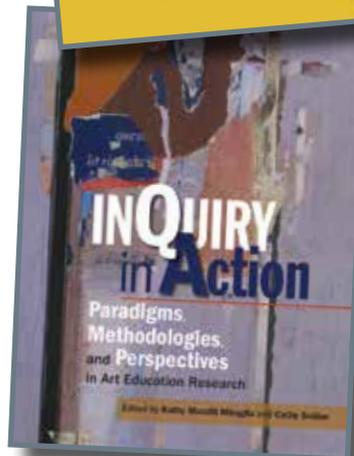
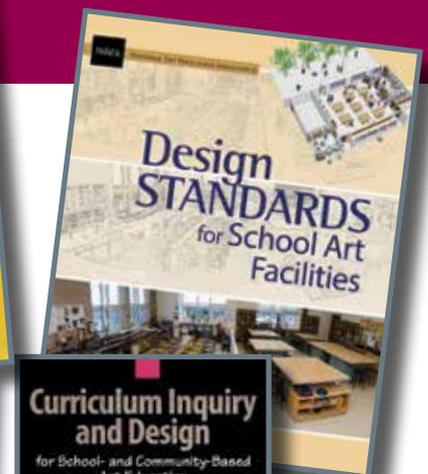
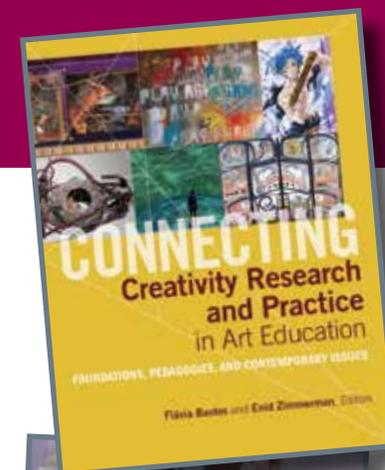
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